

Magazine

Summer 2025

# Midwestern University

**The First-Generation Experience:**

at MWU often reflects a profound journey marked by unique challenges



**In this Issue:**



**Chicago College of Osteopathic Medicine**  
Midwestern University's Founding College

*Timeline*

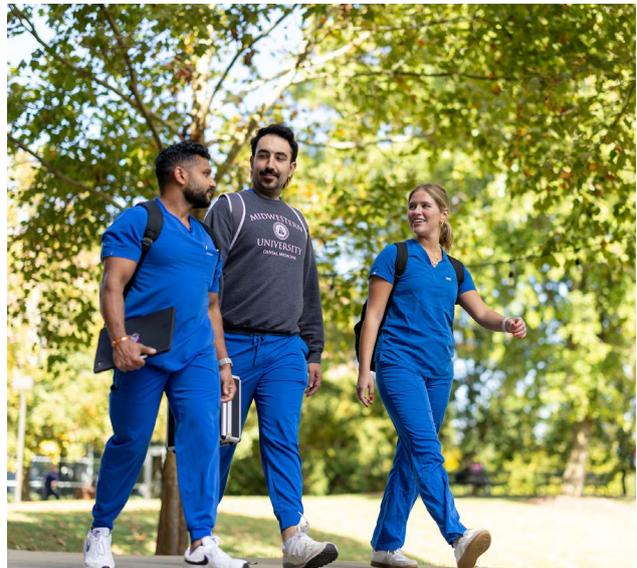
# In this Issue

---

<b>A Leadership Transition at Midwestern University</b> .....	3
<b>Midwestern Minute</b> .....	4
<b>First-Gen Alumni Break Barriers to Contribute to Healthcare Professions</b> .....	11
Embracing Education, the Osteopathic Philosophy, and Lifelong Learning.....	12
Building a Solid Foundation through Academic Excellence and Community Service.....	14
A Pharmacist’s Journey to Find Purpose and Belonging.....	16
How Becoming an SLP Fostered Family Understanding.....	18
<b>Midwestern University Chapter of National Tri-Alpha Society Welcomes its First Members</b> .....	20
<b>Perspectives and Insights from Midwestern University Instructors Who Were First-Generation Students</b> .....	22
<b>First-Generation Midwestern University Students Pay it Forward for High School Students at Health Careers Institute</b> .....	26
<b>Chicago College of Osteopathic Medicine Celebrating 125 Years</b> .....	28
<b>Alumni in Focus</b> .....	30
<b>From the Archives</b> .....	32



**On the Cover:** As the first in his family to earn a college degree, José Vargas, D.M.D. (CDMI '22), credits the support of his family in achieving his success. A graduate of the College of Dental Medicine-Illinois (CDMI), Dr. Vargas is now a general dentist practicing at Dental Partners of Southwest Georgia.



## **A Leadership Transition at Northwestern University:** Honoring the Past, Embracing the Future

Dear Friends of Northwestern University,

As we move forward in this time of University leadership transition, I want to share a brief update and reiterate the Board of Trustees' confidence in the strength and stability of Northwestern University. In alignment with our long-term leadership succession plan, we are taking deliberate and thoughtful steps to ensure continuity and uphold the values and vision that have guided our institution for generations.

The Board of Trustees has established a search committee to identify and evaluate qualified candidates for the position of President and Chief Executive Officer of Northwestern University. Currently, Dr. Joshua Baker has been appointed to serve as Interim President and Chief Executive Officer. Dr. Baker brings a wealth of leadership experience, having served in key academic and administrative roles within the University for over a decade, most recently as Chief Academic Officer. His deep understanding of our academic programs, institutional priorities, and student-centered mission makes him exceptionally well-suited to lead Northwestern University at this time. Under his guidance, the University continues to operate with purpose and momentum.

Northwestern University remains in a strong financial position, with a continued focus on strategic investment in our academic programs, faculty development, and infrastructure. We are committed to sustaining the progress we've made and ensuring that this transition is marked not by pause, but by continued forward motion.

As we begin the new academic year, we are excited to welcome our incoming classes across all campuses. Their energy, aspirations, and commitment to healthcare professions are a vital part of our community, and we look forward to supporting them on their journey. In addition, we are preparing to honor the dedicated service of our outstanding faculty and staff at the upcoming fall Recognition Dinners. These celebrations are a meaningful opportunity to express our gratitude for the years of dedication and excellence that continue to shape Northwestern University's success.

With appreciation,

Janet R. Bolton  
Chair, Board of Trustees  
Northwestern University

## Midwestern University Students Mentor Local Undergrads Interested in Health Careers through MIMS Program

Undergraduate college students interested in pursuing careers in healthcare now have a resource for navigating the path toward a graduate education in the health sciences, thanks to a free program established by Midwestern University (MWU) on both its Glendale, AZ and Downers Grove, IL Campuses.

The Mentors in Medicine & Science (MIMS) mentorship program pairs undergraduate students with Midwestern University students from all eight University colleges, representing over 20 different healthcare career tracks. The MIMS program provides monthly communication between MWU mentors and their undergraduate partners about potential careers, good study habits, entrance exam test-taking, positive mental health, goal setting, and navigating the process of applying to graduate and professional schools. An additional

on-campus event in the spring will offer hands-on simulation and lab experiences for mentors and mentees.

The Glendale Campus MIMS program began with a kick-off reception and faculty panel on October 10, during which 94 college students were matched with 131 Midwestern students.

On the Downers Grove Campus, the mentor match event was held on October 30 and included 44 undergraduate mentees from Aurora University, who matched with 52 Midwestern mentors. The session also included a faculty panel.

**For more information about the MIMS Program, visit: <https://www.midwestern.edu/community-media/MIMS-AZ>**



MIMS program pairs undergraduate students with Midwestern University students.

## Midwestern University Announces New College of Veterinary Medicine Proposal on Downers Grove Campus



The College of Veterinary Medicine Illinois is expected to open in 2027.

Midwestern University is advancing veterinary education with the development of the Midwestern University College of Veterinary Medicine–Illinois on the Downers Grove Campus. The decision to add veterinary medicine to the healthcare degrees offered on the Downers Grove Campus is in response to the growing need for skilled veterinarians who can provide comprehensive care for large and small animals. In addition, the new College will help address the need for critical research to aid in public health and the demand for qualified professionals to serve as leaders and educators within the veterinary profession. The proposal for the new college is currently being reviewed by the American Veterinary Medical Association Council on Education (AVMA COE).

The establishment of the Midwestern University College of Veterinary Medicine–Illinois comes at a time when the demand for veterinarians in the United States continues to rise. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there is a projected 20 percent growth in employment for veterinarians from 2022 to 2032. This growth is driven by increased consumer spending on pets, expanding treatment options, a growing and aging pet population, and workforce retirements and turnover. Currently, there is only one veterinary medicine school in Illinois.



**Coretta Cosby Patterson, D.V.M., DACVIM-SA**, will serve as the Dean of the proposed new College.

Dr. Patterson earned a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (D.V.M.) degree and a Bachelor of Science (B.S.) degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Upon graduation from veterinary college, she completed a residency in Small/Companion Animal Medicine at Michigan State University and subsequently completed a residency in small animal internal medicine. Dr. Patterson holds licenses to practice veterinary medicine in Arizona, Illinois, California, Georgia, Kansas, Michigan, Nevada, and New Mexico.

Pending accreditation approval, the first class is expected to matriculate in 2027. Graduates will earn a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (D.V.M.) degree and can expect excellent job opportunities. Midwestern University has offered a D.V.M. degree on its Glendale, AZ Campus since 2012.

## OT Student-Created Pediatric Video Eases Anxiety of Visiting the Dentist

A visit to the dentist can be challenging for young children, especially those with sensory sensitivities. To ease anxiety, Carly Rascia, O.T.D., a 2023 Occupational Therapy graduate, collaborated with Midwestern University's College of Dental Medicine-Illinois (CDMI), Media Resources, and Marketing teams to create an award-winning pediatric dental video during her doctoral capstone project that won a Silver Telly Award.

Dr. Rascia was inspired by her own discomfort with dental visits and recognized how overwhelming they could be for autistic children due to bright lights, loud tools, and unfamiliar sensations. Research showed that social stories and videos could help prepare children for appointments. "Watching videos beforehand helps children and families know what to expect, making them more comfortable," she said. Families can also bring noise-canceling headphones, sunglasses, or weighted blankets to improve the experience.

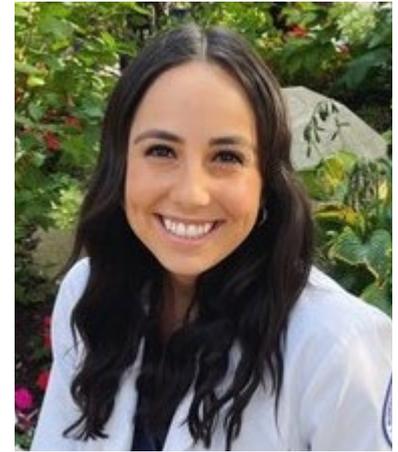
The video, designed to portray a positive dental visit, was developed with guidance from faculty mentors Divya Sood, O.T.D., OTR/L, Professor, Occupational

Therapy, Downers Grove; and her site mentor Ahmed El-Maghraby, D.M.D., FAGD, M.P.H., Director of Clinical Faculty, Dental Institute, Downers Grove. For the video, she also worked with Sheila Hall, D.D.S., Clinical Assistant Professor, Dental Institute.

"A child's first dental visit sets the foundation for lifelong oral health," Dr. El-Maghraby noted. "Social stories can have a great impact in preparing the child for all the sensory stimulation of a dental visit and to make sure that first visit is positive."

Dr. Rascia observed various dental appointments before working with Media Resources to refine the script. "This project is a perfect example that aligns well with the vision statement of the occupational therapy profession," Dr. Sood added.

Now published on Midwestern University's Facebook and YouTube, the video is part of an ongoing series. Dr. Rascia currently works as a pediatric occupational therapist at M Street Pediatric Therapy, focusing on early intervention. The video can be viewed on the Midwestern University YouTube page at <https://www.youtube.com/@MidwesternUniversity>.



Carly Rascia, O.T.D., a 2023 graduate of the Occupational Therapy Program



Military color guard performs at day of free dental care for Arizona military veterans.

## MWU Hosts Day of Dental Services for Phoenix Valley Military Veterans

In October, the Midwestern University Dental Institute on the Glendale Campus hosted its annual Veterans Dental Day to provide free dental care and consultations to Valley military veterans in need.

Faculty and students from the College of Dental Medicine-Arizona donated their time to complete free screenings and treatments, including dental examinations, routine cleanings, sealants, fillings, extractions, consultations about dental implants or dentures, and recommendations for follow-up care to approximately 250 local veterans.

## Midwestern University Receives New Grant for Rural Arizona High School Students Interested in Healthcare Careers

Cristal Reyes, (center) from rural Wellton AZ, learns about podiatric medicine at the summer Health Careers Institute.



The annual eight-day summer Health Careers Institute for High School Students (HCI) on the Glendale Campus is a free hands-on experience for Arizona high school students to explore careers in the health sciences.

Now, thanks to a partnership with the H.S. Lopez Family Foundation, select high school students from rural areas in the state can attend the HCI with financial assistance from Midwestern.

The partnership between the H.S. Lopez Family Foundation and Midwestern supports high-achieving students in rural areas who have no other means to attend this unique summer program. Scholarship funds are available for six exceptional high school students from rural Arizona to cover housing, meals, transportation, and related costs (as well as for a family member if the student is under 18) to visit the University's Glendale Campus and attend the Health Careers Institute. The HCI is a highly competitive program that selects 64 of the top-performing high school students from around Arizona and provides a free, hands-on summer program full of interactive experiences, presentations, mentoring, and learning about healthcare careers from faculty and student volunteers representing Midwestern's 25 graduate-level programs.

Cristal Reyes from Wellton, AZ, attended the Health Careers Institute in 2024 via the H.S. Lopez Family Foundation scholarship. "I truly believe the HCI has been one of the best experiences I've had. I got to learn about so many careers. Before this experience, I was worried I might at some point regret my choice of wanting to pursue a career in the medical field. But once I saw the opportunities available to me, I instantly knew that life was for me. I loved all of the hands-on experiences!"

"I absolutely loved the program and I truly miss it so much," says Azul Rangel from south Tucson, AZ, who also attended this year's HCI. "I am infinitely grateful to the H.S. Lopez Family Foundation for giving me the opportunity to make this happen. This program helped me get more of a feel for different medical careers and really educated me on the process for undergraduate, graduate, and even residency."

Students interested in attending the Health Careers Institute must be current sophomores, juniors, or seniors and must submit an application including short essays and a current transcript. **For more information:**

[www.midwestern.edu/AZHealthCareersInstitute](http://www.midwestern.edu/AZHealthCareersInstitute)

## CDMI Receives Grant to Enhance 3D Printing, Dental Education

The College of Dental Medicine-Illinois (CDMI) was awarded an \$8,000 grant by the Illinois State Dental Society Foundation (ISDS) as part of its "Our Legacy, Our Future" program. This grant enables CDMI to expand educational opportunities for dental students by integrating advanced 3D printing technology into its curriculum, ultimately enhancing both student learning and patient care.

The grant funds will go towards the purchase of an advanced 3D printer that will be used to improve the accuracy and efficiency of dental prosthetics such as dentures, mouthguards, and retainers for geriatric and pediatric patients. Additionally, the funding will support the maintenance and upkeep of the 3D printing system, allowing students in their preclinical years to practice a variety of skills on dental mannequins and in other simulated environments.

"This grant allows us to continue our mission of providing our students with cutting-edge tools and hands-on experience. By integrating 3D printing into our curriculum, we are preparing the next generation of dental professionals to meet the demands of modern dentistry," said Kaveh Adel, D.D.S., Associate Dean, College of Dental Medicine-Illinois.

For pediatric patients, 3D printing enables the rapid and cost-effective production of retainers that need frequent adjustments or replacements. For older adults who often require dentures or bridges due to tooth loss, 3D printing provides a more efficient and alternative solution to traditional dentures, including implant-supported hybrid bridges. Traditional denture fabrication can be a lengthy process with multiple appointments, but 3D printing streamlines this by allowing for precise digital design and faster production.



The new grant for CDMI provides 3D printing to enhance accuracy for dental care.

CDMI students also have the opportunity to use 3D technology to collaborate with faculty mentors on a range of research projects that have the potential to drive innovation in dental care. "Digital dentistry is the future, and getting experience with 3D printing now helps us get comfortable with where things are headed," said dental medicine student Bhavik Patel (CDMI '27).

## MWU OT Students Teach Life Skills to Aged-Out AZ Foster Care Youth

Before Christopher Trujillo, O.T.D., OTR/L, became Program Director of the Glendale Campus Occupational Therapy (OT) Program, he worked in public schools to help youth in foster care set goals, determine their interests, turn their interests into strengths, and expand their worldview. He found the work deeply fulfilling and wanted to continue sharing his knowledge of incorporating OT principles into the

underserved foster care community.

Now, Dr. Trujillo and Midwestern OT students continue this work in collaboration with the local non-profit organization Foster360.

In Arizona, over 800 youth each year are not adopted before they turn 18, and they "age-out" of the foster care system. Foster360 provides these youth, who are also at risk of becoming homeless, with housing, trauma coaching, and support services.

At the Foster360 rotation site, Midwestern students utilize their OT skills outside of a medical setting and observe real-life barriers unique to each participant. Some of the skills they teach the youth include:

- Applying for jobs
- Interacting with prospective employers
- Grocery shopping within a budget
- Cooking nutritional meals

- Developing healthy habits
- Establishing healthy boundaries in friendships

Raini Leveen, M.S.O.T., (CHS-OT '24), an OT alumna who worked with Foster360 as a student, says the experience reminded her to respect and honor each patient's life journey. "I think anyone working with foster youth should understand that each person comes from a unique background, and each person should be treated with dignity and respect. Healthcare professionals should be mindful of letting them practice autonomy, and of helping them to become educated and a part of decision-making. It is not uncommon for this population to experience some level of trauma, so being trauma-informed and practicing empathy are also essential to this population."

Dr. Trujillo and the OT Program hope to continue this partnership with Foster360 in the future while advocating for youth in foster care.



Dr. Trujillo (center) and Erika Dubros, CHS-Glendale OT '24 (left), and Raini Leveen, CHS-Glendale OT '24 (right), worked with Foster 360 students.



## Your Gift Matters to our Students.

As a graduate of Midwestern University, you are part of a tradition of excellence and leadership in healthcare education. With your support of the Annual Fund, students today may pursue educational goals and experiential opportunities that will change their lives forever. Your gift matters.

Your annual gift may be designated toward your college for scholarships, or wherever the need is greatest.

To donate online, visit:

[http://online.  
midwestern.edu/giving](http://online.midwestern.edu/giving) or text **GIVE to 53780**

Downers Grove Campus  
555 31st Street  
Downers Grove, Illinois 60515

[www.midwestern.edu](http://www.midwestern.edu)  
**800-962-3053**

Glendale Campus  
19555 North 59th Avenue  
Glendale, Arizona 85308

## Amazon Prime's "The College Tour" Features Midwestern University Campuses

Since mid-September, the University's two campuses in Glendale, AZ, and Downers Grove, IL, have been featured in Amazon Prime's "The College Tour," which tells each school's story through the perspective of its students.

Each episode of the show focuses on a different college or university, describing the academic programs, campus life, and educational experiences available from a student's point of view. The show follows Midwestern University students through their day-to-day routine, showcasing their backgrounds and their lives on

Kevin Phan, CDMA '27, (below) and Natalie Ferruffino, CPDG '26, are two of 18 students featured in "The College Tour."



campus. The show also showcases the many state-of-the-art classrooms, labs, and clinical facilities available to students on both campuses.

Students auditioned for the program based on topics that include their program of study, clinical experiences, interdisciplinary education, research, and more.

"The College Tour" is a groundbreaking TV series developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when opportunities to attend in-person campus tours were restricted. The show takes viewers on a showcase tour of campuses across the country, telling each school's story through the diverse lens of its students. Hosted by The Amazing Race winner Alex Boylan, "The College Tour" provides aspiring students with a platform to access comprehensive and meaningful information regarding higher education anytime and anywhere, free of charge. "The College Tour" is available on Amazon Prime Video, Freevee, and on their official website: [www.thecolleetour.com](http://www.thecolleetour.com).

## Feature



### **First-Gen Alumni Break Barriers to Contribute to Healthcare Professions**

For many who are the first in their family to attend college, the path to a healthcare career is one marked by perseverance, adaptability, and determination. Without a family legacy in higher education to rely on, these first-generation trailblazers must navigate unfamiliar systems while balancing the emotional and financial pressures that often accompany such a journey. Yet, these very challenges often result in a deeper sense of resilience and positively impact their future.

Here, we spotlight just a few of the Midwestern University first-generation alumni who are now successful healthcare professionals making a difference in their fields. Their stories reveal the obstacles they faced and how these experiences shaped the way they approach patient care and serve their communities.



First-Gen Alumni





“In adversity, you must find ways to overcome - or succumb - to the challenges. I chose the first. I have always found mentors to help me find my path and develop my skills, and I still do this today.”

Melody Medawar Rodarte,  
D.O., FACP

**Melody Medawar Rodarte, D.O., FACP**

Arizona College of Osteopathic Medicine,  
Class of 2002

**Hometown:** Mesa, AZ

**Current Role:** Owner/Medical Director  
of Activated Health & Wellness

**Career Update:** Currently provides  
personalized medicine for weight loss,  
hormone health, body sculpting, and  
more. She is married to a retired homicide  
detective, has two children, and has been  
selected six times for Phoenix Magazine's  
annual Top Doc list in Obesity Medicine.

# Embracing Education, the Osteopathic Philosophy, and Lifelong Learning

Melody Medawar Rodarte,  
D.O., FACP

I was motivated to go into medicine from a young age. Both my parents did not go to college, and they immigrated here from Lebanon to provide a better opportunity for their children. With my parents not going to college and wanting their children to succeed, it was a given that I wanted to make them proud. I think that first-borns are usually driven for perfection. Unfortunately (or fortunately as I have learned now), that was me to a “T” as well.

## **Community, Work Ethic, and “Weird” Food**

Something I’m so thankful for in my background is the Mediterranean diet. I was the “weird one” in school; thank God my mom stuck to her guns on feeding us right, as it is the “norm” now and highly recommended. I remember classmates asking back then if I was eating dirt and questioning what tabouli or hummus were. We ate at the dinner table together nightly, and my mom cooked a lot, so we rarely ate out. We were encouraged to have a good work ethic as well and build community in our neighborhood.

## **Education First**

Education was especially important in my family, and I was lucky enough to have teachers along the way who encouraged me. There is one high school teacher I will always be grateful for, as he got me into a program for first-generation, college-bound students. That program allowed me to make college a reality. Both my younger brother and I obtained our undergraduate degrees from ASU and then osteopathic medical degrees from Midwestern University. That’s special for our parents.

## **Overcoming Adversity through Personal Growth**

Along my educational journey, I also had teachers who questioned or dismissed my passion for becoming a doctor. I remember my ASU counselor telling me that I should pick another career, as I was unlikely to get into medical school because I didn’t have a family member in medicine! In adversity, you must find ways to overcome - or succumb - to the challenges. I chose the first. I have always found mentors to help me find my path and



develop my skills, and I still do this today. Personal growth has been important at every stage, and even more now as I have my own practice and really believe that personalized medicine is the future.

## **Choosing Osteopathic Medicine**

Midwestern was my first choice of medical schools. I wanted to be an osteopathic physician, and I loved that they were opening a campus in AZ. I believe in the osteopathic philosophy, and truly feel blessed that our class and campus were small at the time. I learned both a team approach and a holistic approach that I use daily. I still have colleagues from my class who I stay in touch with, and of course use as referrals.

## **Lifelong Learning and Networking**

Networking with other professionals inside/outside medicine has been such a blessing to me. You never know what you will learn from someone else’s story. I’ve continued to do conferences that challenge me and allow me to keep up with how medicine is changing, and I do them outside of my field/association.

# Building a Solid Foundation through Academic Excellence and Community Service



“I have come to learn that the pathway to becoming a healthcare provider can take many forms, and that a lot of learning is accomplished through failure and trial and error.”

Tim Ellis, D.M.D.

Neither of my parents finished high school, and it was my goal to pursue the highest form of education possible to provide a diversified experience for my own children.

College and professional school were both difficult, namely because I wasn't used to the customs and culture surrounding higher education. For example, networking, proper etiquette in meetings, studying, and understanding the overall landscape of how you can excel within the workplace were all new to me.

## Beginning the Journey

I began my academic journey at the University of Colorado-Boulder on a first-generation, low-income scholarship. There, I earned a bachelor's degree in Integrative Physiology and Psychology with a specialization in Neuroscience. My academic pursuits then led me to the Midwestern University Biomedical Sciences Program, during which I investigated the outcomes of pediatric brain injury at the University of Arizona College of Medicine-Phoenix/Phoenix Children's Hospital. I was able to contribute significantly to the scientific community by publishing multiple peer-reviewed papers and authoring a book chapter on brain injury in a graduate-level neuroscience textbook. Soon after, I entered medical school at AZCOM.

**Tim Ellis, D.M.D.**

College of Dental  
Medicine-Arizona,  
Class of 2021

Arizona College of  
Osteopathic Medicine,  
Class of 2018  
(completed two years)

College of Graduate  
Studies, Master of  
Biomedical Sciences  
Program, Class of 2014

**Hometown:** Aurora,  
Colorado

**Current Role:** Dr. Ellis and  
his orthodontist wife,  
Dr. Brittany Ellis (CDMA  
Class of 2014 and ASDOH

Class of 2016), recently  
launched their brand-  
new practice, Greater  
Oklahoma Orthodontics  
with Lumio Dental.

**Career Update:** Dr. Ellis is  
committed to patient  
experience, patient  
outcomes, identifying  
ways to improve rural  
access to care, and his  
team's impact on the  
communities they serve.  
He has done research  
on brain injury and  
its subsequent oral  
biomarkers in cases of  
suspected domestic  
violence, garnering  
recognition from NPR for

advocacy in identifying  
and aiding potential  
victims. His active  
research interests  
currently include exploring  
how patient-centered  
care can improve oral health  
and the community at large.

When not immersed in  
orthodontics, Dr. Tim can  
be found with his three  
children (and Rhodesian  
Ridgeback), teaching at  
local schools and colleges,  
engaging with the  
local community, or  
indulging in his  
passion for jiu-jitsu.



Initially drawn to a career in  
pediatric neurosurgery, my path took  
a turn when I became a father to my  
first son. Inspired by a heartfelt letter  
from an orthodontist during my third  
year of medical school, I redirected my  
focus towards dentistry, culminating in  
enrollment at Northwestern University's  
College of Dental Medicine-Arizona  
(Class of 2021).

**Learning through Trial and Error**

My experience as a first-generation  
student was paramount in shaping my  
career path, and it led to a few unex-  
pected twists and turns. Being a stu-  
dent of a biomedical sciences master's  
program, medical school, AND dental  
school was not my initial intention. I  
have come to learn that the pathway  
to becoming a healthcare provider  
can take many forms, and that a lot  
of learning is accomplished through  
failure and trial and error. I have had  
the opportunity to share the classroom  
with some phenomenal doctors who  
had parents or friends in the field, and  
what I've observed is that their path  
was still difficult even though the per-  
sonal challenges they faced differed.

**You Don't Know What You Don't Know**

The saying "you don't know what you  
don't know" offers a simple and

concise summary of my experience.  
The master's program set a strong  
foundation to pursue any career in  
healthcare; however, life does not  
always follow the plan you set forth  
-- hence my transition from medicine  
to dentistry. Medicine was always my  
dream until my own personal family  
began to develop. Being a first-  
generation student, getting married  
to a fellow doctor, having children,  
setting/determining boundaries, and  
trying to be the best were all difficult  
to manage properly. Further, I had  
minimal perspective on how these  
external changes might impact my  
career and life altogether. The pressures  
of life can be exacerbated when  
few in your family or immediate circle  
can relate to the pressures of a pro-  
fessional career. In the end, my experi-  
ence and success as a first-generation  
student is rooted in persistence and a  
passion for lifelong learning and  
improving myself and my community.

**Many Mentors**

My parents largely wore their emotions  
on their sleeve and were not opposed  
to conflict, but I quickly learned that  
navigating the professional world is  
much more nuanced. If it weren't for  
some of my mentors like Dr. Jonathan  
Lifshitz (University of AZ), Dr. Cliff Run-

ning (AZ School of Dentistry and Oral  
Health), and Northwestern University  
faculty Drs. Mark Speicher, Lori Kemper,  
Brad Smith, Sheri Brownstein, Marlon  
Smith, and Mark Steig (to name a few),  
the journey would have been much  
more tumultuous and arduous. It was  
with their help and support that I was  
able to articulate the environment and  
make it to the next level of my career.

**Paying it Forward**

The community and the patient are  
always at the forefront of my mind, as  
is developing the next generation. My  
varied educational and professional  
experiences, along with my low-  
income, first-generation background,  
have afforded me the ability to  
communicate, connect, and be  
comfortable with a wide variety of  
healthcare settings. These range from  
founding a low-income, multi-special-  
ty clinic in downtown Phoenix called  
Student Health Outreach for Wellness  
(SHOW), to launching an orthodontic  
practice to provide the best care in  
the rural communities of Oklahoma  
(Greater Oklahoma Orthodontics). I am  
grateful for being able to encounter  
the challenges that accompany being  
a first-generation student, and I hope  
that my experience will result in a net  
positive for the communities I serve.



Dr. Korsak (front) and fellow pharmacy classmates take a break from classes on the Downers Grove Campus.

**Samantha Korsak, Pharm. D.**

College of Pharmacy,  
Downers Grove,  
Class of 2020

**Hometown:** Palos Heights, IL

**Current Role:** Ambulatory  
Care Clinical Pharmacy  
Specialist, Rush University  
Medical Center

“My parents’ work ethic and dedication to their family is something I continue to admire and emulate.”

Samantha Korsak, Pharm. D.

# A Pharmacist's Journey to Find Purpose and Belonging

**G**rowing up as a first-generation Chinese girl adopted by white American parents, I often felt like a puzzle piece that didn't quite fit. I was always considered 'different', being one of two people of color in my grade until I got to high school. I fully recognize that I am lucky and privileged to be where I am, and I am forever grateful that my parents gave my brothers and me a supportive childhood.

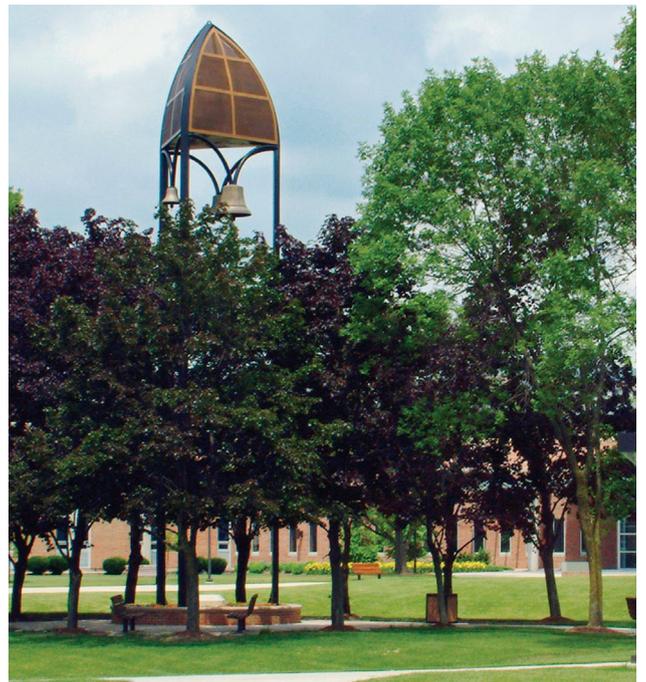
## **War's Legacy Creates Adopted Family**

My father, a Vietnam War veteran, was made infertile due to exposure to Agent Orange. My mother, who dropped out of college to save for our adoption, worked tirelessly to ensure that my brothers and I had a good childhood. My parents were in their 40s when they adopted us, which was different from the other kids who had younger parents and the financial ability to have one parent stay home. My parents' work ethic and dedication to their family is something I continue to admire and emulate.

## **Family Health Challenges Inspire Career**

Preparing for college was a daunting task. The application and financial aid process were unfamiliar to my parents; their age and full-time jobs made them unable to provide much guidance. When I was a junior in high school, my father was diagnosed with prostate cancer, which introduced them to the complexities of insurance, appointments, and medical terminology. He is now fully in remission, but their experience inspired me to make healthcare more accessible to everyone.

This led me to MWU to become an ambulatory care pharmacist focusing on primary care access in underserved populations. I'm eternally thankful to my family and friends who supported my career journey. The mentors and opportunities provided by Midwestern University were invaluable in helping me become the pharmacist I am today.



**Claudia (Grabowski) Angulo,  
M.S.**

CHS-Downers Grove,  
Speech-Language Pathology,  
Class of 2019

**Hometown:** Chattanooga, TN

**Current Role:** Supervising  
SLP at Siskin Children's  
Institute in Chattanooga, TN

**Career Update:** Recently  
began Ed.D. program in  
Leadership, Learning, and  
Organizational Strategy at  
Vanderbilt University/  
recently featured in local  
magazine article in  
Chattanooga "Health Scope"



## Cognitive Load vs. Physical Labor:

# How Becoming an SLP Fostered Family Understanding

**M**y family motivated me to pursue a college degree. They always told me they immigrated to the United States to give us a better life, and going to college was a big part of that dream. I was born in Chicago, but my mother was seven months pregnant with me when she and my father immigrated from Poland. When I was a toddler, we went back to Poland for a bit but ended up in Chicago where I was raised. I spent many childhood summers in Poland with my family and grandparents. In our household, putting family first was paramount. Family time, especially around holidays like Easter and Christmas, was always centered on the Catholic faith, with traditional and specific celebrations that we continue to uphold.

Getting a college degree was part of my parents' vision for me and my family. I also wanted to build the resilience and hard work ethic I saw in my parents. However, going away to college was a new and uncomfortable experience for them. They set clear limits on how far I could go (no more than two hours away from Chicago), and I had to choose a specific major before starting college—there was no “undecided” major option in my parents' house. This pressure, combined with the weight of their expectations to succeed in a certain way (make money, own a house), added to my own drive.

### **Learning to Navigate the Work of Getting an Education**

During my Speech-Language Pathology (SLP) master's degree program, one of the biggest challenges I faced was explaining to my parents the difference between cognitive load and how exhausting learning could be versus physical labor. My parents are used to exhaustion as experienced from physical labor, but often, it was difficult for them to understand how many hours needed to be put into studying and the exhaustion associated with that. It took many conversations and a lot of effort to make sense of things, but we eventually reached a mutual understanding and developed a deeper respect for each other.

More than anything, it made me appreciate my parents' hard work immensely. They paved the way for me to have

“More than anything, it made me appreciate my parents' hard work immensely. They paved the way for me to have the privilege of attending university so that I didn't need to do physical labor if I didn't wish to do so.”

Claudia (Grabowski) Angulo, M.S.

the privilege of attending university so that I didn't need to do physical labor if I didn't wish to do so. It also made me understand that all work, regardless of the type of work, needs to be respected.

### **First-Generation Experience Impacts Professional Life**

Being the first in my family to attend college has shaped my perspective both personally and professionally. It's a journey my family was invested in, and my younger cousins, both in Chicago and Poland, are now following in my footsteps, which is exciting. The pressure to succeed was intense, as I felt my parents' ideas of success—financial stability, a certain lifestyle—were tied directly to my earning a degree. At the same time, I was juggling the traditional expectations of marriage and family. Navigating this balancing act wasn't easy, but understanding where my parents' values and expectations came from helped me manage it.

As a speech-language pathologist, my educational and cultural background has influenced my approach to my work. I always take a family-centered and multidisciplinary approach, and I loved my courses at Northwestern University that focused on interdisciplinary collaboration. I use the principles I learned in those courses every day in my career. Through it all, my parents have remained dedicated to our family, and I hope to pass on the same dedication to my own children, giving them even a fraction of what my parents have blessed me with.

# Honoring the First-Generation Experience:

## Midwestern University Chapter of National Tri-Alpha Society Welcomes its First Members

The first-generation experience encompasses being the first in a family to pursue a college degree or coming to the U.S. for higher education. First-generation students often face challenges regarding educational resources and guidance from their families compared to their cohorts, studying far from familiar support networks.

Recognizing the importance of this journey, the University launched a chapter of Tri-Alpha, the National First-Generation Honor Society. This

society serves as a platform to celebrate the achievements of those who are the first in their families to pursue higher education. Induction ceremonies were held on both campuses, honoring 64 individuals.

The first-generation community shared stories of overcoming feelings of isolation, mastering imposter syndrome, or pursuing healthcare careers to give back to their communities. Clinical Psychology student Catalina Blanton (CHS-Glendale Clin Psych '26)

shared, "As the daughter of a non-English speaking parent with limited opportunities, I saw firsthand how restricted access to resources perpetuates healthcare disparities, especially in mental health." Catalina described the challenge of code-switching, which for her went beyond language: "It meant adjusting my behavior, appearance, and identity to fit into a new environment. As an underrepresented student, this constant negotiation left me questioning my sense of belonging."

The Downers Grove Campus welcomes its first members of National Tri-Alpha



Her experience deepened her understanding of the psychological toll on others like her. "It reminded me I was exactly where I needed to be. I am not only pursuing my own dreams, but carrying the hopes of my mother and the sacrifices she made."

Victoria Franks, M.Ad., Vice President, Multicultural Affairs and Community Outreach, discussed the significance of the Tri-Alpha chapter: "Members of this honor society take pride in their achievements and share their stories.

The pin new members receive includes the words '1st Gen,' so that everyone who sees it will recognize the importance of this trailblazing path."

Ms. Franks added, "First-generation students often encounter unique challenges, including a lack of familial experience with higher education systems, financial barriers, and limited access to academic or professional networks." She noted that support systems on campus are in place to guide students with the challenges, including balancing their studies and learning

about the available resources.

Karen Eckhart, M.A., B.S., Financial Aid Administrator, Student Financial Services, emphasized, "Midwestern is a leader in education. We're always looking at how we can better serve our students." She said the initial step is to start by recognizing the multilayered aspect of first-generation identity and its meaning, especially among graduate students in a variety of health-care studies. Ms. Eckhart noted that first-generation identity among graduate students is often overlooked.

Midwestern University celebrates National First-Generation College Celebration Day. Attendees add or take notes of encouragement.

Mentorship is one of the ways Midwestern University supports first-generation students on their path to educational and career success. Ms. Franks highlighted the importance of those mentorship roles in providing advice, encouragement, and emotional support throughout students' educational journeys. "By their strength and character, our first-generation students inspire others to succeed in rigorous healthcare education programs and beyond," she said.



As a first-generation college student, Biomedical Sciences student Jacob Dowd (CGS-Downers Grove MBS '25) relied on outside resources to apply for higher education. Now, he serves as a mentor, offering guidance to peers with similar challenges. "My role as a mentor is to assist first-generation students in any way possible and be an outlet for the incoming students who may face the same challenges that I experienced in my first year in the program."

Dental student Valeria Estrella (CDMI '25) echoed Jacob's sentiments, saying, "Navigating the education system without any help presented a series of challenges; however, it was important for me to overcome these obstacles and pursue opportunities that were not readily available to my parents." A mentor for two years, Valeria said she learned quite a bit about the reciprocal aspect of mentoring and plans to offer the same support and guidance she received. "First-generation students may feel overwhelmed at times, but their resilience and determination often lead them to succeed. Support from mentors, access to resources, and a strong sense of community can impact their journey," she stated.

Danielle Bank, Learning Specialist, Student Services, added that first-generation students might be afraid to ask about resources for classes, activities, office hours, class expectations, study habits, when to reach out to faculty, and a myriad of other concerns that they think they should already know. "The goal is to create a strong peer-to-peer relationship that allows for wrap-around support," she said.

Following the establishment of the Tri-Alpha chapter, Midwestern University created an additional resource called the First-Generation Initiative, through which first-generation students will be given the resources and support that they need early on to assist them on their educational journey.

Students in the mentorship program can expand their networks through interdisciplinary collaboration. To promote connections across campus, mentors and peers might not be from the same program, Ms. Bank explained. By building these connections, students gain access to real-life success stories through their peers, staff, and faculty. "With faculty and students self-identifying as first-generation, other students are able to say, 'Wow. I didn't know this person was first-generation and has this identity,'" Ms. Bank said.

Ms. Franks elaborated that the first-generation faculty and staff are trailblazers and set the example of higher education for their families and the first-generation community. She continued, "Both first-generation students and faculty bring unique perspectives and experiences to academic and professional environments. Their diverse backgrounds enrich discussions, research, and decision-making processes, fostering a more inclusive and innovative atmosphere."

The first-generation community shares a unique identity, and the opportunities to connect with one another and foster camaraderie and connections. Ms. Bank noted, "We're building a community and developing programming that meets students where they are, using a strength-based approach, so that students not only feel comfortable in their identity, but they can see themselves as successful in their chosen specialty." First-generation students offer valuable contributions to Midwestern University through their determination and adaptability. "Their experiences with navigating complex systems can inform innovative educational strategies and curricula that are more inclusive and effective for all students at Midwestern University," said Ms. Franks.

# First-Gen Faculty

## Perspectives and Insights from Midwestern University Instructors Who Were First-Generation Students



Navigating the academic world as a first-generation student can present a unique set of challenges. Many individuals face a steep learning curve without the guidance of family members familiar with the intricacies of higher education.

In the healthcare professions, the stakes can be even higher. The demanding nature of higher education in healthcare requires not only academic excellence but also emotional fortitude and a deep commitment to patient care. Mentorship becomes a vital element in this journey.

In the following Q&As, we delve into the experiences and insight of four Midwestern University faculty members who were first-generation students themselves. Their stories highlight both the obstacles they personally overcame and how the value of mentorship shaped their outlook when teaching the next generation of healthcare professionals.

### Describe your first-generation experience, and your choice to pursue higher education.

**Dr. Edwards:** Throughout my upbringing, my parents said “go to college and get a good education.” When I turned 17 years old, I decided I was going to go to college with the help of the military. My father was in the Army, and from my perspective, it would be ideal to have that military background help pay for college. Six months after joining the Army Reserve, I was diagnosed with a benign brain tumor, which was removed surgically. But then I contracted spinal meningitis. This was why I chose to pursue higher education, and ultimately why I went into pharmacology. It really made me realize how short life is, and if I wanted to go to college, then had I better work as hard as I could, and get as many grants and scholarships as I could. It really was an influential part of my first-generation experience, that drive to do the best I can and do the most with my life after having this close near-death experience.

**Dr. Eikenberry:** I am a first-generation college student who comes from a family of farmers in rural Indiana. My parents were the first of their generation to seek employment outside of farming, and for as long as I can remember, my parents and grandparents instilled in me

that I needed to get into college and graduate to establish a career that would provide me with more opportunities for myself and my future family. In high school, I decided that I wanted to be a physical therapist, and the only way to become a PT is through college and graduate school. However, my family did not have the financial means to put me through even one year of college, let alone graduate school. Even with the assistance of partial scholarships, my first-generation experience throughout college and graduate school was challenged by stressors of financial insecurity, in addition to challenges related to navigating the higher education system and feeling as if I didn’t belong because of my background. Despite these challenges, I succeeded and have earned a bachelor’s degree and two doctoral degrees.

**Dr. Jauregui:** As a first-generation student, I faced many challenges and doubts. My parents stressed how important education was, but since they didn’t have much experience with it, they couldn’t guide me fully. Thankfully, I found mentors who supported me along the way. After my mom passed away from cancer during my junior year of high school, her wish for me to get an education, combined with my own interest in cancer, led me to pursue higher education.



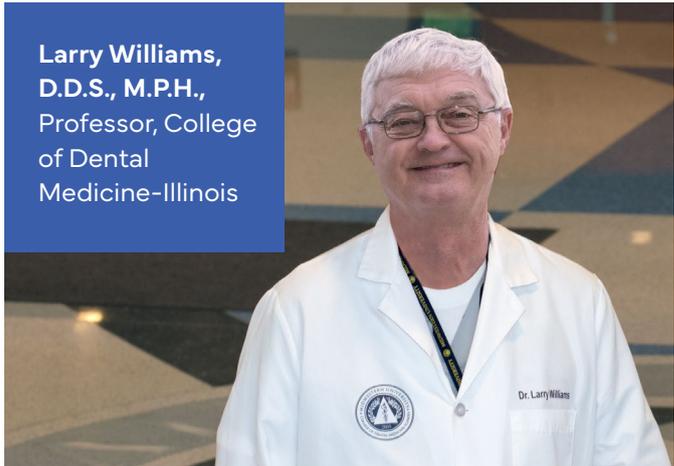
**Joshua Edwards, Ph.D.,**  
 Professor,  
 Pharmacology,  
 College of Graduate  
 Studies, Downers  
 Grove Campus



**Megan Eikenberry,**  
 PT, D.P.T., NCS,  
 Associate  
 Professor, Physical  
 Therapy, College of  
 Health Sciences,  
 Glendale Campus



**Estela Jauregui,**  
 Ph.D., Assistant  
 Professor,  
 Physiology,  
 College of  
 Graduate  
 Studies,  
 Glendale  
 Campus



**Larry Williams,**  
 D.D.S., M.P.H.,  
 Professor, College  
 of Dental  
 Medicine-Illinois

**Dr. Williams:** My mom was a nurse, and she did a certificate program. At that time, nursing schools were not college-based. When I was growing up, I went with her, and we took care of a few relatives who lived way back in the mountains. My dad was a tire salesman. I learned a lot about hands-on work, and I always knew I wanted to be in healthcare. I applied for medical school, but I didn't have biochemistry, so I had to take it. In that process, I changed my mind about medicine and decided to go into dentistry because I loved working with my hands.

It started me down the path toward a career in pharmacology. That was the reason why I chose to pursue my Ph.D. in Pharmacology and Toxicology.

**Did you have a mentor who inspired you? Describe how their influence set you on your career path.**

**Dr. Edwards:** After my undergraduate degree, I met someone once who was hugely influential to me. I had a temporary job in the Kalamazoo, MI area, and a veterinarian who did medical research talked to me. He said, "If you want to do research on animals and animal physiology, go into pharmacology." This impactful conversation with someone who told me career advice was what I really needed at that time.

**Dr. Williams:** Dr. Frank Bowyer was my orthodontist. Of all the flukes in the world, at the time he was treating me, he was the President of the American Dental Association. He had one of the first versions of a speaker phone on his telephone, and he was talking with the American Dental Association office in Chicago from Knoxville, Tennessee while I was there. I asked him questions afterward and he explained more about the field of dentistry.

Then, when I was in the military, I started my own program on tobacco cessation to help sailors quit. When I came to a Navy base to work as a dentist, my executive officer, Jerry Johnson, took me aside. He said, "This is something that we as dentists should be doing. I'm happy that you're doing this program, training other dentists, and working with the patients." He went on to become the Chief of the Dental Corps, a two-star admiral. We had a working relationship of 25 years, and it was extremely rewarding. We helped thousands of people quit smoking, saved lives, and helped people save money.



---

### **How has the Midwestern University community inspired you to be a mentor?**

**Dr. Eikenberry:** Midwestern is a student-centered institution where faculty are supported and encouraged to develop innovative strategies to support students. I love being a part of the Midwestern community and feel that I belong here. The institutional commitment to honoring the success of first-generation students through the Tri-Alpha Honor Society acknowledges the additional burden that first-gen students have to overcome, and it helps create a sense of belonging and community amongst the first-gen University students and faculty.

**Dr. Jauregui:** The Midwestern University community has inspired me to become a mentor because of its strong sense of support and teamwork. Watching how everyone works together to overcome challenges has been motivating. Programs like the Tri-Alpha Honor Society bring people together to help each other, showing the value of mutual support. This program encourages me to give back as a mentor and help others.

---

### **Describe how mentorship can impact a first-generation student versus those who do not have a mentor.**

**Dr. Jauregui:** In my own experience, mentorship has been invaluable, offering me guidance, support, and encouragement throughout my career. Without my mentors, I would have missed out on crucial advice, faced greater struggles, and might not have reached the point in my career that I am at today. Mentorship has been essential in helping me overcome challenges and achieve my goals.

**Dr. Williams:** For a first-generation student, not having someone to talk to is almost like leaving in your car to go on a trip without any directions. How do you know you've gotten where you were supposed to go? You either learn it yourself, or you pick it up from others. And that's where mentorship comes into play. You're able to provide information to people and hopefully get them on a path that they're supposed to be on or should be on, or at least open their world to view options of paths they could take.

---

### **What are some of the struggles first-generation students can face, and how can they overcome these struggles?**

**Dr. Edwards:** Many first-generation students struggle to find a direction or career path to go down in terms of making a living with their degree. Once you're college-educated, your amount of income is going to be on average higher than someone who doesn't have a college degree. Retirement planning, investments for the future, college funds for future children, and other investments can be really important.

Be aware of the struggles that are likely to happen. Make a plan for how you are going to talk to your family about the need to pursue your career. There's a difference between having a job and having a career. With careers, you may need to make different kinds of sacrifices.

**Dr. Eikenberry:** Evidence shows that first-generation students are less likely to seek out resources such as tutoring, counseling, or other student-support services, despite them being freely available to all students. First-gen students are also less likely to attend office hours, initiate an email to set up a meeting with a faculty person or ask for help, or maybe even realize that they need academic help. I believe that first-gen students can help overcome their struggles proactively by taking advantage of student support resources, even if they feel that maybe they are not doing "badly enough" to need to use resources.

---

## What would you like people to know about the first-generation student experience?

**Dr. Edwards:** I feel like I lacked the “polish” that other people who aren’t first-generation often have. They knew how to act in a professional setting, whereas I didn’t really have that experience growing up. First-generation students have the same qualifications, but they’re not as advantaged when it comes to career advice and career paths, compared to their second or third-generation peers.

**Dr. Eikenberry:** I think that faculty should be aware that first-gen students have unique challenges that they may not even realize, and that we should be sensitive to these challenges that may manifest as lack of organization, reduced professionalism, or poor stress management, among others, and we should help these professionals develop in these areas.

I would want all first-generation students to know that you belong here at Midwestern University, and there are many more of you than you may even realize!

**Dr. Jauregui:** First-generation students often face unique challenges, so it’s important to acknowledge and support their journey. To our first-generation students, remember that you belong and have the capability to achieve your goals.

**Dr. Williams:** Not everybody has a silver spoon. Understand that there are people (like me) who do not have the advantage of having a parent or family member who is also a dentist. They need our understanding, help, and a kind shoulder to lean on. They need someone who can give them a hand and help them. I think that’s the tough part about dental school or any professional training.

---

## What advice do you give to first-generation students?

**Dr. Eikenberry:** Take advantage of all student support resources that are offered to you. If mentorship is available, seek out a first-generation mentor who has successfully completed graduate school. An alumnus or faculty person, even if in a different specialty area, can provide information to help you efficiently solve problems that may take up valuable attentional bandwidth that could otherwise go towards more important things.

**Dr. Jauregui:** My advice to first-generation students is to build a strong support system and remember that you absolutely belong. Seek out mentors, join student organizations, and connect with peers who can offer guidance and encouragement.



## On Common Ground

### First-generation Midwestern University Students Pay it Forward for High School Students

When Azul Rangel and Cristal Reyes arrived at Ocotillo Hall on the warm June morning for their first day at the Health Careers Institute for High School Students (HCI), they did not know one another – but they already had one thing in common.

Cristal and Azul drove for hours from southern Arizona to reach Midwestern University's Glendale Campus that morning – Azul, from near Tucson, and Cristal from Wellton, just east of Yuma. Both young ladies were excited for the opportunity, not just because of the prospect of enjoying hands-on experience with a wide variety of different healthcare career possibilities, but because they are the first in their families to pursue higher education.

While Azul and Cristal got accustomed to being on a college campus that morning, Midwestern student volunteers took time out of their busy life schedules to get ready to mentor them and the rest of the 64 high schoolers selected to attend the University's annual eight-day summer camp. Each of the mentors committed themselves to their role for their own reasons, but several of them stepped up because they shared a common background with students like Cristal and Azul – they, too, were the first in their families to go to college and to pursue a healthcare career.

#### Overcoming the Obstacles

"The best way I can describe my experience as a first-generation student is like being thrown into the deep end of the pool," says Maguerite Djossou (AZCOM '27). "You either sink or swim – or, in my case, you're just happy to be floating. There are days where I question or doubt my abilities and wonder if I am even qualified to be where I am. I must remind myself of how far I have come and the work that I have put in and continue to put in to be where I am."

Jordyn Garland (AZCOM '27) grew up in a small town in Kentucky where education, particularly for women, was not valued highly. But as someone who describes herself as "stubborn," she knew that becoming a doctor was the one thing she wanted, no matter how hard of a road it would be. "I was lucky enough to have parents who pushed me in



Ashley Parker, AZCOM '27, demonstrates how to suture

school because they knew that was the only way for me to get out, be independent, and live a better life," she recalls. "My harsh reality is that I was not like other kids – I didn't have the same path, it wasn't as easy. I didn't have siblings, parents, or others in my family to help me get shadowing opportunities, jobs, or advice about the medical field. I was alone and had to figure it out all by myself."

Stubbornness also helped Ashley Parker (AZCOM '27) to overcome barriers that stood in her way as she navigated the unknown as a first-generation student herself – stubbornness, and a willingness to consume every bit of advice that came her way. "I had little understanding of the application process, how to obtain financial aid, or what the demands of higher education entailed," says Ashley. "But you have to stay open-minded and not be afraid to continue to ask for help when it's needed. Not one piece of advice will work for everyone, and one person's advice may help you more than someone else, but you will never know unless you ask for it."

First-generation students face a host of challenges and struggles, including a lack of familiarity with the processes and deadlines of applying to schools; financial aid requirements and options; housing and the logistics of campus life;



and so forth. Each student has to overcome challenges unique to their personal context. But the feeling of loneliness and imposter syndrome is something that Ashley, Jordyn, and Maguerite all specifically point to as one of their biggest barriers. “The feeling of ‘I don’t belong’ and looking at other kids and thinking I’ll never be like them took a huge mental toll,” Jordyn explains. “It is a constant uphill battle of looking at your place on the ground and seeing all of your peers miles above you due to the connections and privileges that they have been granted.”

### **Becoming Mentors**

Familiar with loneliness, not feeling good enough, and not knowing how to ask for help, Maguerite, Ashley, and Jordyn all decided that they would reach out and apply to become mentors to offer their knowledge and experience to the high schoolers attending the HCI. Their personal histories made them sensitive to the younger students’ feelings as they arrived on campus – feelings of being out of their element, not knowing where to go or with whom to talk, and even a touch of imposter syndrome being around peers who seemed more accomplished or worthy.

But also, each of the AZCOM students were inspired by how the Midwestern community helped them acclimate and gave them ways to succeed, so they wanted to pay it forward to the next generation. Jordyn cites the love

and kindness of her classmates and the environment of respect and support on campus. Maguerite, who attended the one-year Biomedical Sciences master’s degree program to prepare for AZCOM, feels that the experience helped her boost her ability to self-advocate as well as improve her didactic skills. Ashley remembers, “I was blown away. Midwestern and AZCOM offered support services and resources, tutoring, workshops, counseling, financial aid support, and community-building events.”

Over the course of the HCI’s eight days, Jordyn, Ashley, and Maguerite mentored their groups of eight students, sharing personal stories, offering insight, encouraging the high schoolers’ curiosity and inquisitiveness, and even hosting a “table topics” round-table discussion specifically for first-generation students. Their mentorship extended to offering themselves as resources even after the HCI was over. “I encouraged them to reach out to me, whether it be now or years down the road that they need help or advice,” Maguerite says. “They may not have a question now, but it helps to have someone you can talk to later when you need some answers.”

As for Cristal and Azul, their eight-day experience was everything they hoped for and more. “I said to them that the only way out is through, and if you want this you will have this,” concludes Jordyn. “I told them that if I could fight and crawl my way to where I am now, then I know for a fact that they can, too.”

# Midwestern University's Founding College



## Timeline

Midwestern University is celebrating the 125th anniversary of the **Chicago College of Osteopathic Medicine (CCOM)** in 2025. To commemorate this milestone, the University has created a special alumni pin, launched a dedicated webpage ([www.midwestern.edu/ccom125](http://www.midwestern.edu/ccom125)), and planned special recognition events throughout the year.



**1900:** Founded as The American College of Osteopathic Medicine and Surgery in Chicago.



**1902:** Six of the college's 16 graduates were women—a rarity at a time when most allopathic medical schools excluded them. Osteopathic medicine, a growing field in need of students, offered women a valuable alternative path into the profession.



**1909:** The board of directors announced a new name for the college, officially renaming it Littlejohn's College and Hospital, a title it held until 1913.



**1910:** The Flexner Report was published, highlighting the need for standardized medical education across the U.S. and pushing for higher educational requirements. This report led to reforms in both allopathic and osteopathic schools.



**1940s-1950s:** The establishment of osteopathic internships and residencies became more common across the U.S. as the profession grew and gained recognition.



**1947:** The college lost two of its respected and admired founders: Dr. James B. Littlejohn died in Chicago on May 21st, and his older brother Dr. J. Martin Littlejohn died in England on December 8th.



**1955:** D.O.s were officially recognized as fully-licensed physicians, granting them the same rights and privileges as M.D.s. This year also marked the recognition of D.O.s as eligible to serve in the military, allowing them to practice medicine in military settings alongside M.D.s.



**1963:** 75 additional beds for inpatient care were provided with the opening of a new wing at the Chicago Osteopathic Hospital.



**1986:** The Downers Grove Campus site (formerly George Williams College) was purchased.



**1988:** The Board of Trustees dedicated the Downers Grove Campus and laid the foundation for a larger institution dedicated to healthcare education.



**1990s:** CCOM expanded its clinical partnerships with regional hospitals, increasing opportunities for student rotations and residencies, enhancing its reputation for primary care and specialty training.



**1993:** Midwestern University is founded to build on the legacy of CCOM and expand the commitment to healthcare education and interdisciplinary training.

# The Littlejohn Scholarship



Make an impact—support our new scholarship today.



To mark CCOM's 125th anniversary, we are launching a new initiative - the Littlejohn Scholarship - designed to honor our founders and support the students who will continue to advance the values and progress of osteopathic medicine for generations to come. Please consider celebrating with us and supporting our new scholarship.

**CCOM opened its doors in 1900** as The American College of Osteopathic Medicine and Surgery, welcoming just four students. The school was established by J. Martin Littlejohn, D.O., and his brothers, James Buchan Littlejohn, M.D., D.O., and David Littlejohn, M.D., D.O., who shared a vision for a medical school that emphasized osteopathic principles. Their vision laid the foundation for what would become one of the nation's leading osteopathic medical schools.

**Today**, CCOM graduates approximately 200 students each year and has celebrated more than 7,500 alumni. Its graduates have made significant contributions to osteopathic medicine across a wide range of specialties and leadership roles, both in the U.S. and around the world.



**1913:** The school unveiled a new name – the Chicago College of Osteopathy (CCO) and 50 students reported for classes when the fall term opened, forming the largest incoming class up to that time.



**1918:** In the midst of a ferocious flu epidemic sweeping Chicago and the rest of the country, the school transferred its base of operations from Monroe St. to Ellis Ave. between 52nd and 53rd streets in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago and opened the 50-bed Chicago Osteopathic Hospital.



**1929:** The American Osteopathic Association (AOA) established the first formal osteopathic residency programs, providing structured post-graduate training for D.O.s, a significant step toward professional development and practice.



**1940s:** With students and potential students leaving to serve in World War II, all medical schools, including the Chicago College of Osteopathy, adopted a three-year curriculum. Despite the challenges, the College remained viable.



**1966:** Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara authorized the acceptance of osteopathic physicians into the military medical services on the same basis as M.D.s, allowing them to volunteer for active duty commissions.



**1970:** The American Osteopathic Association voted to name all osteopathic schools as Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine. The name of the College is officially changed to the Chicago College of Osteopathic Medicine (CCOM).



**1973:** A groundbreaking ceremony took place for a new six-story CCOM Outpatient Clinic.



**1978:** Olympia Fields Osteopathic Hospital opened, serving as a key clinical training site for CCOM students. The hospital expanded hands-on medical education and strengthened osteopathic practice in the Chicago area.



**1996:** Midwestern University opened its Glendale, Arizona Campus, marking its expansion beyond Illinois. The first classes included osteopathic medicine and physician assistant studies, laying the foundation for a comprehensive healthcare education in the Southwest.



**2000:** CCOM celebrated 100 years, honoring a century of excellence in osteopathic medical education. CCOM marked its centennial with special events, historical retrospectives, and a reaffirmation of its commitment to training future healthcare professionals.



**2000:** CCOM launched a comprehensive research division focusing on osteopathic manipulative medicine and primary care.



**2025:** University celebrates the 125th anniversary of CCOM, highlighting its contributions to osteopathic medical education, research, and patient care.

### Dr. Alexandra Burnham

#### Title/Work Organization:

Owner/dentist, The Smile Studio, Phoenix, AZ

#### Education:

Bachelor of Science in Biology, Westmont College, Santa Barbara, CA (2010)  
Master of Arts, Biomedical Sciences, Midwestern University College of Health Sciences, Glendale Campus (2012)  
Doctor of Dental Medicine, Midwestern University College of Dental Medicine-Arizona (2017)

#### Family:

I have been married to my amazing husband, Bobby, for six years now. We have been together for a total of 12 years. We actually met at Midwestern University during our master's program! We have an adorable little Bernedoodle named Chief, who just turned one year old. We are expecting our first baby boy in December. We are super excited to start this next chapter as parents

#### Residence:

Surprise, Arizona

#### Professional Memberships:

American Dental Association (ADA), Academy of General Dentistry (AGD)



**Describe what you do:** As a dentist, I am dedicated to diagnosing, treating, and preventing oral health issues. My ultimate passion in dentistry is helping others feel confident about themselves through their smiles. My commitment is to focus on lifelong learning and stay updated on the latest technology to provide the best quality care for my patients. At the end of the day, I just want to help my patients feel better and make a difference in their lives

**Why did you decide to go into this field?** I decided to become a dentist because of the lasting impact I could have on someone's life. From a young age, I was always fascinated by teeth. I loved going to the dentist and having my teeth cleaned. Dentistry was a great career path for me because it allowed me to combine science and art while making a positive impact on someone's life.

**What is the hardest thing about your job?** The hardest part of being both a dentist and a business owner is balancing clinical responsibilities with the demands of running a successful practice. As a dentist, the primary focus is on patient care, requiring attention to detail, precision, and staying updated on the latest medical advancements. Simultaneously, as a business owner, there's the need to manage finances, team members, marketing, and operations, all of which can be time-consuming and stressful.

Juggling these roles means constantly shifting between being a healthcare provider and a business strategist, which can lead to challenges in time management and maintaining work-life balance.

**Favorite quote:** "She believed she could, so she did."

**Philosophy:** Be good to others and do good for others. Another favorite motto of mine is: The person who tries 100 times is more successful than the person who does not try at all.

**Favorite hobbies:** My husband and I love traveling. We try to go to a new country every year. We have been to over 24 countries and 21 states. We also love trying new restaurants. Other than traveling, if I'm not hanging out with our little puppy, Chief, I'm usually staying active - whether that's at the gym, hiking, or at a new studio trying a new workout.

**What's the best advice you ever received?** You have two choices: you can either take the leap and see where it leads or stand on the sidelines watching others move forward while you remain unchanged.

**Favorite travel destination:** Italy! Each city has its own rich history and amazing food. We have gone to Italy every year over the past five years.

**What do you listen to in the car?** I mix it up. Some days I listen to real estate podcasts (another love of mine), and other days I'm jamming out to the top hits, hip hop/R&B, and dance/electronic music.

**Who do you admire the most?** I truly admire my husband. He is the most genuine person I have ever met. He is very dedicated to his work, humble, and just has a good heart.

**If you weren't in your current field, what would you be doing?** If I wasn't in dentistry, I would probably be in real estate in some fashion. Over the last few years, I have gained a lot of experience in real estate and love learning more about it. It is an industry that has so many branches, whether it's focusing on residential, commercial, land, property management, and so forth. I have loved learning the creative ways of getting involved and have found it fun and rewarding.

**Describe what you do:** I serve as the President of CVS Health's Retail Health businesses. This includes MinuteClinic, virtual care, and behavioral health. Together, these businesses represent one of the largest Nurse Practitioner (NP) and Physician Assistant (PA) provider workforces in the country, serving over five million patients annually.

**Why did you decide to go into this field?** I have a passion for changing healthcare to make it more consumer-oriented, value-based, and easier for patients and providers to build trusted relationships. I enjoy building teams and leading companies that help change healthcare to become more of a system and less fragmented and complex for both patients and providers. And, I still see patients today as an Internal Medicine physician.

**What is the hardest thing about your job?** I really enjoy my job and consider it a privilege to lead smart and driven teams that are making a difference in healthcare. The hardest part is balancing work and family responsibilities to also ensure I am a good dad and husband.

**What is the most rewarding thing about your job?** The most rewarding part of my job is constantly learning about new advances and innovations in our industry and applying them to our practice and business to better serve our patients.

**Notable achievements/Major Accomplishments:** I would like to think my greatest accomplishment is my children and being happily married for over 10 years. In my career, my most impactful accomplishments come from the work of building great teams to achieve their goals and helping people – our employees as well as our patients – achieve their goals.

**Volunteer organizations/Community involvement:** I serve on the Alumni Board for the University of Colorado Boulder and for Midwestern CCOM. I really enjoy giving back to the institutions that helped me achieve my career goals.

**What do you listen to in the car?** Country music channels!



**Favorite quote:** "Don't worry alone." I was in the Coronary Care Unit (CCU) during residency and had a very difficult patient to manage. When our team finally called the attending physician, he said, "Don't worry alone." If we had called a few hours earlier, the attending could have helped us steer the patient's clinical course more quickly. Fortunately, the patient had a good outcome, but it was a good lesson in recognizing that teams are really important, and it is always helpful to have more than one person helping to tackle hard problems.

**Philosophy:** Life is too short. Particularly as I get older, the sense of mortality is ever-present and forces reflections on how to best spend my time and where best to devote my talents while still being a great dad and husband.

**What are your favorite ways to relax?** I love hanging out with my family, taking hikes, skiing, and fly fishing.

**What's the best advice you ever received?** Don't be afraid to fail. Too often we become complacent in our jobs and, in our lives, and it is important to stretch, learn, and grow continuously. This will involve failure. Learning from failure and applying those lessons to future situations is a very important skill that helps deepen your leadership and hopefully makes you a better person.

**Favorite travel destination:** We live in Denver and our favorite place to go is Breckenridge, CO, where we enjoy hiking, skiing, and the outdoors.

## Dr. Creagh Milford

### Title/Work Organization:

President, Retail Health at CVS Health

### Education:

Bachelor of Arts in Political Science, University of Colorado, Boulder (2000)  
Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine, Midwestern University (CCOM 2008)  
Master of Public Health, Harvard School of Public Health (2013)

### Family:

Wife, Maribeth; Children: Madelyn (8) and Charlotte (6)

### Residence:

Cherry Hills, Colorado

### Professional Memberships:

American Osteopathic Association (AOA), American College of Osteopathic Internists (ACOI), American Medical Association (AMA)

**Who do you admire the most?** There are many leaders whom I admire; the one that would be close to the top of the list is Winston Churchill, who led England through WWII in a time of despair and desperation. On a personal note, I greatly admire my wife, who is a practicing anesthesiologist, wife, and mother to our two kids and can balance all three with grace and laughter.

**If you weren't in your current field, what would you be doing?** I am drawn to and passionate about healthcare. My father and grandfather are both physicians, and the ability to help people in their most vulnerable times of need is a gift. If I weren't a physician executive, I would likely still be in healthcare trying to make an impact.

# From the Archives

## Four Peckham Brothers Make their Mark at CCOM as First Generation to Attend College

Floyd F. Peckham, Russel R. Peckham, C. Fred Peckham, and Arthur C. Peckham came from a hard-working farming family in upstate Watson, New York. When an osteopathic physician visited their small town and treated their sick mother, they were hooked and decided to become D.O.s themselves.

Floyd entered the Class of 1921, and his brothers Russel, Fred, and Arthur soon followed in the Classes of 1923, 1926, and 1929. Their father, who sold the farm and bought a butcher shop in town, required them to work there after high school before attending medical school, which they all did, anchoring their connection to the area.

During medical school in the 1920's, the Peckham boys were known to be very popular among their classmates, a trend which continued after graduation. Russel became a Professor of Anatomy at CCOM until his untimely death in 1933, and Floyd served as Director of the Chicago Osteopathic Hospital and Clinics in the



Floyd F. Peckham, D.O. (1895-1970)



C. Fred Peckham (1901-1977)

C. F. PECKHAM  
*President*



DR. RUSSEL R. PECKHAM  
(1897 - 1933)  
Graduated from Chicago College of Osteopathy — June, 1923  
Associate Director of Clinic—1923-24  
Professor of Anatomy — 1924-33  
Professor of Technique — 1930-33  
Developed Palmer Park Athletic Clinic — 1926-31  
Original research in Anatomy and Technique

### IN MEMORIAM

Russel R. Peckham, D.O. (1897-1933)



PECKHAM, ARTHUR C. *Atlas Club*  
*Lowville, N. Y.*

Lowville High School; Prefreshman Class President, '24; Football, '24, '25, etc.; Baseball, '25, '26, '27, '28.

A real sportsman, who loves to win  
And can cheerfully lose.

Arthur C. Peckham (1903-1986)



Floyd Peckham Basic Science Building at Hyde Park Chicago College of Osteopathy campus

1920s as well as on the CCO Board of Trustees beginning in 1932. In 1949, he was appointed Chairman of the Board, a position he held until 1967. In 1968, the new basic science building at the original Hyde Park Chicago College of Osteopathy campus was named the Peckham Science Building in his honor. He also served his fellow D.O.s as AOA President from 1950-1951 and was awarded their highest honor, the Distinguished Service Award.

Both Arthur and Fred returned upstate to practice medicine and were very active in the profession in New York. Almost 30 years later, Fred's son, C. Fred Peckham, Jr. (1928-1999), graduated as part of the CCOM class of 1957.

Submitted by: Dan Grooms, University Archivist

Non-Profit  
U.S. Postage  
**PAID**  
Downers Grove, IL  
Permit No. 26

**Join Us Online:**



facebook.com  
/MidwesternUniversity



instagram.com  
/midwesternuniv/



linkedin.com  
/school/midwestern-university/



youtube.com  
/user/MidwesternUniversity



tiktok.com  
/@midwesternuniversity



threads.net  
/@midwesternuniv



x.com  
/MidwesternUniv

