



AURORA UNIVERSITY

MAGAZINE ————— VOLUME 7, ISSUE 1 — SPRING 2021



DISCOVER WHAT MATTERS. AND BUILD YOUR LIFE AROUND IT.

Aurora University Magazine is published twice a year for alumni of Aurora University. Editorial offices are located at 1500 Southlawn Place, Aurora, IL 60506.

Spring 2021 | Volume 7, Issue 1

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About the Cover
The bronze Spartan statue, installed in 2014, overlooks the AU Quad as spring arrives.



Often over the past year I paused in gratitude. Though our mission of transforming lives through learning is always inspiring for me, it seemed particularly so during the pandemic. Several moments stand out among the many. Once, as I walked across the silent campus, I realized that I was profoundly

thankful to have meaningful work. Another time, as Tango and I walked the familiar lake path, I again was overwhelmed with deep gratitude for all that we have been given and all that I hope we will share with our students in years to come. In the midst of a testing time, I hoped that we would find the resilience and fortitude to move forward, to transcend current circumstances to envision a vibrant future for our students and our university. In this issue of the Aurora University magazine, we share some of our dreams for the decade ahead.

These articles were written against the backdrop of a global pandemic, but are not about COVID-19. (In fact, the strategic plan itself was drafted prior to the onset of the pandemic.) Our students, faculty, and staff indeed worked hard this last year to adapt and to realize important goals. We took special care of one another and thought too about the welfare of peers, neighbors, and family. Sadly, the past 12 months saw the deaths of dear friends of the university. It was heartbreaking not to be able to travel and join into celebrations of their lives, to offer sympathy face-to-face, and to share memories of happier times. We will not forget these generous souls and the time shared with them. Nor will we forget the work that remains to be done in our country to fulfill the fundamental promises of America.

Aurora University’s new strategic plan, approved by the Board of Trustees in November of 2020, is both practical and aspirational. Some elements reaffirm existing commitments, such as our dedication to providing faculty and staff with highly competitive salaries, wages, and benefits. Given the many pressures on both the revenue and expense sides of our budget, such a promise requires real dedication to realize. We are grateful for the help we have received from alumni and friends in this vital area. In recent years, new endowed professorships in accounting, chaplaincy, ethics, music, and vocation have been noteworthy. I know you will enjoy reading about the exemplary teacher and scholar who soon will join us as the Joe Dunham Distinguished Professor of Ethics.

The new AU plan places a special emphasis on affordability and accessibility. Like alumni from both the Aurora and George Williams sides of the family, almost

half of our current students are the first in their families to attempt bachelor’s degrees. Frequently, they shoulder college costs themselves, working several jobs to make tuition payments. For many of these students, even living on campus is beyond reach. So too are prestigious internships in Chicago (that may interfere with work schedules) or study/travel courses with faculty members. Several years ago, as we marked our 125th anniversary, we established the new Study Beyond endowment to help address this problem. Like donor-funded scholarships, these dollars help us broaden and deepen the learning experiences of our students.

One of the boldest initiatives set forth in the new plan is the establishment of a School of Health Science. Here we intend to build upon the strong foundation already present in our nursing, athletic training, exercise science, human-animal studies, and therapeutic recreation programs. A rigorous new constellation of courses will prepare students for continued study in professional fields ranging from medicine, dentistry, and veterinary science to physical therapy, occupational therapy, and public health. Already key faculty leaders are working with colleagues throughout the Chicago area and beyond to fashion the articulation agreements that will allow our graduates to make positive transitions into professional and graduate schools. The new programs will make further meaning of our historic traditions of educating students to help and to heal individuals and society as a whole.

Our best collective efforts will be required to realize the vision set forth in the new strategic plan. Each person and each stakeholder group — students, faculty, staff, alumni, friends, and trustees — has a distinctive role to play in the next chapter of our story. Toward this end, I know that you will enjoy meeting two members of our Board of Trustees, who not only share graciously with the university, but perform also vital fiduciary functions. They follow in the footsteps of many who came before. Like the alumni featured in the pages that follow, they seek to give something of what they have received. At the end of the day, this is the essence of our story at Aurora University. And so we go forward, comforted and inspired by the miles traveled already and confident and grateful for all we will meet on the road ahead.

Rebecca L. Sherrick

REBECCA L. SHERRICK
PRESIDENT

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RISING ABOVE

The Path to 2024



AU's new strategic plan looks to the future and finds opportunities for growth

Standing outside Eckhart Hall, looking across the Quad to the bronze Spartan statue poised at the entrance of Alumni Hall in the distance, it is impossible not to experience the resilience and strength of Aurora University.

Since its founding, AU has striven to be an exemplary institution of higher learning, standing apart from other colleges and universities by putting the focus on affordability, accessibility, and authenticity.

It is with this legacy in mind that AU has unveiled its new strategic plan, Rising Above. The five-year strategic plan, approved by the Board of Trustees in November, charts an ambitious path through 2024. True to AU's mission, the plan is designed to emphasize first and foremost its students — supporting them not only in the classroom, but across mind, body, and spirit.

The theme of Rising Above calls not only for AU to rise above the upheaval facing higher education, but for students to rise above prevailing circumstances and personal challenges to fulfill their aspirations. The plan builds on AU's legacy of rising above the exigencies and orthodoxies of a complicated world, to fulfill the university's mission with confidence for decades to come.



Higher education is evolving in dramatic and often unpredictable ways. The global pandemic, its economic fallout, and widespread social unrest have accelerated the seismic shift already underway in how America addresses the education and training of its young people for life, work, and community. Public confidence and trust in higher education, once quite high, have declined in recent years. Critics of higher education are especially vocal about high tuition costs and concomitant levels of student debt. Although AU operates with a high degree of integrity and transparency, the industrywide problems are putting pressure on all universities.

AU is responding with agile and nimble adjustments to meet the changing marketplace and the evolving needs of students. The university's distinctive business model blends a remarkably low private-college tuition price with a generous aid philosophy, thoughtful stewardship, and demonstrated excellence to provide a truly exceptional value. This value proposition — along with longstanding commitments to scholarship, character, citizenship, social responsibility, and spiritual growth — distinguishes AU from other higher-education institutions.

"This is a moment that calls us to something higher," said AU President Rebecca L. Sherrick. "We can choose a different path."

In the years ahead, the university will continue to build upon these strengths while welcoming new populations of undergraduate and graduate students to AU's campuses, enrollment centers, and growing online program.

AU has plans to launch the Aurora campus autism initiative this summer, expand the Plus One accelerated graduate degree programs, diversify online offerings, increase summer learning opportunities, and continue to make investments in technology infrastructure.

What follows is a closer look at a few of the many initiatives underway as part of the Rising Above strategic plan that are shaping AU for the years ahead.

Training for Jobs of the Future: The New School of Health Science

One of the boldest initiatives set forth in the new strategic plan is the establishment of a School of Health Science.

The health care field is the largest source of jobs in the U.S. and ranks among the fastest growing professions. An estimated 2.4 million jobs in health care are expected to be created by 2029, an uptick of 15% since the start of the decade, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"We want to prepare students to be leaders in the health fields and to bring positive changes to the health care industry and to society as a whole," said Sarah Radtke, dean of the School of Health Science. "This past year of the pandemic crisis has exposed all the problems in health care.

Mission Statement

Aurora University is an inclusive community dedicated to the transformative power of learning. As a teaching-centered institution, we encourage undergraduate and graduate students to discover what it takes to build meaningful and examined lives. Our singular goal is to empower our students to achieve lasting personal and professional success.

We knew they were there, but we could see how the system broke down under the extreme stress of the pandemic.”

The new school, launched in January, is a natural outgrowth of AU’s strong foundation in the helping and healing professions. The university has been training nurses since the end of World War II and social workers since the Great Depression. The School of Nursing and the School of Social Work are among the most highly regarded programs of their kind in Illinois.

The School of Health Science likewise follows AU’s practice of sending well-educated and highly trained graduates into the world to improve the lives of individuals and the community with compassion, integrity, and inclusivity. For the past 20 years, AU has excelled in preparing students for careers in athletic training, exercise science, human-animal studies, and therapeutic recreation.

The pre-veterinary track has an unmatched record in training students for acceptance into veterinary schools. And AU alumni in the fields of biology and health science are working across Illinois and the U.S. as physicians, pharmacists, biomedical engineers, and research scientists.

The School of Health Science houses four undergraduate majors, three graduate programs, and nine pre-health profession tracks from AU’s current programs and expands upon them with new courses and programs.

A rigorous new constellation of courses is under development for continued study in professional fields ranging from medicine and dentistry to physical therapy and public health. Exciting new classes in community health, health care informatics, and evidence-based health care will be offered for the first time this fall. And a new Health Care Administration program is on the horizon.

New curriculum will introduce students to the fields of health care, health care ethics, and health care technology, including electronic record-keeping systems, and address the cultural issues related to providing health care.

“After a review of the top health science programs in the country, we expanded our focus on public health, with an eye toward developing really well-rounded health care practitioners,” said Radtke, who built the Exercise Science and Athletic Training programs at AU before being named dean of the School of Health Science.

To further support students, the School of Health Science is in the process of hiring new faculty with extensive experience working in the field as medical doctors, exercise physiologists, and athletic trainers. The school has a pre-medical advisor dedicated to helping students interested in pre-health professions to navigate the ever-expanding array of health care careers, as well as to demystify the professional-school application process.



What’s Ahead: School of Health Science

- » New classes in community health, technology, culture, and ethics
- » Dedicated premed advisor
- » New faculty hires with work experience in health care
- » Pipeline agreements with medical schools
- » New Health Care Administration major

“Most students enter college with limited knowledge of the diversity of jobs available in health care,” said Radtke. “We are intentionally focused on introducing students to the complexities of the health care industry and all the job possibilities within it.”

AU leaders are working to develop pipeline agreements with medical schools and expand partnerships with local health care organizations that will allow AU graduates to make positive transitions into careers and advanced studies. AU’s Exercise Science and Athletic Training programs already provide students with internships and clinical experiences at local hospitals, rehabilitation centers, and medical facilities, including Advocate Health Care, Athletico Physical Therapy, ATI Physical Therapy, Fox Valley Immediate Care, Northwestern Medicine, and UChicago Medicine. Similar agreements are on track to be in place for the pre-professional health programs by the end of the year.

“We have done a lot of good things in health science already, and we are looking to build upon our successes,” said Radtke.

Improving Student Writing Across Disciplines

Clear communication is powerful. Students who write well are more likely to succeed.

No matter what the discipline, good writing reflects a student’s ability to think critically, frame arguments, and draw conclusions. That is why AU is integrating how to become a better writer into more courses and majors.

“Students’ long-term success depends in large part on their ability to communicate precisely and concisely,” said Matthew Kneller, associate professor of communication and director of general education. “It doesn’t matter what profession you go into, to be successful, you have to be able to write well.”

The university has made student writing the focus of its Higher Learning Commission Quality Initiative. AU is due for its 10-year accreditation in October 2022, and choosing a project for the HLC Quality Initiative is required as part of the accreditation process. The final outcomes report for the writing initiative will be presented to the HLC in June 2022.

Almost every academic program offered at AU is connected to a profession that is writing intensive, said Kneller, who has been working with a team of professors,



What’s Ahead: Writing Initiative

- » New writing-intensive courses for every major
- » Restructured writing assignments that measure students’ improvement
- » Extra support from professors, the library, and the Academic Support Center

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It doesn’t matter what profession you go into, to be successful, you have to be able to write well.

—Matthew Kneller, Associate Professor of Communication

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administrators, and staff members to coordinate the writing initiative. Nursing, social work, and criminal justice require excellent report-writing skills. Scientific and evidence-based writing predominate in psychology, biology, health science, and sociology. Mathematics emphasizes written proofs that rely on providing evidence and drawing conclusions.

The arts and humanities require intense reading skills and the ability to effectively argue a point. And the mastery of proper grammar, sentence construction, correct spelling, and organization apply to all modes of writing, Kneller said.

As part of the initiative, AU faculty have created significant writing assignments tailored to every major and have incorporated writing instruction into most of their classes. Beyond writing more, students are tasked with writing better. Rather than simply receiving a grade, students review, revise, rewrite, and resubmit their papers to demonstrate improvement. The faculty have developed a rubric to chart students’ development in writing across various disciplines from freshman through senior year.

“The strategic plan is designed to foster a climate of continuous improvement,” said Kneller. “One of its core values commits the institution to pursuing excellence by embracing quality as a way of community life. Improving written communication will benefit AU students for life.”

Guiding Students to Success

The heavy toll the pandemic has taken on teenagers is changing how AU plans to welcome the incoming freshman class this fall.

For almost a year and a half, most high school students have had minimal interaction with classmates. They have taken some or all of their classes remotely. Most social activities, sports competitions, pep rallies, student clubs, proms, graduation ceremonies, and other

traditional high school touchstones disappeared due to COVID-19 restrictions.

AU has recognized this new reality and is adjusting student support services to fill the gap.

“We’re starting to talk about what orientation looks like for new students coming to AU,” said Jennifer Buckley, vice president for student success and dean of the School of Education. “We need to help students with basic social skills and time management, with what it means to communicate with your professors. There’s going to be a resocialization taking place at colleges everywhere as we start to rebound from the pandemic.”

At the heart of AU’s efforts to support students during their college journey and into their early career is the Kimberly and James Hill Center for Student Success. The newly constructed building is slated to open later this summer. It will offer students opportunities to discover their path in work and life, to prepare for employment and graduate school interviews, and to succeed after graduation.

Academic advisors and faculty members are committed to creating connections with students throughout their college experience — from registering as freshmen to choosing a major, landing an internship, and securing employment after graduation.

Guiding students toward success also includes a broader understanding of fiscal responsibility. The goal is to make sure that families have a detailed plan for how to pay for college. Financial aid counselors and academic advisors have started a new practice this spring of meeting one-on-one with every new student and family to review the total cost of tuition and other school expenses, compared to the sources of funding and financial support available.

There’s going to be a resocialization taking place at colleges everywhere as we start to rebound from the pandemic.

—Jennifer Buckley, Vice President for Student Success

AU began expanding career support last fall with the introduction of the Sundays @ 7 Career Conversations with Alumni. The virtual program provides a forum for students to hear firsthand from recent graduates about their transitions from college to careers or graduate schools.



» What’s Ahead: Guiding Students to Success

- » Newly constructed Kimberly and James Hill Center for Student Success
- » One-on-one financial counseling for every student and family
- » Sundays @ 7 Career Conversations with Alumni
- » Renewed focus on ethics across disciplines
- » Resocialization for students as they return from pandemic restrictions

Alumni across the U.S. have taken part, representing the fields of finance, science, medicine, law, communication, education, psychology, and accounting, among others. Indeed, one alumna participated from Spain, where she serves as a judge advocate in the U.S. Navy.

“This program has become one of the most significant avenues for alumni to support our students,” said Teri Tomaszewicz, vice president for alumni relations.

Beyond academics and careers, AU is enhancing existing efforts to help students think about the big questions in their lives. The strategic plan calls for incorporating a stronger focus on ethics into the university’s undergraduate and graduate student experiences, a process already underway with the first Joe Dunham Distinguished Professor of Ethics (see page 10). The Wackerlin Center for Faith and Action is also searching for a new director and, along with its current emphasis on faith and vocation, will expand to include a focus on social justice.

“The pandemic has created new opportunities for us,” said Buckley. “We paused and became more reflective to make sure we are serving our students in the best way possible.”

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Rising Above: An Overview

The Rising Above strategic plan is intended to guide institutional decision-making from 2020 to 2024 with the following three broad strategic directions:

1 Optimal Mix

Provide Aurora University students with the optimal mix of programs and services vital to fulfillment of their aspirations and our mission.

- » Continue to strengthen the general education curriculum for undergraduates and explore the feasibility of establishing common required experiences for graduate students.
- » Develop new undergraduate majors and graduate programs, consistent with the university’s mission and emerging workplace needs.
- » Engage undergraduates in affordable and accessible high-impact learning experiences.
- » Prepare undergraduates for successful transitions to the worlds of work and continued study.
- » Facilitate the persistence and growth of undergraduates through delivery of high-quality support services and a strong co-curriculum.

2 Vibrant Learning Environment

Invest in the continuous development of a vibrant 21st-century learning environment.

- » Continue to strengthen the university’s salary/wage, benefit, and professional development programs.
- » Empower the university community with the information technology systems and resources necessary to sustain academic and administrative excellence.
- » Ensure the safety and welfare of our campus communities.
- » Continue to make strategic investments in the university’s facilities and campus environments.

3 Financial Vitality

Ensure continued institutional vitality through the entrepreneurial development of new sources of financial support and the prudent management of existing resources.

- » Secure external support to help fund important university capital projects and program initiatives.
- » Evaluate continuously the viability of the AU business model in a rapidly changing and volatile external environment and amend as appropriate.

To read the complete strategic plan, visit aurora.edu/strategicplan.

Meet Gopal Gupta

AU’s first Joe Dunham Distinguished Professor of Ethics

As a young man, Gopal Gupta had his sights set on becoming an electrical engineer. Math and science fascinated him. But the further he got into his studies, the more intrigued he became with deeper questions. What’s the relationship between science, religion, and ethics? How can these forces of the world be used to make life better?

As the questions grew larger, so too did Gupta’s journey. After earning bachelor’s and master’s degrees in electrical engineering from Boise State University in his hometown of Boise, Idaho, Gupta traveled to Oxford University in the United Kingdom, where he received a master’s degree in science and religion, then a doctorate in theology and religious studies. He wrote his thesis on human suffering and *māyā*, one of the most fascinating and enigmatic concepts in Indian philosophy. And he researched thinkers including Ian Barbour, Rupa Goswami, John Hedley Brooke, and Rabindranath Tagore.

Last year, his book, “*Māyā in the Bhāgavata Purāna: Human Suffering and Divine Play*,” was published by Oxford University Press. He also serves as editor of the *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*, a peer-reviewed journal focusing on comparative religion.

This fall, Gupta will bring his fascination with the human condition to Aurora University as the first Joe Dunham Distinguished Professor of Ethics. The professorship was established in the name of the late Joe Dunham, a remarkable professor of philosophy and religion who was an essential part of AU for more than four decades. Dunham was widely lauded as one of AU’s greatest teachers and a trusted mentor to students and colleagues. The endowed professorship was established by his family, friends, and former students in hopes of ensuring that future generations will benefit from his legacy.

Gupta comes to AU from the University of Evansville in Indiana, where he was a professor of philosophy and religion. We spoke with Gupta about his teaching philosophy, his plans for AU’s ethics curriculum, and his personal goals as a professor. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.



“The issues of ethics lie at the heart of every human endeavor, in every field of study.”
—Gopal Gupta, Joe Dunham Distinguished Professor of Ethics

Aurora University: What is your teaching philosophy?

Professor Gupta: Among other methods, I enjoy teaching ethics through a narrative-style approach that has proved so successful with students. Through my research and teaching, I found that the primary way ethical insights are communicated in all traditions is more through story than theory. I tell this to my students: Storytelling, especially the stories of heroes and saints, shapes the ethical imagination of civilizations.

I want my students to think ethically. I want them to develop an ethical consciousness, an ethical point of view. They can do this by imbibing the traditions, hearing the stories of world cultures, and recognizing how these stories might be relevant to them in their

present lives. For example, Gandhi’s ethics were shaped by the “Bhagavad Gita” and his Hindu faith, but also by Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount. And then Martin Luther King’s ethical views were influenced by Gandhi’s insights. Through the narratives of different traditions, many of our major figures in history received insights from an exercise in comparative ethics.

AU: What stood out to you about your visit to AU?

Gupta: I had conversations with students, faculty, and staff — I really started to love Aurora University almost instantaneously after these conversations. It became overwhelmingly apparent to me that the AU community believes that issues of ethics lie at the heart of every human endeavor, in every field of study.

AU: What do you hope to bring to the AU curriculum?

Gupta: I would like to propose both a concentration and a minor in ethics that are available to all students. This would allow students to pursue in-depth studies in human character and conduct. They can benefit from, for example, looking at the traditions of Confucianism and Taoism, which talk about character and conduct — what we ought to be and what we ought to do. Both the concentration and the minor would promote a greater understanding of ethics as a discipline in relation to philosophy, religion, history, business, and medicine.

The two greatest influences in people’s lives today are science and their beliefs, both religious and ethical. Since these two areas influence people so much, it’s important to understand how they can work together and how they need to work together to make a better world.

My teaching schedule is still to be developed, but we are talking about offering ethics classes for students studying the environment, medicine, science, business, and the humanities.

AU: What are your personal goals for this professorship?

Gupta: I would like to engage with the students in class. A good teacher takes students seriously and engages with them enthusiastically and patiently. They are also part of the conversation.

Second, I want to engage with students outside of the classroom. At the University of Evansville, I would teach courses where students applied ideas in the community. They engaged in projects and community discussions, and brought concepts to life. I deeply believe that the duller of topics can become interesting if it engages the learners. So I want to connect with the community. And not just by giving lectures, but by having courses with an applied aspect that engage with nonprofit organizations, communities, and businesses in the area. The students can see how their knowledge and their education can play a practical role in society.

Lastly, a good teacher engages students in conversations with their fellow classmates. This is also part of my teaching philosophy: Students should engage with one another. They should work in groups, have discussions and debates on ethical issues, and understand that ethics is not just a private issue, but a public matter.

Many of my students come from backgrounds in which they’re told, “You don’t talk about religion and ethics — these are very sensitive topics.” But in the academic environment, these are topics to be discussed in a respectful, courageous, and open manner. These are topics at the heart of a good education.

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A View from the Board of Trustees Vice Chairs

On finances, navigating the pandemic, and the need to give back

The Aurora University Board of Trustees remains focused on the new strategic plan and the challenges ahead. The plan, approved by the Board last November, will guide institutional decision-making through 2024.

In a conversation that took place this past March, Vice Chairs of the Board **John Ammons '83** and **Douglas Craft '75** discuss what's in store for AU, how they navigated the pandemic, and why it's important to give back.



Ammons is president of Wheatland Title Guaranty Company in Yorkville, Illinois. After cofounding Wheatland in 1982, he built the company into one of the largest title agencies in Illinois. Ammons joined AU's Board of Trustees in 2013, where he also serves as vice chair of the finance committee. His grandparents, Clayton Day and Dorothy Day (née Ames), graduated from Aurora College in 1929, and many in their family are AU alumni.



Craft is a retired executive vice president of Fiserv Inc., a payments and financial services technology company in Brookfield, Wisconsin. He joined AU's board in 2015, where he also serves as chair of the finance committee. Craft earned his MBA from Northern Illinois University in 1977. He is the former chairman of the board of Pius XI Catholic High School in Milwaukee.

The following is an edited conversation.

Aurora University: What is the Board's role in the strategic plan?

Craft: We are the fiduciary stewards of the strategic plan, and as fiduciaries, we need to look at the strategy and the mission statement and make sure those things are getting accomplished. We aren't the day-to-day operators of the university by any stretch. Our job is to review strategy and make recommendations to senior administration. We are a sounding board for senior management as opposed to a directional force.

Ammons: Our job as stewards is important. We keep that mission statement in front of us at all times. I know how to run a business, so I add my view from that perspective to get us to operate more like a business within the structure of a higher-education learning institution.

Craft: I agree. Bringing that business perspective to the table is crucial because we don't have the large endowment or pool of alumni giving that other universities do to finance operations.

Our business model is not an endowment model; it's a tuition model. It is the model we have. It's a good model. It keeps us on our toes. That's why it is important to have people on the Board who know how to run a viable business and how to create products and services that people will pay for.

AU: How does the finance committee fit into the plan?

Craft: It's up to the finance committee to foster innovative and entrepreneurial approaches to the business model. Our role is to ensure that we have the financial resources in the future to support the strategic initiatives. It's our job to ask: How are we creating resources, and how are we going to allocate them? Strategy is nothing more than the mission-driven allocation of scarce resources. What we attempt to do through the finance committee is really to accomplish that allocation methodology.

The new autism initiative, the new men's and women's wrestling programs, the Plus One accelerated graduate degrees: these are all opportunities to create more resources and accomplish what AU's mission and vision statements tell us. We're blessed with strong senior administration staff members who think through all of this. From the role of trustees, we need to get everyone focused on the strategic plan.

Ammons: One of the most important roles the finance committee has is to monitor AU's financial health, including the institution's performance against approved budgets. Even with the pandemic crisis, we are in good financial standing and are on track to have a budget surplus this year.

As I look at the past year and at the direction we are headed, I really do believe AU's core values statement is how we accomplish the strategic plan. When I first joined the board eight years ago, the values statement quickly caught my attention. "We live within our means and manage our resources wisely and responsibly, while sustaining an environment that fosters teamwork and promotes service to others." Those are the values that guide the work of the finance committee.

AU: Has the COVID-19 crisis increased a sense of urgency on the board?

Ammons: You have to manage through a crisis, and that's where the board helps. AU will come out stronger from the COVID-19 crisis, just like we did a few years ago during the Illinois budget crisis, when we temporarily lost MAP [Monetary Award Program] grants, which are state-funded, need-based grants that help students pay for tuition and fees. AU has traditionally relied on MAP dollars to support up to 9% of our annual operating budget. We've got to

run this budget from the standpoint that MAP could disappear at any given time. We are fortunate to have a president and senior leadership that can manage AU through a crisis. The board is a key element in that process in terms of finance.

Craft: I see COVID-19 as a temporary issue. Strategic planning is long range. And most of the issues facing us are long-range issues. COVID-19 to me was a black swan; nobody saw that coming. But the response has just been phenomenal in terms of how quickly the president and her senior staff made adjustments and decisions and moved forward.

We will get COVID-19 under control, and we will return to some normality. But down the road, colleges and universities will soon be facing increased competition due in large part to the "enrollment cliff." There is a demographic shift happening, particularly in the Midwest, where the number of high school graduates will decrease in the years ahead, and that means a shrinking pool of potential college freshmen.

AU: You are both generous donors. Why do you give?

Ammons: I always saw my grandparents and parents giving. That helped to mold me. I grew up in Sandwich, Illinois, a small town, and going to AU opened up a whole new world for me. I had a great internship at a law firm when I was at AU, and that led me to starting Wheatland Title with one of the partners at the firm. The company grew from there, and it all started at AU.

I give to help students start on a path to success and make an impact in the world. I need to give back. We have a responsibility as individuals to help the community and the world become better places.

Craft: I, too, grew up in a small town. I come from a large Catholic family and was known as "one of the Craft boys" for most of my life — until I came to AU. At AU, I became Doug Craft. I received a freshman scholarship, which got me into the school relatively cheaply. I also earned my way through school with the help of work-study programs. There is no way a kid like me could have gone to college without these programs. Somebody that I didn't see or know was donating money that was affecting my life in a transformative way. It was life changing for me.

If you look back at the founding of the college in 1893 in Mendota, Illinois, and then at the early years when the college relocated to Aurora, you see all the financial struggles these people had, and the sacrifices they made to keep the college going. There's an awful lot of giving back in this tradition, and it's a tradition that needs to go forward.



THE FACES OF HEALTH SCIENCE ACROSS AMERICA

Six AU alumni share their passion for improving the well-being of their communities



Health care is one of the largest and fastest-growing industries in the world. The job opportunities are plentiful. And so are the chances to improve lives.

Aurora University has been preparing students for careers in the health sciences field for decades, arming students with rigorous training while also cultivating their desire to make their community a better place.

Whether it is taking the time to explain to a patient how COVID-19 spreads, educating the public about wildlife conservation, keeping a professional baseball player healthy enough to sustain his career, taking part in research that is advancing pediatric brain cancer treatments, serving as a Latina role model for women aspiring to STEM careers, or working on the development of cutting-edge drugs, AU alumni are ready to serve.

Here are six alumni from across the U.S. who are investing in the overall health and well-being of the world around them.

IN SOUTH CAROLINA: A physician practices knowledge and compassion



At a time when a patient can feel more like a number than a human being, **Dr. Brian Walker '94** approaches his work as a physician with humanity. He treats his patients as if they were part of his extended family.

It is an approach he cultivated as a student at

AU and has carried with him throughout his career, helping people in life's toughest moments.

"Medicine is a field where there is no set on or off button," said Walker. "We are dedicated to people and their families. We are there on their best day, and they remember our faces during their worst nightmares. Knowledge and compassion make the best students and the best doctors. I started learning that at AU."

While working toward his **Bachelor of Science in Biology** at AU, Walker fluctuated on whether he wanted to go to medical school. Indeed, it was a few years after graduation when Walker decided to fully commit to becoming a doctor.

He credits his AU professors, especially biology professors Jane Davis and Carol Crane, with helping him to see his potential and push through the obstacles to reach his goal.

"My professors didn't give up on me once I graduated," said Walker. "That is what I've always appreciated about AU. They follow you as long as you need — well beyond graduation. My mentors and professors were honest. They let me know it was time to get serious if I truly wanted to do what I professed."

Walker went on to graduate from Des Moines University College of Osteopathic Medicine in Iowa and complete his family medicine residency at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

After his medical school training, Walker spent several years working in emergency rooms and urgent care clinics in the South. He joined the Duke University Health System in Raleigh, North Carolina, where he had an academic appointment at Duke University School of Medicine. He held several leadership positions, including medical director at one of Duke's urgent care centers, and medical review officer.

Today, Walker, 49, works as an urgent care physician at Atrium Health Urgent Care center in Indian Land, South Carolina, where he, his wife (whom he met at AU), and their 12-year-old twins recently moved to be closer to Walker's parents.

As a physician, he has been on the front lines of treating patients for COVID-19. His main challenge every day is combating misinformation about the coronavirus disease. Some patients come in wanting a test so that they can be cleared to go to a large party — that's not how the virus works, he informs them — while others push back on wearing a mask.

He sees these encounters as opportunities to help his patients understand the pandemic. He believes that every physician should always teach, and that doctors should view their patients as partners in their care.

**"KNOWLEDGE AND COMPASSION MAKE THE
BEST STUDENTS AND THE BEST DOCTORS.
I STARTED LEARNING THAT AT AU."**

—BRIAN WALKER '94

Walker is also passionate about serving as a role model for young Black men who are interested in medicine. Fewer than 5% of physicians practicing in the U.S. are Black or African American, while Black men make up less than 3% of the nation's physicians, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges. From economic disadvantages to systemic racism, Black men face many obstacles in their path to medicine, the AAMC said in a report last year. It's a disparity that Walker and other leading physicians are working to change.

"Kids have to see Black male physicians in their communities to think about becoming one," said Walker. "I have had my share of Black kids and adults tell me they had never seen one before me."

A student again himself, Walker is two classes away from earning his MBA in health care management.

"I tell students to trust your professors," Walker said. "Trust that they know what they're talking about. Get with your career advisor. Work hard and know that you can do it, whatever field you are in."

IN PENNSYLVANIA: A physiologist mentors Latinas in STEM



Liz Cambron '13 remembers the exact moment she realized that she wanted to study biology. It was during an ophthalmology appointment for her mother. On a computer screen, the doctor was looking at an image of the back of her mother's eye.

"It blew my mind," said Cambron, who was in high school at the time. "In that very moment in that room, I was like, OK, I want to do something like this."

Cambron grew up in a Mexican American family in Chicago. She spent a lot of time accompanying family members to doctors' offices for treatment of diabetes and other health issues, and in the process became fascinated with medicine.

"I like to say that science chose me," she said. "I originally wanted to go into ophthalmology. I knew I wanted to help people, and at that time I thought that was the only way I could. Once I learned while as a student at AU that I could help people from behind the scenes doing research, I changed paths."

Today, Cambron, 29, is a comparative physiologist with an expertise in insects, insulin signaling, and metabolism. As a lab manager at Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences in the Department of Veterinary and Biomedical Sciences, she oversees lab activities related to the study of diseases that spread between humans and animals, so-called zoonotic diseases such as tuberculosis, and most recently COVID-19.

While earning her **Bachelor of Science in Health Science** at AU, Cambron thrived in the small class sizes, which allowed her to build strong relationships with her professors.

"I didn't know what opportunities were out there," she said. "My professors helped me see my own potential."

At the suggestion of Mark Zelman, associate professor of biology, Cambron applied for and landed a three-month summer internship at North Dakota State University as part of the National Science Foundation Research Experiences for Undergraduates (REU) program. It was her senior year, and the program was only for undergraduates,

but Zelman told her to give it a shot. The program changed her life.

"That was my first exposure to grad school," Cambron said. "I worked with a grad student one-on-one for the whole summer. That experience showed me what it was like to be a grad student and what a PhD research project looked like. I thought to myself, 'I'm going to get to do research all the time and get paid for it? That sounds amazing.'"

Another AU professor, Eva Serrano, who taught Cambron's Spanish class at the time, helped her secure the funding she needed to attend graduate school at NDSU. Cambron also secured an NSF grant to work on a research project at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Research Service studying alfalfa leaf-cutting bees and the role that insulin signaling plays in their development. Her research has implications for how farmers store bees during the winter so that more bees survive. Eager to learn more, Cambron went on to earn her PhD in cellular and molecular biology at NDSU.

Today, outside of her lab work, Cambron serves as a mentor to women and minority groups to get them excited about careers in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). She is passionate about being a role model for underrepresented groups in STEM.

"I feel it is my duty to reach back and help others," said Cambron. "I wish I would have seen more Latina scientists when I was growing up. Getting a PhD was not easy. When I struggled with a science course, I wish there had been someone who looked like me to go to for help. I want to be that person for someone else. That's why I want to use my experience to help others see that if a first-generation Mexican American woman from a low-income community can achieve her dreams against all odds, they sure can too."

IN TEXAS: A zoologist lives with the lions, protects wildlife

It was a wild year for **Sara Bjerklie '09**.

As a lead zoologist at the Dallas Zoo, Bjerklie battled COVID-19 work restrictions, the temporary shutdown of the zoo due to the pandemic, and a record-breaking Texas



snowstorm that forced her and her team to camp out on site to keep the animals warm and fed.

So it was a joy when she got to be part of a remarkable event: the first time in nearly 50 years that a litter of African lion cubs had been born at the Dallas Zoo, the oldest and largest zoo in Texas.

“Taking part in these three cubs being born is the highlight of my career,” she said.

Bjerklie has been working at zoos for more than a decade. She had dreamed of a career with animals ever since she was a young girl attending a middle school camp at the Brookfield Zoo just outside Chicago. While earning her **Bachelor of Science in Biology** degree at AU, she began to realize that her dream was possible. Her favorite AU courses taught her about plant and animal life in an active, hands-on way. AU made science fun and sparked her curiosity about the natural world.

She returned to Brookfield Zoo for an AU internship, and that led to a part-time job working at the children’s zoo, caring for animals, and teaching zoo visitors about the need for conservation.

“During my college internship, I discovered I absolutely loved it,” said Bjerklie. “I loved the hands-on aspect of the field, and interacting with the guests and telling them about the animals and why conservation is so important.”

In 2013, Bjerklie joined the Dallas Zoo as a children’s zoo specialist and has been moving up the ranks ever since. Last year, she was named the lead zoologist of the mammal team, looking after lions, tigers, cheetahs, otters, and even an anteater. Her days involve everything from feeding animals and caring for their surroundings to taking animals’ blood pressure, checking their teeth, drawing blood samples, and monitoring their weight.

Animal training is also part of her routine. She sets goals for the animals to achieve specific behaviors that will help the medical team do their jobs, behaviors such as lying down to receive an injection or opening their mouths to allow for a dental exam.

As part of her work with Bahati, the new mom lion, Bjerklie and her team trained the lion to jump up on a specially made bench for ultrasounds. They monitored her pregnancy, keeping daily charts of her weight and her behaviors, and alerted the vets when it appeared she was starting to go into labor. When the cubs arrived, there was a surprise. The ultrasounds had shown only two cubs, but there was a third in the litter.

The births were unusual in another way. The cubs were delivered by Caesarian section. Bjerklie was on hand for bottle-feeding the baby lions and for the physical therapy necessary for one of the cubs who had trouble walking. She

was also part of the zoologist team that came up with names for each cub on the basis of their personalities: Ilola (“to become strong” in the Sesotho language of South Africa), Izwi (“vocal” in the Shona language of Zimbabwe), and Tadala (“we have been blessed” in the Southeast African Chewa language).

Ever passionate about protecting animals, Bjerklie, 33, serves as a board member and head of the conservation team at the American Association of Zoo Keepers. She is active in the organization’s annual Bowling for Rhinos event, raising money for the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in Kenya.

A few years ago, she took a group trip to Lewa to experience the animal conservancy herself. She saw the critically endangered black rhino, as well as zebras, elephants, lions, giraffes, and leopards.

“When our plane touched down on the ground, we all started crying,” said Bjerklie. “We were so excited to see how our work affects animals out in the wild. It gave me renewed hope that our work here makes a difference.”

IN ARIZONA:

An athletic trainer helps Chicago Cubs minor league players stay healthy

If you want to work in professional sports, you must learn to love the long days.

During spring training, **James Edwards ’16** drives under the starry Arizona morning sky to Sloan Park, where he arrives by 5:30 a.m. to begin his day as minor league assistant medical coordinator for the Chicago Cubs.

He spends a 12-plus hour day attending meetings, treating injuries, and working every baseball game. He goes home tired, then prepares for the next day when he will do it all over again.

Edwards wouldn’t have it any other way.

“It’s awesome to get to work with athletes at the top of their sport,” said Edwards. “All they want to do is get better and make it to the big leagues, and whatever I can do to get them there, that is goal No. 1.”



“IT’S AMAZING TO WORK WITH ATHLETES AT A HIGH LEVEL. THE STAKES ARE HIGHER. THEIR BODY IS THEIR CAREER, AND IT’S JUST AWESOME TO BE A PART OF IT.”

—JAMES EDWARDS ’16

Since graduating from AU five years ago with a **Bachelor of Science in Athletic Training**, Edwards has been working at the Chicago Cubs organization. He started as an intern before securing a full-time position. Today, he helps to oversee the athletic trainers and medical staff for all of the Cubs’ Minor League Baseball teams across the country, including teams in Arizona, Indiana, Iowa, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

Edwards credits AU with opening the door to his career. During a May term class, when AU athletic training students spent a week in Colorado visiting sports venues, Edwards and his class met the head trainer of the Colorado Rockies.

The trip changed Edwards’ life. A Spartan baseball player, it was during that trip that Edwards discovered he didn’t have to be a player to work in Major League Baseball. He learned about the Professional Baseball Athletic Trainers Society, where he saw a listing for an internship with the Chicago Cubs. He applied and landed the internship. Quickly, he realized exactly what he wanted from his career: “Professional sports or bust.”

Playing baseball growing up, Edwards became fascinated with human anatomy and physiology. While attending Yorkville High School, Edwards took classes in sports medicine through the school district’s partnership with the Indian Valley Vocational Center. At AU, he played third base for the Spartans for a year, then left the team to put all his efforts into athletic training studies, focusing on what it takes to help high-level athletes recover faster.

He would listen to his AU professors repeat one mantra that has stuck with him his entire career: “Anatomy is power.”

“That’s our core, fundamental principle,” Edwards said. “The nice thing about athletic training is that anatomy doesn’t change. Once you have a solid base and you understand anatomy, plenty of other things play off that, whether it’s prescribing rehab or evaluating an injury.”

Edwards advanced his education by earning a Master of Science in Exercise Science online from California University of Pennsylvania while working full time with the Cubs. It was a demanding schedule. Edwards leaned on his experience at AU, where he learned how to stay organized and manage his time.

Like the players he treats, Edwards has big aspirations. His long-term goal is to become a head athletic trainer in the major leagues. Perhaps, from there, he might become a team’s medical director. But at 28, Edwards knows that he has plenty of long days ahead.

“It’s amazing to work with athletes at a high level,” said Edwards. “The stakes are higher. Their body is their career, and it’s just awesome to be a part of it.”

IN TENNESSEE:

A biomedical engineer advances pediatric brain cancer research



Kyle Newman ’14 became fascinated by biomedical engineering during an AU physics class.

It was an unexpected discovery. When he came to AU as a freshman, he wanted to become a physical therapist. He took biology, anatomy, physiology,

and other prerequisite course work, and he spent hours shadowing physical therapists. But, when it came time to go to graduate school, a necessary step to becoming a licensed physical therapist, he didn’t get in.

Physical therapy programs are extremely competitive, with limited slots open each year, and it’s not unusual for applicants to try for several years to get accepted. Newman considered continuing to pursue his goal and resubmit his applications, but he also wanted to be realistic.

Fortunately, at the advice of his AU professors and advisors, Newman had a backup plan. While working on his **Bachelor of Science in Health Science**, he had also been looking into a career in biomedical engineering, a fast-growing area of science that applies the problem-solving techniques of engineering to biology and medicine. The

field is responsible for medical devices such as pacemakers and artificial hips, and it is behind futuristic technologies including stem cell engineering and 3D bioprinting of artificial organs.

“SCIENCE HAS SO MANY COOL JOBS THAT YOU DON’T REALIZE ARE OUT THERE UNTIL YOU START LOOKING INTO THE FIELDS.”

—KYLE NEWMAN ’14

“It’s something I never thought I would get into,” Newman said. “Science has so many cool jobs that you don’t realize are out there until you start looking into the fields.” This was a career he could get excited about. He applied for a biomedical engineering graduate program at Southern Illinois University and was accepted. He hasn’t looked back. Today, Newman, 28, is a senior research technologist with the Department of Developmental Neurobiology at St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. Newman works in a lab that grows stem cells for brain research, leading to improved treatments for children with brain tumors and other neurological diseases. At St. Jude’s, he has found a drive and a purpose to his work. He is surrounded by smart coworkers and inspired by

the patients and their families. Every day, he feels a sense of working toward something greater than himself. Newman said he feels lucky to have had classes at AU that opened his mind and presented new career options. His favorite classes drew him into the subject matter and made him think differently — it was the physics class that sparked his new passion. By staying receptive to unforeseen possibilities, today he is able to do fascinating work. “It’s good to have a Plan B,” Newman said. “Life doesn’t always work out the way you plan, and that’s OK. If you stay open, who knows what awaits you.”

IN NEW YORK:
A research scientist works on developing cutting-edge drugs



Candi Esquina ’12 spends much of her time as a research scientist in the cold room of a drug discovery lab in Buffalo, New York. She dresses for the cold room, always cooler than 40 degrees, by layering a hoodie under her lab coat. In the center of the lab is a sample-preparation and liquid chromatography system, which looks like a sci-fi espresso machine, replete

with tubes, valves, screens, and bottles. It is one of the main tools in the protein purification process at the heart of her work at Albany Molecular Research Inc. (AMRI), an Albany, New York-based global provider of advanced drug development and manufacturing solutions. “With these proteins, everything has to be cold,” Esquina said. “You don’t want the protein to become unstable.” Her most recent project is to produce proteins used in the development of treatments for a neurodegenerative disease. AMRI has also been involved in supporting the making of COVID-19 vaccines. Working for AMRI means that Esquina, 30, must be precise and have high standards, something she embraced during her undergraduate years at AU, where she earned a Bachelor of Science in Health Science.

“AU BROUGHT OUT MY CURIOSITY ABOUT THE SCIENTIFIC WORLD AND MADE ME QUESTION HOW THINGS WORK IN OUR BODIES AND IN THE REAL WORLD.”

—CANDI ESQUINA ’12

A native Chicagoan, Esquina came to AU thinking she was interested in a career in computer science, but soon found herself fascinated by classes in human and

cell biology. She joined the Health Science Club and the Latin American Student Organization, and she tutored fellow students in microbiology. She earned both the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute Scholarship and the Hispanic Scholarship Fund General College Scholarship. AU professors trained Esquina to explain complex concepts, she said, both in verbal presentations and in writing. Now, she is thankful for that training — at AMRI, she’s tasked with giving clients biweekly updates on her projects and presenting her work to scientific audiences in the industry. “AU brought out my curiosity about the scientific world and made me question how things work in our bodies and in the real world,” Esquina said. “Anybody who’s interested in the health sciences has that same curiosity about how the world works.”

At the advice of her AU professors, Esquina decided to go to graduate school. She earned a master’s degree in molecular, cellular, and developmental biology from the University of Michigan and a master’s degree in chemistry from Purdue University. The dual advanced degrees led to a research scientist position at AMRI. Lately, she’s been training AMRI’s new scientists in the protein purification process. Working for a corporation differs from work in a university lab, Esquina said. At universities, researchers can spend years experimenting on the same problem — there’s room for trial and error. At AMRI, clients request the exact amount of protein they need in a specific time frame, often within months — there is very little room for error. “I just try my best in order to produce the best quality of work,” Esquina said. “I like working toward something that could make a real difference in people’s lives.”



BY THE NUMBERS
HOW SPARTANS TACKLED COVID-19

With the world facing a global pandemic, 2020 was a year like no other. Spartan students, faculty, and staff remained resilient, working to keep our campus safe and our community engaged. Here are just a few ways AU met the challenges of COVID-19.



1.1 MILLION
Zoom hours



44,000
disposable masks



170
sanitizer stands



2,000
hours of safety training



360
virtual student events and activities



157
Spartan Safety mask distribution kiosks



442
acrylic shields and dividers



1,747
commencement celebration boxes



Rendering of the new AU wrestling facility.

AU Brings Back Wrestling

Aurora University wrestling is back, and this time, women are joining the competition. After a 35-year hiatus, men’s wrestling is returning to AU as an NCAA Division III program. And women’s wrestling, one of the fastest-growing emerging sports in college athletics, is starting up for the first time. Leading AU’s wrestling program as head coach for both the men’s and women’s wrestling programs is Justin Pearch, who built the boys wrestling program at Aurora Christian High School into one of the top teams in Illinois. The Spartan wrestling programs are scheduled to begin competing in the 2021–2022 season, bringing the total number of NCAA DIII sports at AU to 24.

.....
Wrestling teaches students discipline, confidence, and resilience.
—Justin Pearch, Head Wrestling Coach
.....

“We are thrilled that women’s and men’s wrestling will be the newest programs at AU,” said Jim Hamad, vice president for athletics. “We have added other athletic programs in recent years — including women’s hockey and men’s volleyball — and have quickly found success. We are confident that our wrestling programs will follow a similar path.” Pearch comes to AU after four seasons as Aurora Christian’s head wrestling coach, where he led the program to an Illinois state championship and two additional top-three finishes. Pearch has also served as the Illinois National Dual Meet head coach since 2015 and as the Illinois Cadet

and Junior National team coach since 2013. He wrestled collegiately at the University of Oregon, where he finished second at the 2007 Pac-10 championships and earned a place in the NCAA Division I tournament. “Wrestling kept me grounded when life was crazy,” said Pearch. “No matter where I was in life, I always found my way back to the path that kept me moving forward — and that was wrestling.” Wrestling teaches students discipline, confidence, and resilience, Pearch added, and it gives students a “competitive integrity and mental toughness” that will help them in the classroom and in their careers. A total of 116 men’s wrestling programs compete in NCAA DIII, and the men hold their championship in March. There are a total of 59 collegiate institutions with varsity women’s wrestling teams. Last year, the NCAA voted to approve women’s wrestling as an emerging sport, a key step toward its evolving into an NCAA championship-level sport in the future. Women’s college wrestling has existed since the early 1990s and became an Olympic sport in 2004. There have been women’s college wrestling championships since 2004 as well, and the sport is gaining momentum across the U.S.

A



Justin Pearch, head coach of AU Wrestling.



Spartans Return to Competition

Spartans returned to athletic competition in January for the first time in 10 months after the pandemic had put a halt to intercollegiate games. Women’s bowling was the first team to return to play, followed by men’s and women’s hockey and basketball. All winter and fall sports including football, soccer, and volleyball played condensed schedules. Spartan athletes adhered to pandemic protocols, taking part in surveillance testing, mask wearing, and hand washing, and following other safety precautions. Plans called for a full schedule for spring sports including lacrosse, softball, and baseball. “It’s been a long journey to get back to competition,” said Jim Hamad, vice president for athletics. “We are thrilled to resume our quest for championships, but with an increased focus on the health and safety of all in the Spartan family.”

A



Reading the Weather

Artist Nathalie Miebach is fascinated by weather.

She has spent her career exploring the intersection of art and science, taking scientific meteorological data and weaving it into art. In lieu of charts and graphs, she translates temperature, wind, and pressure gradients into dynamic, colorful sculptures.



Rendering of “Changing Waters” installed in the lobby of the Kimberly and James Hill Center for Student Success.

After collecting scientific weather data, Miebach plots each data point and element with a combination of colorful paper, string, dowels, reeds, and beads. Using a basket weave as her main grid, she assigns meaning to her materials. One reed may represent an hour in time or a longitudinal degree.

It’s important to Miebach that the objects accurately reflect weather data, because she wants her finished pieces to live in the science world as much as in the world of sculpture. Her fanciful, intricate, and brightly colored woven sculptures serve as vessels for her data.

Visitors will get a chance to see Miebach’s artwork close up at the Kimberly and James Hill Center for Student Success, slated to open in late summer. Miebach’s “Changing Waters” will be permanently installed in the lobby of the new building. The 24-foot-long art installation depicts the weather patterns and marine ecosystems within the Gulf of Maine. Aurora University first displayed “Changing Waters” in a 2017 exhibit at the Schingoethe Center.

“Weather is this invisible complexity that we walk through every day,” Miebach told CNN in a short documentary about her work. “What artists can do is help us look at data differently and find alternative ways of thinking about it. I think it’s so important in helping us understand data better.”

Spanish Students Translate ‘The Global Language of Headwear’ Exhibit

In a creative collaboration, Aurora University Spanish students translated into Spanish the didactics at the Schingoethe Center’s latest exhibit, “The Global Language of Headwear: Cultural Identity, Rites of Passage, and Spirituality.”

The traveling exhibition explores the vital role of ceremonial headwear throughout diverse cultural customs, beliefs, and rituals. It features 89 hats and headdresses from 43 countries and is a tribute to the stunning diversity of the world’s cultures.

Students from Spanish professor Denise Hatcher’s Language and Community Immersion class translated the interpretive texts for all of the objects, as well as the introductory text and the thematic wall labels.

“We want to make the Schingoethe Center more accessible to the community,” said Natasha Ritsma, the museum’s director. “We are working to keep language from being a barrier to people enjoying all the museum has to offer.”

The exhibit was jointly organized by independent curator Stacey W. Miller and International Arts & Artists, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit. The exhibit closed in May, but a virtual tour is available on the Schingoethe Center website at aurora.edu/museum. The Spanish translations will accompany the traveling exhibit as it continues to other venues.



“Kayapo/Mekranoti Headdress (Akkapa-ri).” Brazil, mid-to-late 20th century. Feathers, cotton, reed. ©2012 Courtesy of Hat Horizons. Photograph by Matthew Hillman.

AU Theatre Department Debuts Its First Virtual Play

The show must go on, even during a pandemic. Aurora University’s theatre department debuted its first virtual play in January, “Sonnets for an Old Century,” by José Rivera.

The digital streaming event featured more than two dozen undergraduate and graduate students as cast and crew in a collection of dramatic monologues set in an abandoned theatre. The characters, recently departed souls gathered in the waiting room to the after life, are given one last chance to tell their life story — in the length of a sonnet.

“One of the big challenges of producing theatre during a pandemic was that theatre by its very nature is live,” said



Stacy Joyce, associate professor of theatre. “We had to change plans multiple times as we figured out how to best make this work safely.”

Students adapted by conducting rehearsals on Zoom. When it came time to perform on stage, the actors stayed 6 feet apart, and no more than eight people were in the theatre at a time.

“The experience taught students how to be flexible and open to change, how to brainstorm ways to solve problems,” said Joyce. “I also hope they learned that attempting the impossible can be fun.”

AU performed its spring musical virtually as well. “Fugitive Songs: A Song Cycle” by Chris Miller and Nathan Tysen was streamed digitally in April.

Kris Johnson Awarded Excellence in Service Award for Therapeutic Recreation

The Illinois Therapeutic Recreation Section, a branch of the Illinois Park and Recreation Association, awarded Associate Professor Kris Johnson the 2020 Excellence in Service Award for her outstanding contribution to the field of therapeutic recreation.

Johnson, who is chair of therapeutic recreation and autism studies, received kudos for leading AU students in collaborative and innovative work with the Fox Valley Special Recreation Association.

In 2020, when COVID-19 restrictions forced most FVSRA programs to go virtual, Johnson jumped into action with the idea of a best-buddy Zoom program. The eight-week session, called Spartan Pals, promoted social inclusion by matching more than 30 AU students with FVSRA participants. The buddies met weekly to talk and to play virtual games and other activities.

Since AU reinstated the undergraduate Therapeutic Recreation major in 2017, Johnson has quickly built



enrollment. She created a variety of programs with FVSRA for AU students to gain hands-on experience and connect with professionals in the field.

“When you first meet Kris, you can quickly feel the warmth and sincerity that she radiates,” said Jackie Salemi, superintendent of recreation at FVSRA, who presented the award. “She is the type of professional that understands the importance of relationships, and she is the type of leader who thinks outside the box.”

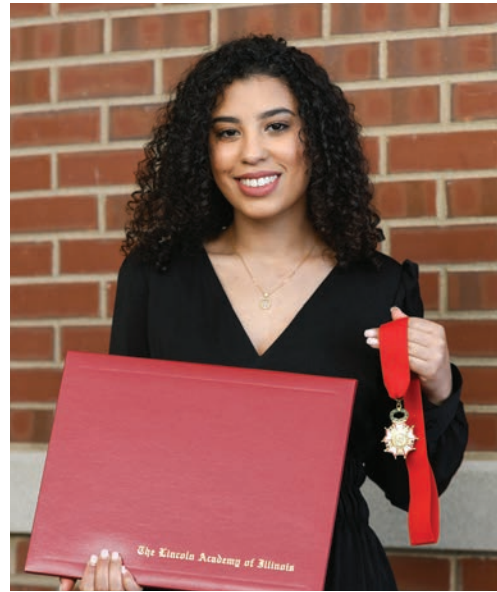
Basma Outhman '21 Honored as Student Lincoln Laureate

Aurora University's Basma Outhman '21 was recognized with the Abraham Lincoln Civic Engagement Award, representing AU as a student laureate of The Lincoln Academy of Illinois.

Every fall, the award is presented to an outstanding senior from each of the participating colleges and universities in Illinois. The awards ceremony is typically held at the Old State Capital State Historic Site in Springfield, Illinois, but was conducted virtually in 2020 due to pandemic restrictions.

In the spirit of Abraham Lincoln, student laureates are honored for their "leadership and service in pursuit of the betterment of humanity and for overall excellence in curricular and extracurricular activities," according to the Springfield, Illinois-based nonprofit organization.

Upon graduating with a **Bachelor of Social Work** with minors in prelaw and French, Outhman plans to pursue her Master of Social Work, then apply to law school. Her goal is to become a human rights lawyer, combining her knowledge of social work and the law to serve the greater good.



Spartan Summer Reimagined

Aurora University has reimagined the summer experience for students to expand beyond traditional coursework, with new classes that help them move forward in their careers and advanced studies, as well as have fun by following their passions.

The program, Spartan Summer, debuted in May 2021 with 15 new courses focused on exploring a new field, preparing to apply to medical school or law school, studying for a national licensure or certification exam, learning a new language, expanding technology skills, and more.

Spartan Summer also includes general education and majors courses to help students accelerate completion of their undergraduate degree, as well as adding graduate-level courses, including the accelerated Plus One programs that allow students to earn their master's degree in one year.



GWC Celebrates Melinda Blakesley for 50 Years of Service

On a perfect fall afternoon this past September, the George Williams College community gathered to honor food service manager Melinda Blakesley for 50 years of service to the college.

She began working in the GWC dining hall as a teenager. In fact, her high school graduation took place in the historic Lewis Auditorium, and her wedding reception with her husband, Marv Blakesley, was held in the Seabury Room. Through the decades that followed, her parents, sisters, and husband all worked on the campus in various roles.

Their family legacy embodies the GWC spirit of service to others. The dining room in the Beasley Campus Center has been named in her honor.

David Dial Receives 2020 Trumbo Award for Excellence in Teaching

The 2020 Marcus and Mark H. Trumbo Award for Excellence in Teaching, the university's most prestigious faculty recognition, went to **David Dial**, associate professor and chair of criminal justice.

Dial was lauded as "an exceptional teacher, skilled department chair, powerful advocate for students, and enthusiastic campus citizen." The adjectives that students and fellow faculty members invoked in the nomination process to describe Dial were "caring," "passionate," "dedicated," and "knowledgeable."

Dial arrived at Aurora University in 2012, after a career in law enforcement. He served as Naperville police chief for more than two decades, and before that was honored for distinguished service as a commissioned officer in Vietnam.

Since its inception in 1976, the Trumbo Award has served to recognize the finest work of full-time AU faculty in their roles as teachers, mentors, and scholars.

Faith Agostinone Wilson, professor of education, and **Keith Herrmann**, assistant professor of physical education, presented a development session to AU faculty titled "Student Engagement on the Ground and in Space." They shared research data and anecdotal stories on how creating student rapport helps engagement and content delivery while teaching in a remote or a face-to-face environment.

Chris Bruhn, associate professor of social work, was appointed to the Council on Social Work Education's Commission on Accreditation for a three-year term. She was instrumental in renewing AU's partnership with the Community Foundation for the Fox Valley Region and is assisting with the evaluation of its Youth Engagement in Philanthropy program for a second year.

Carlos Estrada, assistant professor of exercise science, published "Does strict validation criteria for individual motor units alter population-based regression models of the motor unit pool?" in the publication *Experimental Brain Research*.

Kara Fenne, assistant professor of nursing, received the 2020 Meritorious Faculty Award from the Aurora University Students' Association. Fenne was cited as an "outstanding professor" for her countless hours of dedicated work on behalf of nursing students and for her efforts to ensure that students are involved leaders in the community.

Lisa Fredenburgh, who is the Parolini distinguished professor of music, director of choral activities, and chair of the music department, was named the president-elect of the Illinois American Choral Directors Association. In her new role, Fredenburgh will work to foster excellence in choral conducting across the state while raising AU's visibility among high school music programs and prospective AU music students.

Gregory Goalwin, assistant professor of sociology, had his book, "Borders of Belief: Religious Nationalism and the Formation of Identity in Ireland and Turkey," accepted for publication by Rutgers University Press. The book is based on his dissertation. Goalwin received his PhD in sociology from the University of California at Santa Barbara.

Ashley Harris, assistant professor of athletic training and clinical education coordinator, published "Patient perceptions in receiving LGBTQIA culturally competent healthcare" in the *Oklahoma State Medical Proceedings*, an online open-access peer-reviewed journal.

Denise Hatcher, professor of Spanish and chair of foreign languages, published the Spanish readers and teacher's guides "El Primer Trabajo de Nayeli" ("Nayeli's First Job") and "La Quinceañera de Nayeli" ("Nayeli's Quinceañera") with Teacher's Discovery, one of the largest suppliers of classroom teaching materials in the U.S.

Jessica Heybach, professor of education and chair of the EdD program, was awarded a 2021 Society of Professors of Education Outstanding Book Award for "Making Sense of Race in Education: Practices for Change in Difficult Times," coauthored with Professor Sheron Fraser-Burgess of Ball State University. The book takes a fresh look at the issue of race in American schools.

James Kao, associate professor of art, exhibited his paintings and drawings in the show "A Mirror, A Dish, A Window" at Goldfinch gallery in Chicago this past fall. He was one of six artists exploring the intimate landscape of interior space.

John McCormack, assistant professor of religion, received a Racial Equity and Interfaith Cooperation Award from Interfaith Youth Core, a Chicago-based nonprofit focused on religious diversity in higher education. He will use the grant to redesign the undergraduate religion course titled *Jesus: Faith, Identity, and Power*. His chapter, "Pinkman's Progress: Allegory and Augustinianism from ABQ to Alaska," was accepted for an edited volume, "Theology and Breaking Bad," to appear in 2022.



Forward Together at Aurora University

After an unprecedented year, we are all looking forward to a brighter future. However, we should not forget to smile back on the past with fondness, and more importantly, gratitude. Aurora University was built on the generous spirit of parents, friends, and a strong community of alumni. Without the support of many before us, AU would not be the remarkable institution it is today.

Now more than ever, our legacy is sustained through annual giving. The AU A-Fund, now **Forward Together**, is an investment in Aurora University and its extraordinary students. From scholarships to new learning facilities, this fund enriches all areas of the Spartan experience. Every day, our students benefit from the support that annual gifts provide.

As an alumnus, your investment — big or small — ensures that these hardworking individuals have the opportunities and resources needed to earn their degrees. Whether you can give \$5 or \$2,500, your gift positively impacts the story of AU. By honoring your past, you can inspire their future. And together, we can truly make a difference.

We encourage you to join us as we move “forward together” in 2021 and beyond. You may make your gift by returning the envelope below or by giving online at aurora.edu/give. For more information, contact **Meg Howes**, vice president for development, at **630-844-5256** or mhowes@aurora.edu.



Elysian Magazine

Aurora University has a long tradition of student literary magazines encouraging students to sharpen their writing skills and explore the creative process.

The first literary magazine debuted in 1933, and was named *Wings in the Dawn*, after the mythical winged horse Pegasus rising out of an aurora. The early issues showcased a collection of the best poetry from the student newspaper, *The Aurora Borealis*. Student drawings of Pegasus, and later birds in flight, graced the cover of each issue.

Wings in the Dawn (later renamed *Wings of the Dawn*) continued to publish once or twice a year for 55 years, until 1988, when it underwent a series of name changes. Over the next three decades the literary magazine published under the titles *AU Review*, *Sparks and Cinders*, *Lorem Ipsum*, and *Nolos*. In 2018, the magazine returned to its Greek mythological roots and was renamed *Elysian*, meaning heavenly, or like paradise.

Reading through issues of *Wings in the Dawn* in the archives at Phillips Library serves as a window into the creative lives of some of the people who built AU. The 1935 issue includes a foreword by Mark Trumbo '37, who later became a dean at the college. The issue also identifies James Crimi '38 as the winner of short story and essay contests.

Crimi served as Aurora College president in the 1960s and early 1970s, and Crimi Auditorium is named after him. Ethel Tapper '35, who was a librarian and instructor from 1937 to 1970, wrote a timely essay titled “The Effects of Fascism Upon the Intellectual Groups of Italy.”

Moses C. Crouse, longtime professor of religion, appears in the 1936 issue as winner of the short story contest and in the 1942 issue as a poet. The 1943 issue of *Wings in the Dawn* is dedicated to Stanley Perry, a lover of the creative arts who was a member of the class of 1917, an AU professor of poetry and drama, a dean of the college, and the namesake of Perry Theatre.

Last fall, *Elysian* moved online to the student-created website auelysian.wixsite.com/auelysian. It publishes artwork, photography, poetry, prose, and short fiction submitted by students, staff, and faculty.

“While the modes of publication have changed,” said Sara Elliott, associate professor of English and faculty advisor to *Elysian*, “the role of creative expression in the AU experience and in the process of discovering what matters remains.”



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