

2023-2024 ANNUAL REPORT

Shaping the future of public health



COLLEGE OF
PUBLIC HEALTH
George Mason University®

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ALL TOGETHER DIFFERENT

Front cover photo: Associate Professor Brenda Helen Sheingold (sitting) and Master of Health Administration students on Capitol Hill, leveraging George Mason's proximity to the nation's capital, which provides students the opportunity to watch policy making in action. Read more on page 13.



CPH Faculty and Staff 2024 ▪ We deliver all together different

Schools/Departments

SON	HAP	SW -
School of Nursing	Department of Health Administration and Policy	Department of Social Work
GCH		
Department of Global and Community Health		
NFS		
Department of Nutrition and Food Studies		

College Leadership

Melissa J. Perry Inaugural Dean	Anthony J. Piantieri Chief Business Officer
Robert M. Weiler Senior Associate Dean for Academic Affairs	D. Todd Marrs Senior Director of Development
Alison Evans Cuellar Associate Dean for Research	Lisa R. Joyner Executive Director, Administration
Brian K. Gillette Interim Associate Dean for Student Affairs	Matthew U. Hicks Director of Information Technology and Security
Catherine J. Tompkins Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs	Michelle L. Thompson Director of Marketing and Communications

DEPARTMENT CHAIRS	SCHOOL OF NURSING
Martin Binks Nutrition and Food Studies	Margaret Rodan Acting Director
Rima Nakkash - Interim Global and Community Health	P.J. Maddox Acting Co-Director
Emily S. Ihara Social Work	
P.J. Maddox Health Administration and Policy	

2023-24 Annual Report

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From the Dean

I wasn't the first in my family to go to college, but I grew up knowing what it means to overcome challenges. Raised in a low-income household in rural Vermont, I experienced firsthand how access to opportunity can transform lives. A full scholarship opened the door to my college education—an opportunity that changed my life and gave me the chance to pursue my dreams.

At George Mason University's College of Public Health, I see that same transformative potential in our students every day. Many of them come from backgrounds where determination, resilience, and hope are as much a part of their journey as their textbooks. They are trailblazers, not just in their families but in their communities and chosen fields. They are innovators and change-makers, striving to improve health and well-being across our region and the globe.

What makes George Mason, and our college in particular, so special is that we meet students where they are and provide them with the tools to thrive—not just academically, but personally and professionally. We are a community rooted in diversity, compassion, and a commitment to excellence. Our programs integrate cutting-edge research with real-world application, empowering students to make a meaningful impact. Whether they are investigating the health effects of climate change, addressing inequities in healthcare access, or innovating solutions for chronic disease prevention, George Mason students and faculty are at the forefront of change.

For me, leading this college is deeply personal. I remember what it felt like to dream big, even when the odds seemed stacked against me. I see that same fire in our students—the hunger to learn, to serve, and to create a healthier future for all. And I see the incredible impact they will make, thanks to the support and opportunities they find here at George Mason.

This college is more than just a place to earn a degree. It's a launchpad for dreams, a hub of innovation, and a home for those who dare to imagine a better, healthier world. And it's a privilege to be part of that journey, helping to shape the next generation of public health leaders who will change lives and communities for the better.



Melissa J. Perry
Inaugural Dean
College of Public Health



Check out the Dean's recurring column in *Psychology Today* - the Mindful Epidemiologist.



Dean Melissa Perry shared her wisdom with graduates at the College's Degree Celebration: "As you go forth, take with you the lessons you've learned, the friendships you've formed, and the passion for public health that unites us all. Be proud of what you have achieved and excited about what you can accomplish. The future is in your capable hands, and I am confident you will use your skills and knowledge to make the world a safer, healthier place for all."

WORK. DELIVER. THINK. DIFFERENT

Faculty and Staff

196 full-time faculty and staff

Growing the Research Enterprise

72 awards

\$17 million in research awards

\$13 million research expenditures, a 15% increase

184 publications

33% research funding growth in the past 5 years

Scan the QR code to see the 2023-24 publications.



National Recognition

National Rankings

College of Public Health rankings according to *U.S. News & World Report*:

#1 Doctorate of Nursing Practice (DNP) among public institutions

#4 Master of Science, Nursing (MSN) among public institutions

#4 Bachelor of Nursing in Virginia

#17 Master of Health Administration among public institutions

#33 School of Public Health among public institutions

#33 MSN online among public institutions

#47 Master of Social Work among public institutions

Giving Back

179 donors

\$4.2 million donated in support of scholarship, public health education, faculty research, and clinical care

\$596,810 donated for scholarships awarded to **132** students through **49** different scholarships

Thank you to all our generous donors



Grit. Audacity. Inclusivity.

Diversity in action

Fall 2023-spring 2024 student data



Students

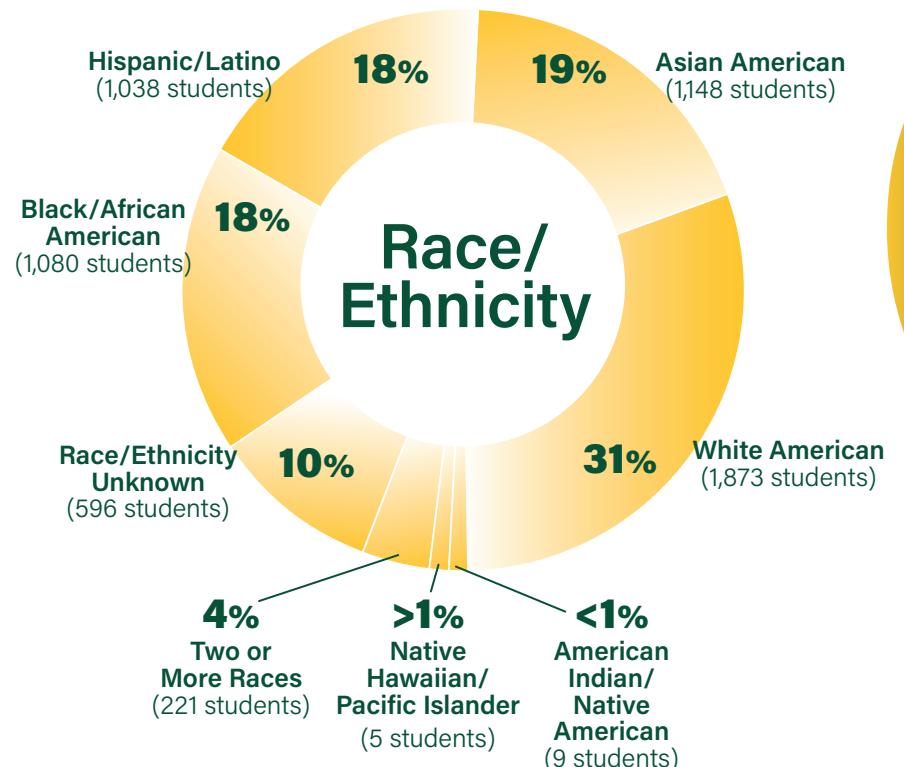
3,042 Total students enrolled

1,746 Total graduate students

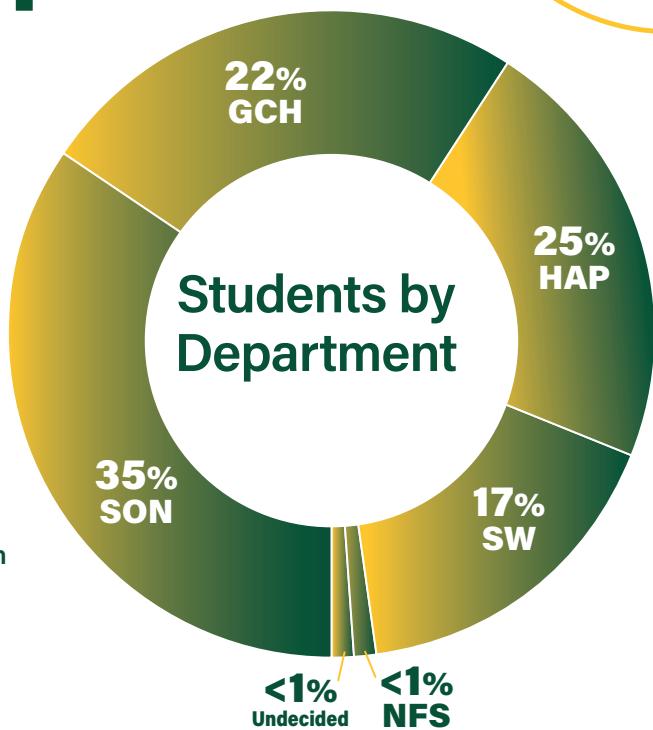
1,296 Total undergraduate students

- 76%** From historically underrepresented identities (undergraduate and graduate)
- 39%** Pell Grant eligible (undergraduate)
- 33%** First generation (undergraduate)
- 18%** First generation and Pell eligible (undergraduate)

WORK. DELIVER. THINK. WELCOME DIFFERENT



Source: George Mason's Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Planning



Our students come from –
41 States, plus Washington, DC and Puerto Rico

19 Countries

Putting student experience center stage

100% of students

participated in an experiential learning opportunity, gaining first-hand knowledge through research, practica, clinicals, and internships

1,200+ students

participated in on-going career development opportunities with community partners and future employers

88% first-year retention rate,

students returned for their second year



"I chose George Mason's School of Nursing due to its stellar reputation and from hearing others' experiences. The program has allowed me to gain hands-on clinical experience throughout different hospital systems within the DC, Maryland, and Virginia area, mentorship from seasoned professionals, and access to resources such as virtual reality labs, top-notch lab equipment, and online study tools."

Student View

Isabelle Kahng, Accelerated Bachelor of Science, Nursing '24

Fueling career success for students and alumni

George Mason is

#1 in Virginia for internships

#1 in Virginia for upward mobility

2023-24 Career outcomes

1,034 graduates

88% positive career outcomes among undergraduate and graduate students

Employed in a role related to their career goals

91% bachelor's • **85%** master's • **87%** doctoral

Source: 2023 Career Plans Survey. 2024 Career Plans Survey (fall 2023, spring 2024, and summer 2024) was still open at printing.





Transforming health through interprofessional education and collaboration

As we mark our second year as Virginia's first College of Public Health, our students and faculty continue to embrace interprofessional collaboration as the cornerstone of public health progress. Learn more about how our dedicated students, faculty, and staff are championing health and well-being for all.

Innovative, multidisciplinary learning opportunities

Interdisciplinary collaboration took center stage in our classrooms. More than 1,100 students have completed our recently launched interprofessional courses:

- GCH 300: Introduction to Public Health
- GCH 500: Foundations of Public Health
- GCH 700: Social and Ecological Determinants of Health

These innovative classes, described by students as "engaging" and "essential," are made possible by our dedicated faculty who designed and delivered these one-of-a-kind curricula.

Hands-on problem solving

Students worked in interdisciplinary teams through the Learning Laboratory for Community Health to create location-based wellness models for adolescents, tackling real-world public health challenges (see page 35).

Pioneering graduates

In May 2024, more than 940 students crossed the stage at our Degree Celebration, representing the breadth and diversity of our disciplines: Global and Community Health, Health Administration and Policy, Nutrition and Food Studies, Nursing, and Social Work.

This year, we celebrated landmark achievement: the graduation of our first Doctor of Philosophy in Public Health, Kim McNally, and the first cohort of Dietetics students.

Groundbreaking accreditation achievements

We are on track to become Virginia's first College of Public Health accredited by the Council on Education for Public Health.

We are the first and only college of public health to be accredited by the Society for Simulation in Healthcare.

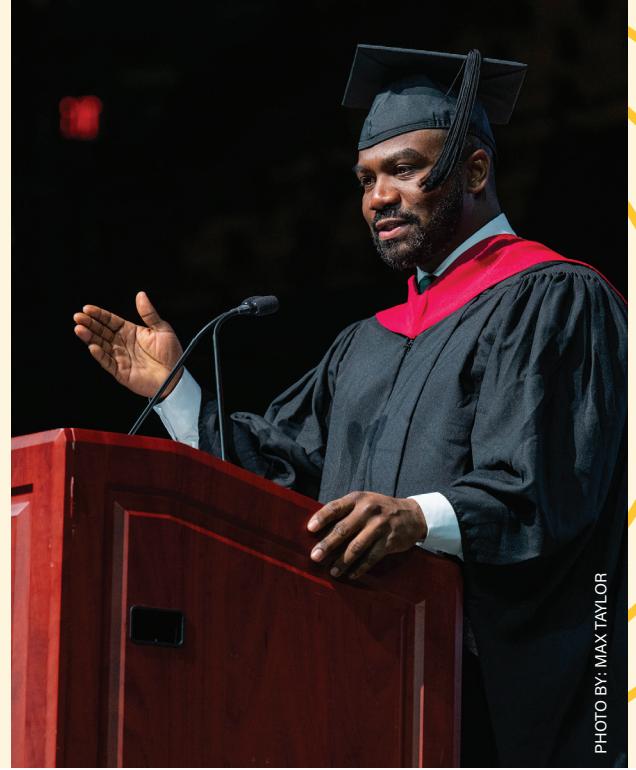
Record-breaking research investments

A transformative \$21 million gift—our largest ever—will fund interprofessional, AI-powered bruise identification research over the next five years (see page 14).

Leading workforce development

For the second year in a row, our Center for Health Workforce was selected by the Health Resources and Services Administration to lead statewide initiatives, reinforcing our leadership in building Virginia's public health workforce (see page 28).

More than 900 students graduated from the College of Public Health in May 2024 ready to use their skills to improve the public's health locally and globally through nutrition, social work, health administration, epidemiology, community health, health informatics, and nursing.



At the 2024 College Degree Celebration, **Marvin B. Figueroa** addressed the next generation of leaders based on his experience in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Virginia's Department of Health and Human Resources. Today, Figueroa serves as the Chief of Staff to United States Senator Laphonza Butler.

Community-focused



"Recognizing the impact of socioeconomic factors, education, and environment on health will inform my approach to operations in nonprofit health care organizations, ensuring more targeted and effective interventions that address root causes. As an example, I gained knowledge of the interdisciplinary approach to combat issues like the opioid crisis."

Emily Yacoub, Master of Health Administration '25 on the new GCH 500 Foundation of Public Health class

Student View



"As we move forward from this moment, let us remain connected in our shared commitment to public health and our vision of a healthier, more equitable world. This degree has gifted us with the ability to be a voice for all communities, especially in the face of injustice. I cannot wait to see the incredible impact we will continue to make together."

Bryanda Amillano, MPH '24 College Degree Celebration student speaker 2024

Thought-leaders tackle climate change and health

PHOTO BY: MARY CUNNINGHAM



Climate change poses significant threats to global health. For National Public Health Week 2024, the College explored the interprofessional effects of climate change and health at *Conversations and Connections: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Climate Change and Health*. The lively discussion showcased experts in public health, communications, psychology, and environmental justice.

"Climate change is an incontrovertible fact, and the intersection with public health is apparent. What in public health is not being affected by climate change?" asked Dean Melissa Perry, who moderated the panel.

Ed Maibach, director of George Mason's Center for Climate Change Communication, underscored the importance of effective communication to mobilize action on climate and health issues.

"It's about smartening up communication in waking up America to the realities of climate change," said Maibach. "We have an opportunity to use our trust with the public. To reframe the issue and bring it into the human health space."

Ed Maibach, director, Center for Climate Change Communication

Lise Van Susteren, clinical associate professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at George Washington University and co-founder of Climate Psychiatry Alliance, shed light on the psychological impacts of climate change.

"As bad as the storms are outside, the storms inside [people] are worse," said Van Susteren. "When you have an extreme weather event, you can clean up when there's a feeling of bravado and a collective effort. But when you have been psychologically damaged, those scars and wounds and the fears, anger, grief, and loss, it's hard to determine."

Nsedu Obot Witherspoon, executive director of Children's Environmental Health Network, provided perspectives on environmental justice and community-based approaches to address climate-related health disparities. She emphasized how children are the key to a brighter future.

"Our children are resilient. We have to start early. You have to expose children to positive examples of how they can be a part of a future, not a dismal, dark future," said Witherspoon.

Panelists expressed hope about climate change and health, while encouraging everyone to make an impact through being an active environmental advocate unafraid to facilitate climate change conversations.

— MC

Dean **Melissa Perry**; **Nsedu Obot Witherspoon**, executive director of Children's Environmental Health Network; **Ed Maibach**, director, Center for Climate Change Communication; and **Lise Van Susteren**, clinical associate professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at George Washington University discussed the communications, psychology, and environmental justice impacts of climate and health.

Watch the recording at
<https://bit.ly/HealthAndClimate24>.

LEAD. INNOVATE. INSPIRE.



New chair of the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies in a clinical exam room in the Population Health Center on George Mason's Fairfax campus.

Martin Binks named Nutrition and Food Studies chair

Metabolic disease scientist **Martin Binks** joins the College as chair of the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies. He is a highly-regarded scientist with more than 20 years' experience in academic leadership, health care, and clinical program development. Over his distinguished career, Binks has assisted thousands of patients with behavioral, pharmacological, and surgical weight loss; health and wellness; and quality of life improvement. He is a dedicated mentor to students and trainees of all career stages.

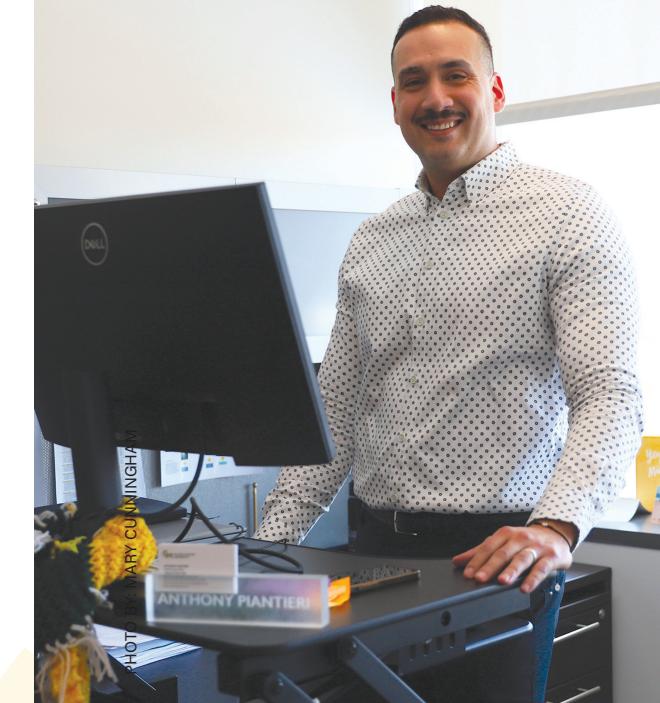
Prior to joining CPH, Binks was a professor in the Department of Nutritional Sciences, Institutional Review Board chair, and the founding director of the Nutrition & Metabolic Health Initiative at Texas Tech University (TTU). He received his PhD in clinical psychology from Fairleigh Dickenson University where he specialized in behavioral medicine, neuropsychology, and obesity. He earned his MBA from TTU. He has authored numerous peer-reviewed publications, several book chapters, and the book *The Duke Diet*.

Thank you to Professor **Lilian de Jonge** for serving as interim department chair for the 2023-24 academic year.

PHOTO BY: MARY CUNNINGHAM

Anthony Piantieri appointed College's first Chief Business Officer

As the College's first Chief Business Officer, **Anthony Piantieri** guides the College's financial and operational strategies that foster innovation and excellence. Responsible for overseeing all business functions, including financial planning, revenue generation, technology integration, and new venture development, Piantieri plays a crucial role in shaping short- and long-term strategic plans to expand programs and partnerships. Piantieri's career in the operations and finance industries spans over two decades. Before joining George Mason in August 2024, he was chief financial officer for the Business and Support Services Division of the United States Marine Corps.



Faculty lead the way: appointments and elections



Raedeh Basiri
Assistant Professor (NFS)
Elected American Society for Nutrition's Aging and Chronic Disease Research Interest Section At-Large Delegate



Megumi Inoue
Associate Professor (SW)
Elected Gerontological Society of America Fellow



Michael Bloom
Professor (GCH)
Appointed Research Institute Advisory Committee of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine Member at Large



Katherine Scafide
Associate Professor (SON)
Appointed to the editorial board of the Journal of Forensic Nursing



Gilbert Gimm
Associate Professor (HAP)
Elected Gerontological Society of America Fellow



Ali Weinstein
Professor (GCH)
Elected Society for Health Psychology Member at Large

PHOTOS SUBMITTED

Informing health policy in

the United States

Advocating for nutrition policy and public health

Faculty, staff, and students in the MS, Nutrition Dietetics concentration met state legislators during Virginia Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Legislative Day in January, sharing their expertise to advance nutrition-related policies.

"Making school lunch free for Virginia students, increasing SNAP benefits for older adults, or advocating for funds to feed low-income Virginia college students are directly related to the

health and wellness of the U.S.," said **Lilian de Jonge**, then interim director of the department.

Student attendee **Katherine Surette** (MS, Nutrition '25) valued witnessing the intricate relationship between nutrition and policy. "The experience reinforced my commitment to driving change through advocacy and collaboration with policymakers," said Surette.

— TT



PHOTO SUBMITTED
Nutrition and Food Studies students and faculty engage policymakers on the Virginia Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Legislative Day in January 2024. They advocated to advance nutrition policy as a foundational component of public health. Front row: **Asma Benomran**, **Monica Vargas**, Professor and Acting Department Chair **Lilian de Jonge**, Department Manager **Allison McKay**, Assistant Professor **Allison Miner**, and Director, Dietetics MS Program **Sapna Batheja**, **Marcus Brick**. Second row: **Kiranjyot Sawhney-Duran**, **Eli Kalman-Rome**, **Mark Rudich**, **Chia Chun (Amy) Chang**, **Yu Ting (Helen) Huang**, **Jui-Ching Li**, **Toqa Elashry**, **Arleija Williams** (top), **Courtney O'Loughlin** (bottom), **Katherine Surette** (top), **Khawlah Kheshafaty** (bottom), **Mary Christopher** (top).

CPH faculty testimony informs policy discussion on the Older Americans Act



Marti Kubik

In March 2024, **Martha (Marti) Y. Kubik** was an expert witness at a U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions hearing, shedding light on the importance of reauthorizing the Older Americans Act. Kubik detailed an innovative approach that engages academic institutions to bring health profession students to community dining sites to provide health-related services that support the needs of seniors.

— TT

Seeing first-hand how policy impacts the nation's health

Master of Healthcare Administration (MHA) students had a front row seat to the legislative process as Health and Human Services experts presented on relevant public health matters advancing on Capitol Hill this fall. The trip inspired upcoming generations of health policy leaders.

"Before the field trip, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, but this experience changed that. I see a future career for myself with HHS. This field trip gave me a better idea of what kind of work I want to do in the future," said **Minnie Pham**, MHA '24.

Speakers discussed policy evaluation, maternal and child health, racial and ethnic equity, health care delivery, and global health.

"The visit enhanced their understanding beyond the walls of conventional classrooms in higher education," said MHA Program Director and Associate Professor (HAP) **Brenda Helen Sheingold**.

— TT



Associate Professor **Brenda Helen Sheingold** (sitting) with Master of Health Administration students on Capitol Hill, leveraging George Mason's prime location near the nation's capital to witness policy making in action.

Advancing research for underrepresented victims of interpersonal violence



PHOTO BY: MARY CUNNINGHAM

Record-breaking \$21 million gift fuels innovation in bruise detection technology

The College of Public Health has received an anonymous \$21 million gift to advance groundbreaking research led by Associate Professor Katherine Scafide (School of Nursing) on alternate light sources for detecting bruises and injuries in victims of interpersonal violence.

"This transformative gift underscores the leadership of George Mason faculty in addressing life-changing challenges," said Dean Melissa Perry. "It provides unparalleled resources to elevate cross-disciplinary research and collaboration, amplifying the impact of work that has the potential to revolutionize care for trauma survivors."

Scafide, alongside Professor of Health Informatics Janusz Wojtusiak (HAP) and Associate Professor David Lattanzi (College of Engineering and Computing), has spearheaded this acclaimed research.

The funding, to be distributed over five years, enables the team to expand their advanced bruise detection system, which combines artificial intelligence, imaging and light technologies, forensic insights, and clinical expertise. This cutting-edge technique is five times more effective than

traditional white light, promising to improve injury detection, enhance data collection, and increase access to care for trauma survivors.

"We hope to address disparities in clinical care, which can lead to improved health care for all, as well as legal recourse for all survivors of violence, by improving documentation of physical trauma," said Scafide, who is a forensic nurse.

Leaders in the movement toward ending intimate partner violence commended the announcement.

"The Scafide team's research and findings are revolutionizing medical forensic examinations," said **Ann Burdges**, CEO of End Violence Against Women International.

"Scafide's research aligns seamlessly with our vision to end domestic violence in our lifetime by prioritizing inclusivity and recognizing the unique challenges faced by survivors with darker skin tones," said **Ruth Glenn**, president of Survivor Justice Action.

Learn more at bruise.gmu.edu.

— MT

Ensuring underrepresented victims of intimate partner violence are part of the discussion

Associate Professor (SW) **Denise Hines** received an anonymous \$1 million grant to dispel stereotypes and racial biases faced by Black and Latino men who experience domestic violence. The goal is to identify how to reduce feelings of isolation and best support this population in accessing resources for intimate partner violence (IPV) survivors.

Hines was the keynote speaker for an FBI event for Domestic Violence Awareness Month in October 2023 dedicated to bringing awareness to male victims of IPV, a historically under-recognized population. Hines's speech, which included evidence supported by her research, provided key insights on the physical, psychological, sexual, and legal/administrative abuse men can experience at the hands of their partners.

— TT



Delivering all together Innovating health care and the different student experience

Virtual case simulation increases Social Work students' resiliency

The Social Work Department created an interprofessional, person-centered VR simulation by working with the College's growing team of Certified Healthcare Simulation Educators. Students apply their skills to a real-time social work case in a low-stakes virtual environment. After the simulation, most students felt more confident with client communications and providing interventions that foster client safety.

"George Mason's Department of Social Work is uniquely positioned to lead pedagogical advancements

in innovative skill development," said **Emily Ihara**, chair (SW). "This includes building safe, virtual learning spaces to enhance resiliency strategies students will need as they enter an increasingly demanding and challenging workforce environment upon graduation."

Master of Social Work students in the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)-funded Community Academic Partnership-Behavioral Health program received the training.

—MC



PHOTO BY: MARY CUNNINGHAM

First and only

college of public health to be accredited by the Society for Simulation in Healthcare

Virginia's first

interdisciplinary center for immersive technologies and simulation

500+ students

experienced VR-enhanced coursework

VR professional development

simulation created titled Recognizing and Responding to Exclusionary Behaviors and Communications at Work

1,500 square feet

dedicated VR/simulation lab space

Portable lab

equipment can make any space a VR lab

5

Certified Healthcare Simulation Educators

From behind a computer screen, Simulation Coordinator **Sindhu Mallala**, a Certified Healthcare Simulation Educator, manages the simulation experience for social work students engaging in a virtual encounter with a teen exhibiting violent behavior and his foster parents.

Professor Farrokh Alemi receives NIH grant to pilot AI chatbot to help African Americans with depression find the right medication faster

As a long-time pioneer in artificial intelligence (AI) health solutions, Professor

Farrokh Alemi received a National Institutes of Health (NIH) AIM-AHEAD program grant to pilot an AI chatbot for people who are Black and African Americans with depression. Alemi will enhance his first-of-its-kind, evidence-based AI tool to address the medication needs of African Americans with depression.

The existing AI tool, available at MeAgainMeds.com, recommends antidepressants for 16,775 general-population patient subgroups, each representing a unique combination of medical histories. Guidance from the chatbot can be used in tandem with care from a medical provider. For each of these subgroups, the current project will analyze the effectiveness and appropriateness

of the recommendations for African Americans, using the NIH All of Us database.

"Antidepressant medications are a first-line treatment for depression; however, a majority of depressed patients do not experience improvement with their first antidepressant. Additionally, minority populations are not well represented in antidepressant studies, contributing to reduced antidepressant effectiveness in these populations," said Alemi.

"There is a significant need to synthesize available evidence regarding antidepressant effectiveness and provide personalized treatment recommendations, and this project addresses a major gap in the management of Black and African Americans with depression."

—MC

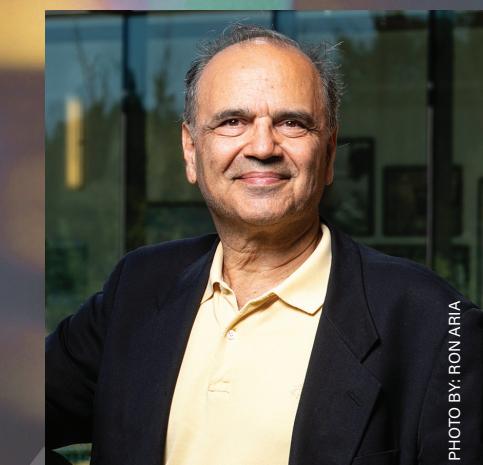


PHOTO BY: RON ARIA

Professor of Health Informatics **Farrokh Alemi** explores new ways to improve the lives of people with depression with artificial intelligence. With a new NIH grant, Alemi will pilot an AI chatbot for people who are Black or African American with depression.

Advancing Environmental Influences on Child Health Outcomes longitudinal study

Prominent National Institutes of Health study continues at CPH—making a direct impact on health policy

George Mason University, the only Virginia institution leading the NIH-funded ECHO project, continues its groundbreaking research on the environmental influences on child health with \$1.78 million in annual funding. Insights from the first study cycle have already shaped national policies, reducing childhood obesity and uncovering critical links between maternal health and children's well-being. Following the success of the first ECHO study cycle, the NIH renewed George Mason University's funding to expand its research.

"We're gathering information about women and children in a longitudinal manner with a goal of comparing to our data to that of Nebraska or Iowa. Learning about the regional disparities will then allow us to use them to influence national policy," said Principal Investigator **Kathi Huddleston**, PhD '08, an associate professor (SON).

The NIH grant provides ECHO teams across the country with a total of \$7 million a year for seven years to research five outcomes of women and children: pre-, peri-, and postnatal outcomes; upper and lower airways; obesity; neurodevelopment; and positive health. George Mason will receive \$1.78 million every year throughout the second cycle. George Mason is part of the ECHO cohort led by the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai.

The team is currently re-recruiting the 1,512 participants from the first cycle to continue in the study. The youngest participant is under one year old and the oldest is 12.

ECHO's first cycle uncovered an association between school lunches and increased childhood obesity. These findings directly led to policy reforms that enhanced the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act.

These changes significantly reduced the overall body mass index among school-aged children and are expected to deliver lasting health benefits for future generations.

More results from the first cycle included changes in sleep patterns due to COVID-19 and disparities in sleep patterns between children of different racial/ethnic backgrounds. The team also found that there is a strong relationship between the health of the mother at pre- and early conception and the overall health of children. For example, babies born to mothers with higher levels of toxic metals were more likely to be underweight, which could lead to future health issues.

—SB



(Left) **Shiva Zarean** measures the height of **Mariella Gallagher** while **Efua Hayford** records the weight of **William Gallagher**. The siblings are part of the more than 1,512 participants that George Mason's ECHO team recruited for phase one of the seven-year study.

(Below) Research Project Administrator **Daisy Posada** BA '13, MA '18; Research Assistant **Seema Poudel** BS '22; and Nursing Student **Shiva Zarean** play integral roles in the ECHO study as they collect teeth, hair, and urine samples for this longitudinal study of health and well-being in the children as they grow.



Improving human subject research recruitment success

One of the many challenges researchers can face while conducting research is recruiting and retaining study participants. Associate Professor **Kathi Huddleston**, PI of George Mason's ECHO cohort and a leading expert in participant enrollment, recruitment, and retention, shares tips for research recruitment success.

PHOTO BY: EMMA ANDERSON

- 1 Start thinking about recruitment at the beginning of the research
- 2 Know your community and know your community's specialty resources
- 3 Communicate and educate your research team and participants
- 4 Reimburse participants for participation
- 5 Set goals and metrics — and celebrate your successes
- 6 Know your numbers and follow up — how many people are eligible, are you able to reach, how many declined to participate and why, etc.?

Learn more at <https://bit.ly/6RecruitmentTips>

CPH alumni

Giving back to their local communities



Gary Taylor, MSW '15, takes community support to the next level by training barbers, who already serve as pillars for mental health among Black men, on how to further support patrons in times of need.

One barbershop at a time: Social work graduate empowers communities and reinforces 'it's OK to not be OK'

Gary Taylor is destigmatizing mental health support and normalizing therapy in the Black community one barbershop at a time. Taylor found that barbershops are the natural place to reach Black men to foster healthy discussions about mental health.

"Barbershops are this safe space because of the trusted role that barbers often play in Black men's lives," said Taylor, Master of Social Work '15 alum. "Most of the time when you talk to barbers, they'll tell you they're almost de facto therapists and social workers."

As a trained social worker, Taylor utilizes his direct cultural experiences with Black men and his skill set, knowledge, and education to train barbers on mental health first aid. He realized he could bring his crisis therapy experience into the community through "barbershop talks"—informal group discussions with the barber, the shop patrons, and a trained social worker.

He has worked with over five local Virginia shops to equip the barbers with skills to provide patrons with therapy resources or find substance abuse resources. Seeing the positive impact of the "barbershop talks," Taylor is working with female colleagues to begin "salon talks" targeted toward Black women this spring.

Taylor is also passionate about "passing the baton" to the next generation by getting more Black people into the social work profession to meet the growing demand.

"There is a growing need for diversity in the social work profession. That cultural awareness piece for the Black community and having more Black practitioners, it's very important as we progress in the field," Taylor said.

— MT

Graduates recognized with esteemed alumni accolades

Cordelia Cranshaw Skeete was named the Graduate of the Last Decade (GOLD) for her excellence and contributions to the field of social work. Skeete is the founder and CEO of Acts of Random Kindness (ARK), a nonprofit dedicated to providing resources and improving the lives of youth facing challenges.

Elma Levy was honored with the Distinguished Alumni award for her outstanding contributions to the George Mason community and active service as a College of Public Health Advisory Board member. Levy is the co-founder of several successful companies dedicated to industrial leadership and is a mentor for aspiring entrepreneurs.



Graduate of the Last Decade (GOLD) awardee **Cordelia Cranshaw Skeete**, BSW '14



College of Public Health's Distinguished Alumni awardee **Elma Levy**, BSN '91

Alumni award winners

Dishing out good food and healthy eating resources to local firefighters

Master of Science in Nutrition students took their skills to Fairfax Fire Station 33, where they explored a unique career path by teaching firefighters the importance of nutrition and preparing healthy meals in the firehouse kitchen.

Meal preparation was 100 percent student-led. Recipes were original and dedicated to firefighters' needs, based on student research that uncovered the concerning higher occurrence of cardiovascular disease among firefighters.

"The project focused on firefighter performance," said **Marcus Brick**, Dietetics student. "A big part of the meal was making sure that the firefighters had an adequate amount of protein—about half a pound of meat [per person]—for a good amount of energy so they're fueled and ready to go for whatever emergency may come."

In their research, the students found that cardiovascular disease is one of the largest issues facing the American population, especially firefighters, said Brick. "But you can reduce that risk by eating plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables and supplementing them in any meal that you have," he added.

— SB

Megan Lautz, a registered dietitian for the firehouse, supervised the visit. NFS faculty and staff members **Sapna Batheja**, **Lilian de Jonge**, **Allison McKay**, and **Allison Miner** attended the dinners, along with Lautz.

Lautz has a unique position as many fire departments don't have an in-house dietitian. She inspired nutrition students to find their niche. "Without Megan and this program, I wouldn't have known that firefighter dietitian was a niche that I could go into. I can work with airline pilots, doctors, and so many other patient populations, and the program really helped me prepare for that," said Brick.

The MS in Nutrition, Dietetics concentration program is a pathway to becoming a registered dietitian nutritionist. The seven graduate students in the inaugural registered dietitian cohort became the first to graduate from this program in May 2024.



Students in the Registered Dietician concentration, **Marcus Brick** and **Mark Rudich**, prepare nutritious green turkey chili for Fairfax City firefighters under the instruction of **Megan Lautz**, registered dietitian and first responder nutrition and fitness expert. The field trip to a local firehouse provided students with a first-hand look at just one of the ways they can use their degree.

Inclusivity in action: Engaging underrepresented voices in research

Noninclusive clinical trials and medical settings, coupled with fear and anxiety around disclosing their identities, leads to LGBTQ+ people being underrepresented in public health research. When underrepresented communities and their health needs are centered in research, they are more receptive to intervention methods designed for their community.

College of Public Health researcher **Rima Nakkash**, interim chair (GCH), convened a youth council (YC), which is a group of college students and young alumni who are interested in this research.

"A youth council helps bridge the gap researchers may face to better engage with those who are closer to these communities so they can be better related to," said Ethan Terceros, BS in Community Health alum, and YC member.

For Nakkash's YC, members informed vape prevention methods targeted toward LGBTQ+ college students in Virginia.

"Given the current knowledge and evidence we have about increased prevalence of vape use among LGBTQ+ youth compared

to their heterosexual counterparts in Virginia, it is important that we move beyond defining the problem to coming up with solutions/interventions to benefit this population of young adults," said Nakkash. "Engagement gives voice to LGBTQ+ youth, makes the approach more relevant, and increases ownership of interventions."

"A youth council helps bridge the gap that researchers may face to better engage with those who are closer to these communities so they can be better related to."

Ethan Terceros, BS
Community Health alum.

Nakkash has successfully created youth coalitions in past studies, and she knew that implementing something similar for this study would ultimately strengthen her current research and provide benefits to the participants.

Including a youth council in research allows you to think and deliver all together different by:

Encouraging students to learn about the research process

"Participating in the youth council is a great way to gain experience in the research process including recruiting, poster design, and presentation of findings, which I think you can never have too much exposure to," said

Rachael King, Master's in Health Informatics alum.

Teaching student and alumni participants about the research process

"I joined the youth council because I am interested in addressing health disparities among LGBTQ+ people and bettering their health outcomes," said **Linh Tran**, BS in Community Health student.

Engaging participants from underrepresented communities in current issues that impact them

All members of the YC are part of the LGBTQ+ community. "Representation matters, and I am in a place where I can amplify my voice for those who can't or aren't comfortable," said King.



Making research and prevention methods more relevant to concerned community's needs

"It is important that public health interventions are developed following a participatory approach to maximize implementation and adoption by the concerned population," said Nakkash.

Promoting health equity among understudied and marginalized communities

Nakkash stresses the importance of giving agency and ownership to marginalized communities who are being studied. Many members of the YC note the disparity in vaping and e-cigarette usage between LGBTQ+ youths and their cisgender and heterosexual peers.

Welcoming valuable community input to shape the direction of research

"Often times, research involving queer folk doesn't involve their perspective, leading to the findings to be not as truly representative as it could be. With a youth council, the participants' ages matched ours, so any of our insights could be helpful," said **Siri Nikku**, BS in Community Health student. The research team consulted the YC on how to best reach other LGBTQ+ college students to recruit them for the study.

Researcher **Rima Nakkash** and members of the Youth Council presented at George Mason University's Access to Research and Inclusive Excellence (ARIE) conference in March 2024 about "Engaging Virginia LGBTQ+ Youth to Inform Vaping Prevention and Policy Initiatives." From left to right: GCH student **Siri Nikku**, GCH student **Linh Tran**, PhD student researcher **Omolayo Anjorin**, GCH student **August Huynh**, principal investigator **Rima Nakkash**, GCH alum **Archana Vardhan**, and GCH alum **Ethan Terceros**. (Members not pictured: Women and Gender Studies student **Lexi McCaffrey**, HAP alum **Rachael King**, **Lisa Lindley** from Lehigh University, and **Ebbie Kalan** and **Ateeqa Ijaz** from Eastern Virginia Medical School.)

Spotlighting public health leaders of tomorrow

George Mason University is a leader in graduating workforce-ready students, and its College of Public Health—the first in Virginia—is dedicated to helping meet the critical need for health workers in Virginia and around the world. In the College, students get involved in improving public health and learn valuable skills that prepare them for careers as social workers, nurses, public health advocates, researchers, dietitians, and more. Hear from students their vision for public health careers and how their hands-on, interprofessional experience has prepared them to champion health and well-being for all.



Susan Favor, BS in Community Health '24, MPH '25

Between 2009 and 2010, HIV and AIDS infection rates were skyrocketing in Favor's native South Africa, so she volunteered at her school to educate others about AIDS/HIV prevention. Favor also volunteered at the South Africa Department of Health, where her mother is a nurse practitioner. This work led her to George Mason.

"I hope to work with USAID Project Management Specialists on HIV and AIDS treatments and preventions, especially with young girls in South Africa, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and all of the southern hemisphere of Africa. I want to make sure they have the information they need about reproduction and sexual health. Education is key; it's the best prevention."

Mark Rudich, Master of Science, Nutrition, Dietetics concentration, first cohort

"The George Mason dietetics program is one of the few in the country right now that follows the new path of becoming dietitians," Rudich said. "You must have a master's degree as well as complete rotations while pursuing your degree. So, it's two birds with one stone in two years."

Rudich says the rotations and hands-on experiences are also a highlight. The program features three rotations, one each in food service, community, and clinical settings. His first rotation included working with George Mason Dining and the nutrition department of Loudoun County Public Schools, followed by the community rotation with area nonprofits Food for Others and Food and Friends.



PHOTO BY: KYLER BEKE



Kim McNally, College's first PhD in Public Health graduate

McNally's primary research looked at ways to improve HPV vaccine compliance, which jump-started her PhD journey:

"I really wanted to jump right in and do an intervention. But then I had to take a step back when I realized that we didn't have the research to support developing one intervention over another. That's where my PhD journey started—looking at a way to empower school nurses in particular."

McNally's PhD research was published in *The Journal of School Nursing*.



Sheetal Sharma (far left), MHA '24, and her Rising Healthcare Leaders at George Mason board members, **Mehboba Adem**, **Amal Abed**, and **Rustam Boura**, learned invaluable professional skills that will help them in their future health care management careers by organizing the annual Inova Career Day.

College powers Virginia's health workforce expansion with \$921K funding

George Mason University's Center for Health Workforce is taking action to combat critical health care workforce shortages with \$921,000 in federal funding from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). With support from Virginia Senators Tim Kaine and Mark Warner, the center is driving regional workforce planning, expanding training capacity, and accelerating development as the state's go-to hub for health workforce solutions.

The center uses data and a collaborative model involving health and educational organizations, policy makers, community planners, and other regional stakeholders to understand local challenges related to the supply, demand, distribution, and deployment of health workers in Virginia. The new funds will help the center expand from supporting three Virginia regions to all nine regions.

"Virginia urgently needs to expand its health workforce to meet community needs and ensure local businesses can supply essential health care services," said **Caroline Sutter**, co-director of the center and a professor of nursing.

This strategic investment in the center will address this critical need to grow and retain the health workforce by prioritizing regional and population health recruitment and retention through evidence-based planning and targeted interventions. These targeted interventions will help regional educational and training programs identify future workers who want to stay in the area to give back and improve the region that trained them.

"Virginia's health care system is grappling with both immediate workforce shortages and the imperative need for long-term strategic planning to build a sustainable workforce," said Sutter. "These shortages threaten to exacerbate existing health disparities and impede access to quality care in Virginia."



-MC

PHOTO BY: RON ARIA

Reducing mortality of chronic conditions through government and community partnerships



PHOTO BY: MARY CUNNINGHAM

Since the initial EMBRACE workshop in August 2024 (pictured here), **Y. Alicia Hong** and EMBRACE have established connections with 12 community-based organizations that represent Black and Hispanic communities in the Northern Virginia area and nine state and district government partners.

Professor (HAP) **Y. Alicia Hong** and research colleagues across George Mason created EMBRACE, a sustainable partnership uniting community organizations, academic institutions, and government agencies. EMBRACE improves access to health services in underserved communities by fostering partnerships, conducting needs assessments, and securing funding. EMBRACE stands for "Empowering Communities and Building Resiliency via Active Coalition and Education."

"Adoption of public health interventions in underserved minority communities has been limited. A strong need exists for disseminating evidence-based programs in underserved communities," said Hong, who is the lead academic partner. "We are focused on reducing disparities in prevalence and mortality of chronic conditions that affect racial and ethnic minorities the most."

The project builds upon Stronger Partnership, Stronger Community (Stronger²), an existing community outreach and capacity-building initiative made possible through a multi-million-dollar grant awarded to the Fairfax County Health

Department from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health. With Stronger², EMBRACE has established connections with 12 community-based organizations that represent Black and Hispanic communities in the Northern Virginia area. The team has gained nine state and district government partners.

"George Mason's faculty, with their interdisciplinary expertise and a dedication to advancing health equity, will position EMBRACE as a foundation for innovative and applied research, integrative learning, and sustainable community services," Hong said.

The transdisciplinary EMBRACE team began strategic planning in July 2023 and hosted the first EMBRACE Workshop in August 2024 with more than 50 attendees, including 15 George Mason researchers and local community health advocates, health department employees, and community organization leaders. The team has since submitted two additional grant applications and intends to host more workshops before the EMBRACE project ends.

—TT



PHOTO BY: MARY CUNNINGHAM

SW researcher **Carol Cleaveland** (front left) and NFS researcher **Lilian de Jonge** (back left) are two of more than a dozen College of Public Health faculty members forging partnerships with Fairfax County governmental and non-governmental organizations to overcome barriers to providing health services to underserved populations.

Global impact

Reducing adolescent malnutrition in Tanzania

Addressing adolescent malnutrition is critical to improving public health, and Assistant Professor (GCH) **Dongqing Wang** focuses on this issue in sub-Saharan Africa, where undernutrition persists and obesity is rising. In a new study, he found that integrating school meals, nutrition education, gardens, and community workshops reduced undernutrition and obesity in adolescents and their families.

With limited adolescent nutrition programs in the region, the study highlights how a four-part school-based intervention can improve diet quality, effectively address malnutrition, and decrease long-term health challenges.

"Our findings highlight the transformative potential of schools as a promising platform to combat adolescent malnutrition in all its forms. This study provides evidence of the feasibility and potential effectiveness of the four-part nutrition intervention package for reducing adolescent malnutrition," said Wang, corresponding author and joint-first author with **Leonard K. Katalambula** of the University of Dodoma. **Wafaie Fawzi** from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health is the principal investigator. This study was supported by the IZUMI Foundation.

Researchers conducted a cluster randomized controlled trial to evaluate the impact of an integrated, school-based nutrition intervention package for adolescents in Dodoma, Tanzania, over one academic year.

"There is a critical need to combine standalone intervention components into intervention packages that are well-integrated into the school environment," said Wang. "Previous school-based nutrition interventions were often implemented and evaluated as standalone programs without harmonization into a package or without adequate integration into the local food environment. These modifications improved the interventions' scalability and sustainability."

—MC

The study provided a healthy mid-day school meal for all students at the intervention schools. Meals, like the one pictured, included traditional Tanzanian staples (e.g., ugali [maize stiff porridge] or makande [maize and kidney beans]) and green leafy vegetables.



PHOTO SUBMITTED

"Our findings highlight the transformative potential of primary and secondary schools as a promising platform to combat adolescent malnutrition in all its forms."

Dongqing Wang
assistant professor (GCH)



Assistant Professor **Dongqing Wang** conducted a four-part nutrition intervention program that reduced adolescent malnutrition in Tanzania.

The study provided daily school meals, nutrition education, and school gardens. (Wang is pictured here in the George Mason Gardens in Fairfax, Virginia.)

Improving our communities through partnership and education

PHOTO BY: EMILY ROSCHER



Empowered Communities conference reinforces the importance of partnerships to empower change

The inaugural Empowered Communities Northern Virginia Public Health conference stands as a testament to George Mason's leadership in tackling critical public health challenges. Spearheaded by George Mason's School of Nursing, the event brought together a diverse array of participants including community partners, public health leaders, practitioners, and cross-sector stakeholders from across the region.

"Today's social challenges are interconnected and multifaceted, requiring us to work collaboratively rather than in isolation. At George

Mason, we recognize that complex problems need holistic solutions, and partnerships are vital. We extend our deepest gratitude to our community partners whose unwavering support played a pivotal role in driving meaningful change," said **Rebecca Sutter**, director of Empowered Communities.

Empowered Communities serves as an umbrella organization designed to holistically address public health challenges through individualized treatment services; community engagement; and professional development, knowledge sharing, and collaboration. The conference facilitated robust discussions on

topics such as peer-centered opioid treatment, community engagement, resident-led systems change, recovery in communities of color, and the efficacy of collective impact initiatives in addressing public health challenges.

"Scaling up success through collaborative networks is at the heart of our approach. By partnering with various stakeholders from across diverse sectors, we pool together a wide range of expertise and resources, enabling us to create more effective and comprehensive strategies for change. Together, we are stronger, and together, we can make a greater impact in the communities we serve," Sutter said.

The Inaugural Empowered Communities Northern Virginia Public Health Conference brought together a diverse array of participants and presenters including community partners, public health leaders, practitioners, and cross-sector stakeholders from across the region.

Graduate students solve real-world public health challenges

Learning Laboratory for Community Health by the numbers

Graduate research assistants (GRAs) for the Learning Laboratory for Community Health worked in interdisciplinary teams with community stakeholders to present a solution to an identified public health issue. The Learning Laboratory supports multidisciplinary training for public health students and professionals, with special attention to marginalized communities within Northern Virginia. The most innovative intervention will be implemented at the George Mason and Partner (MAP) Clinics. See the Lab and GRAs case study success in numbers:

7 evidence-based case studies developed

8 GRAs trained using a workforce development model

40 student challengers participated in public health learning model

47 community partners contributed to case study development

100% of students reported a positive learning experience in the Lab

89% of students reported improved problem-solving skills

71% of students reported improved critical thinking and community health skills

59% of students reported more knowledge about health disparities, networking and professional development, and research skills

Source: 2023-2024 Learning Lab participant survey



Scan the QR code to learn more about the Empowered Communities project.

Setting students up for success with financial support

Donor Impact



PHOTO BY: RON ARIA

The College of Public Health is grateful to **Tamara Nall** and her husband, **Clement Ezeanii**, for creating the Susanna Ezeanii and Mayfred Jolinda Nall Health Informatics Scholarship endowment. The scholarship honors the cherished memory of their mothers. The funding will serve as a catalyst for students pursuing an MS in Health Informatics, enabling them to wholeheartedly dedicate themselves to their studies, overcome financial barriers to graduation, and significantly enhance their research and career readiness.

"Health informatics is a rapidly growing and dynamic field," said **Janusz Wojtusiak**, director of the

Health Informatics program (HAP). "Highly qualified graduates are urgently needed by today's health and public health systems. This scholarship creates opportunities for students from all pathways to pursue this exciting career."

At the intersection of health care, technology, and data science, graduates from the MS in Health Informatics are employed by health care and public health agencies and technology firms to support specialized data collection and analysis that is mission critical to providing essential health services.

George Mason's Health Informatics program has an international reputation for faculty excellence and

commitment to student success, which attracted support from Nall and Ezeanii. The nationally ranked program and rigorous accreditation process ensures that graduates are prepared for future challenges.

Nall takes great delight in contributing to endeavors that foster student success, especially in vital areas like health informatics. "The impact of George Mason's initiatives is truly awe-inspiring, and we feel humbled to be able to contribute to an institution so devoted to its students," she remarked. "These endeavors only serve to enhance the already remarkable work George Mason is doing, and we take immense pride in being part of that."

Clement Ezeanii and **Tamara Nall** created the Susanna Ezeanii and Mayfred Jolinda Nall Health Informatics Scholarship Endowment. The endowment serves as a catalyst for students pursuing an MS in Health Informatics, enabling them to wholeheartedly dedicate themselves to their studies, overcome financial barriers to graduation, conduct research, and prepare for a rewarding career.

Student View



"The scholarship means a lot to me, and it's had a positive impact on my academic journey. As a full-time student, I have had to balance work while giving enough time to my studies and academics. But with this relief, I was able to focus more time on my classes."

Fahim Durani, Master of Science, Health Informatics student and first recipient of the Susanna Ezeanii and Mayfred Jolinda Nall Health Informatics Scholarship

Interprofessional MAP Clinics ensure K-12 students have healthful start to school year

Every summer, George Mason University's Mason and Partners (MAP) Clinics help local elementary school students get back-to-school ready.

Clinics staffed by School of Nursing and Department of Social Work faculty and staff offer essential health services to school-aged children whose parents are uninsured and other underserved communities. Over the course of two summer-time clinics, 66 Accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing (ABSN) students and seven nurse practitioner students served 45 families who brought their children to receive vaccines and physical examinations.

"The clinics are a different side of nursing. The families are so sweet and grateful for everyone who's there," said ABSN student **Kaleigh O'Keefe**.

School nurses, school-parent liaisons, refugee resettlement case managers, and caregivers from MAP Clinic partners reach out to schedule appointments for students. The clinics address various communities and health issues including general health, pediatrics, and substance abuse.

Undergraduate nursing students, MSN Family Nurse Practitioner and ABSN students, as well as graduate psychology, social work, health informatics and administration students among others participated to complete Community Health Clinical requirements in a meaningful way.

"Bonding with these kids is my favorite part," said O'Keefe. "They're just so happy to be there, and being there to help them thrive is everything."

Nursing students received valuable interprofessional experience by collaborating with students and faculty from the Department of Social Work.

"It was [nursing students'] responsibility to relay the patients' information to the provider, as well as the social workers, so that we could work together in getting the resources the patients need," said **Isabelle Kahng**, an ABSN student who will be doing a neuro-ICU practicum for the MedStar Health Future Nurse Program partnership.

—SB



PHOTO BY: SHAYLA BROWN

MAP Clinics serve local communities



PHOTO BY: SHAYLA BROWN

Clinic visits: Culmore, Manassas Park, Fairfax County Public Schools

5,000+
patient visits

3,500+
patients

1,800+
school physicals

200+
urgent visits

283
wellness visits

~ \$600,000
in pro bono services
provided

7,600
vaccines for children

\$1,300,000
in free vaccines

Opioid
recovery
and
treatment

provided at MAP Clinics

431
telehealth
visits

2,140
Medication
Assisted
Treatments

298
shelter
encounters

670+
RN panel
encounters



PHOTO BY: EVAN CANTWELL

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Advisory Board members support the College, the dean, and students as advisors, mentors, stewards, and donors. Fall 2024 Board members pictured Gloria Addo-Ayensu, Elma Levy (back), Patricia Haresign, Carolyn Taylor, Janet Hinchcliff, Les Taylor (emeritus), Dean Melissa Perry, Anton Arbatov, CPH Faculty Sentate Representative Philip Zane, and Yoshie Davison. Not pictured are Robert Blancato, David Goldberg, and Ondrea McIntyre-Hall.

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The College's Alumni Chapter Board serves as ambassadors for the College by enhancing diverse student, faculty, and alumni experiences to improve public health.

The College would like to share a special thank you to **Kathi Huddleston** for serving as the Alumni Chapter President for more than six years and during the transition from CHHS to CPH. Thank you all for your service.

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