A PUBLICATION OF UNIVERSITY OF BRIDGEPORT
SUMMER 2026

UB Knightlines



Four-of-a-Kind!

UB Draws a Winning Hand with 4 Championships

Inside: Soccer, Volleyball, Softball, and Swimming Conference Champs
Expanding Programs - New IET LABS - Art Gallery Reborn

FFF graphics



President Wilken with the championship Men's Soccer Team

President's Line

Dear Friends,

At University of Bridgeport, we often speak about a culture of achievement. This is a campus culture defined by discipline, teamwork, creativity, and an unwavering belief that excellence is achieved through purpose and perseverance. This issue of *Knightlines* shares numerous recent accomplishments that reflect this spirit and underscore the momentum building at UB.

Our student-athletes continue to set a powerful standard for success. This year, University of Bridgeport celebrated four conference championship victories earned by our men's soccer team, our women's volleyball team, and our men's swimming and diving program. Each championship represents more than a title. It reflects countless hours of preparation, the guidance of dedicated coaches, and a shared commitment to excellence. These teams embody the values we strive to instill in every UB student, values like resilience, leadership, and the pursuit of greatness both on and off the field.

Achievement at UB extends far beyond athletics. Across our academic programs, students are translating knowledge into impact. A powerful example of this is the recent success of our students in the Quantum UP! Challenge, where they demonstrated innovation, analytical rigor, and collaborative problem-solving at the highest level. Their victory speaks to the strength of our experiential learning approach, which challenges students to apply theory to real-world challenges and prepares them to lead in their chosen professions.

We are also investing boldly in the future of education and innovation at UB. The opening of our new IET labs marks an important milestone for the University and for our students. These innovative, purpose-built spaces are designed to support hands-on learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, and cutting-edge research. They reflect our commitment to ensuring that UB students have access to the tools, technologies, and environments they need to excel in an increasingly complex and competitive world.

What unites these achievements on the field, in competition, and in the classroom is a shared culture. It is a culture sustained by students who are encouraged to exceed expectations and by alumni like you who continue to believe in the mission of the University of Bridgeport. Your support, advocacy, and engagement help make these successes possible.

As we look ahead, we do so with confidence and ambition. The culture of achievement at UB is strong, and it is growing. We are building on a foundation of excellence, inspired by our past and energized by the promise of what lies ahead.

With gratitude and pride,



Danielle Wilken, Ed.D.
President
University of Bridgeport

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Seizing the CROWN

Men's Soccer Claims First Conference Title in 24 Years





The 2025 season will forever hold a special place in the history of University of Bridgeport men's soccer. Defined by resilience, unity, and belief, the Purple Knights authored one of the most remarkable campaigns the program has ever seen, returning UB to the national stage and capturing their first Central Atlantic Collegiate Conference (CACC) Championship ever and their first conference title since 2001.

The journey was the product of a team that steadily grew into itself, a team that learned how to suffer, adapt, and ultimately rise together when the stakes were highest. "We didn't start as strong this season," senior defender Bruno Cakurs reflected. "We had a lot of ties, but really, really got to know each other as guys. You could see it on the field. We played as one team."

That unity was tested when UB opened postseason play at Knights Field against Dominican in the CACC Quarterfinals. An early seventh-minute goal put the Purple Knights behind, threatening to end their season almost as soon as it began. Instead, UB responded with poise and patience. Two expertly executed corner kicks turned the match on its head. Samuel Dundas finished the equalizer in the 68th minute, and Loik Poder buried the game-winner in the 85th. Behind clutch goalkeeping from Viktor Mašek and a series of last-ditch defensive efforts, Bridgeport escaped with a 2–1 comeback victory.

If the quarterfinal was about resolve, the semifinal against Wilmington was about nerve. After trading goals in regulation and overtime, the teams went to penalty kicks with a championship berth on the line. Graduate student Josh Erdos calmly converted the decisive kick, while Mašek delivered two massive saves to seal the shootout win.

Freshman Kristians Prieditis moves the ball towards a victory.

As momentum built, belief followed. "Once we reached the playoff quarterfinals, everybody was on the same page," said senior Jakob Reinhard. "We kind of knew that if we won, we were going to win the playoffs—and that's how we played. After that, it was just excitement."

That belief was tested to its limit in the CACC Championship against top-seeded Post in Waterbury. UB struck first when freshman Kristians Prieditis scored less than three minutes into the match, but the Eagles responded with three unanswered goals early in the second half. When a red card reduced Bridgeport to 10 men in the 53rd minute, the odds seemed overwhelming.

What followed was one of the greatest comebacks in conference history.

Graduate student Enzo Beatrix ignited the rally with a composed finish in the 55th minute. Five minutes later, Pierre Leo slid home the equalizer. Then, in the 76th minute, Joao Miranda stepped to the penalty spot and converted the goal that completed the unthinkable comeback.

From there, UB defended with everything it had. Mašek stood tall, the back line held firm, and the final whistle unleashed a wave of emotion decades in the making.

"It was an amazing, amazing feeling to make history," Cakurs said. "First in 24 years—it was an amazing run. You can't even really put it into words. It's just crazy."

Head coach Pete Doneit, in his 25th season at UB, called the victory one of the proudest moments of his career. "To be down a man and down two goals in the second half of the CACC Championship and to come back against all odds makes this one extra special," Doneit said. "I'm extremely proud of our guys—not only for their resilience and fight, but for winning while representing our school with respect and honor."

The championship run was accompanied by a wave of individual honors that underscored Bridgeport's balance and depth. Beatrix was named CACC Tournament MVP and First Team All-Conference. Prieditis earned Rookie of the Year honors

Side Lines

> What the team accomplished this year is nothing short of historic. They showed what it means to wear the Purple Knights jersey with pride.





Senior Kaanturk Akgul knows that it is time to celebrate.

after leading the team in goals. Cakurs was recognized as CACC Defensive Player of the Year and Top XVI Award winner for the highest GPA at the championship site. And Doneit was named CACC Coach of the Year.

"This championship is incredibly special, not just because it's our first in 25 years, but because of how our team earned it," said Director of Athletics Anthony Vitti. "To battle back from a 3–1 deficit while playing a man down speaks volumes about the heart, resilience, and belief in that locker room. That's what UB Athletics is all about, never backing down, trusting one another, and rising to the moment when it matters most."

Multiple Purple Knights also earned All-Tournament and All-Conference recognition, a testament to a roster that blended international and domestic players, undergraduates and graduates, into a single, cohesive unit.

"One of the most special things about this team was the makeup of both international and domestic players," Doneit said. "We created a family bond, and that carried us through tough times and made us extremely difficult to beat."

The championship punched UB's ticket to the NCAA Division II Men's Soccer Tournament for the first time since 2007. They won their first-round match against Post University 2-1 on November 21, 2025 in Hooksett, N.H. But in the Super Regional Second Round, the team ultimately fell 1-0 to nationally ranked SNHU in a hard-fought match that featured a season-best 10-save performance from Mašek.

Even in defeat, the Purple Knights left a lasting impression.

"Making it to the first NCAA Regional since 2007 put UB men's soccer back on the map," Doneit said. "Winning the program's first NCAA game since the 1990s showed what this group was capable of."

Reinhard echoed that sentiment. "We enjoyed everything," he said. "We even thought we could win the whole thing. That's how much belief there was."

The Purple Knights finished the season 9-5-8 overall, including an unbeaten 5-0-5 mark in conference play, against one of the toughest schedules in Division II. But the legacy of the 2025 team extends beyond wins and trophies.

"What the team accomplished this year is nothing short of historic," said President Danielle Wilken. "They showed what it means to wear the Purple Knights jersey with pride."

For Doneit, the season represented something even deeper. "One of my goals is to make the alumni who came before us proud—not just with wins, but with how we play and how we conduct ourselves," he said. "I feel we accomplished that and laid the groundwork for the future."

Twenty-four years in the making, the 2025 Purple Knights didn't just win a title, they began a 2025-2026 run of championships that redefined what's possible at University of Bridgeport. ■

Bruno Cakurs Exemplifies the Best of UB



Bruno Cakurs' senior season at the University of Bridgeport was the culmination of four years of steady growth, leadership, and excellence—on the field and in the classroom. A cornerstone of the Purple Knights' back line, Cakurs helped lead UB men's soccer to its first conference championship since 2001 and its first NCAA Tournament win since 1990, anchoring one of the most disciplined defenses in program history.

Cakurs' impact at Bridgeport extended well beyond a single season. Over four years, he appeared in 71 matches and made 58 starts, representing nearly 90 percent of UB's games during his career and cementing himself as one of the program's most reliable defenders in recent memory.

During the 2025 campaign, Cakurs started 21 matches and guided a defense that limited conference opponents to just 0.90 goals per game. Under his direction, UB allowed one goal or fewer in 14 contests and recorded four clean sheets. His commanding presence earned him CACC Defensive Player of the Year honors, First Team All-Conference recognition, and multiple All-Region selections, including D2CCA All-East Region First Team and United Soccer Coaches All-East Region Second Team.

Yet for Cakurs, the accolades were never the point. Reflecting on the season, he noted that while he appreciated the recognition, the championship meant the most. "I really didn't follow all of my awards," he said. "Whatever it takes for the team to win—that's what matters. These accolades are good, but winning the championship is really the achievement I wanted from the start of the season." He described 2025 as the most mature year of his career, a natural pinnacle of four years of development at the collegiate level.

Equally impressive was his performance in the classroom. A finance major with a perfect 4.0 GPA across 93 credits, Cakurs earned College Sports Communicators First Team Academic All-American honors, along with the CACC Top XVI Award and numerous academic distinctions. He served as a volunteer at the VITA tax preparation clinic and as the president of the Entrepreneur Club. He also participated in the alumni mentorship program with Matthew Steiger ('91, '15).

"Bruno brought the same level of focus and dedication that he showed in both academics and athletics," said Sherri Dente, Assistant Professor of Entrepreneurship and Intellectual Property Law and Director of the Innovation Center. "We are grateful for the impact he has had on the center and the students around him and look forward to seeing all he accomplishes in the future."

Bruno will continue his education at a prestigious business graduate school in Portugal with teammate Jakob Reinhard. He leaves Bridgeport as a model student-athlete, defined not just by awards, but by leadership, humility, and an unwavering commitment to team success. ■

Side Lines



Health Sciences major Madison Mohan celebrates an incredible season.

Patience and Confidence

Women's Volleyball Finishes Season with CACC Championship Run

The University of Bridgeport women's volleyball team closed the 2025 season with a defining statement—one built on perseverance, growth, and belief—by capturing the Central Atlantic Collegiate Conference (CACC) Championship for the second time in three years. What began as an uneven and challenging start ultimately transformed into a postseason surge that revealed the true identity of the Purple Knights.

"This year was a little unusual for our program," said head coach Gary Mullin. "We started very slow, I think due to six new freshmen and a couple transfers, so a lot of new people trying to get to know each other and figure out how to play together."

The early portion of the season tested Bridgeport's patience. With a retooled roster and unfamiliar combinations on the court, the Purple Knights often showed flashes of potential in practice that didn't immediately translate to match results.

"About a third of the way into the season we finally found a defensive system that we could execute, and that started to give us a little more confidence," Mullin explained. "Then it was about learning how to win. We could play great in practice but not in the matches."

That turning point proved critical. As confidence grew, so did cohesion, particularly between a talented freshman class and a core of experienced leaders.

"We also had several experienced players returning, including Lucia Tomiello and Hailey Jessen," Mullin said. "They gave the new players confidence that we could find our way through the early jitters."

Entering the CACC Tournament as the No. 2 seed, Bridgeport embraced the opportunity to host and quickly set the tone with a commanding straight-set victory over Goldey-Beacom in the quarterfinals. The win was fueled by efficient offense, steady defense, and a roster that had learned how to win together when it mattered most.

That momentum carried into the semifinals, where the Purple Knights delivered one of their most impressive performances of the season—a sweep of top-seeded Wilmington. Bridgeport hit at a high team efficiency while controlling the tempo from start to finish, earning a return trip to the conference championship match for the second time in three seasons.



Senior captain Lucia Tomiello described the transformation simply.

"If I were to describe this season in one word, it would probably be 'unbelievable,'" Tomiello said. "We started off slow, mostly because of the adjustments we had to make from the previous year. Before preseason began, coaches and I knew we had to work hard on rebuilding this team, especially with six incoming freshmen."

The title match against Holy Family unfolded as a five-set battle that tested every ounce of the Purple Knights' resolve. Bridgeport struck first, but each time momentum swung, the team responded with composure and confidence. In the decisive fifth set, the Purple Knights elevated



their play, closing out a thrilling 3–2 victory to secure the CACC crown.

Junior Hailey Jessen delivered a performance for the ages, recording a career-high 28 kills while adding 15 digs. Her dominant postseason run earned her CACC Tournament MVP honors for the second time in her career, highlighting her role as the heartbeat of Bridgeport's offense.

While Jessen led the way, Bridgeport's championship run was defined by balance across the lineup. Freshman setter Camdyn Cieszkiewicz orchestrated the offense with poise beyond her years, dishing out a season-high 59 assists in the final and consistently putting hitters in position to succeed throughout the tournament.

Freshman Madison Mohan continued her late-season surge with 17 kills in the championship, while Cecilia Kowalski anchored the defense with a season-high seven blocks. In the back row, libero Elaine DeLallo set the tone defensively, finishing with 19 digs in the title match. Each contribution underscored the depth that made Bridgeport so difficult to stop in November.

Team Captain Tomiello provided steady leadership and efficiency at the net, following up a historic semifinal performance, where she set a CACC Tournament record for hitting percentage with another strong showing in the final. Her postseason capped a decorated career defined by consistency and impact on both sides of the ball.



Team captain and psychology major Lucia Tomiello capped off her senior year earning a place on the CACC All-Conference First Team, D2CCA All-East Region Second Team, and CACC All-Academic Team.

Junior Hailey Jessen was named CACC player of the week during the title run.

"We went from losing our first 11 matches to winning the CACC Championship," Tomiello reflected. "And let me tell you, that takes an incredible amount of grit and heart. We were seen as the team no one expected to go far, and yet we proved everyone wrong."

For Mullin, the journey mattered just as much as the result.

"Perseverance and a little patience with each other finally paid off," he said. "They were able to bring some really good practice work to the floor the last part of the season, and we finally showed who we really could be at the end."

That growth forged strong bonds within the locker room—connections that helped Bridgeport thrive when the pressure peaked.

"I think the difficulty in finding our way early helped them become closer at the end," Mullin added. "So I am very optimistic about our upcoming season as well."

The CACC Championship earned Bridgeport an automatic berth into the NCAA Division II Tournament, marking the program's 11th national appearance. While the season concluded in the East Regional, the Purple Knights finished as conference champions, having delivered their best volleyball when it mattered most.

"To win the CACC title for the second time in three years speaks to the culture that's been built, said Director of Athletics Anthony Vitti. "Our student-athletes continue to rise to the moment, and this team has once again demonstrated what it means to compete with purpose and represent UB."

"I am so proud to have been part of this beautiful team," Tomiello agreed. "Having the honor of leading these amazing young women filled my life with joy and gratitude. Sharing my last season with them is truly the best gift I could have asked for."

With a championship trophy in hand, record-setting performances across the tournament, and a young core strengthened by experience, the 2025 season stands as a defining chapter in University of Bridgeport women's volleyball history and a powerful foundation for what comes next. ■



Swimming into History

University of Bridgeport Men Capture NE10 Championship in First Varsity Season Back

For the University of Bridgeport men's swimming and diving team, the 2025–26 season was never just about returning to the pool. It was about proving something about belief, opportunity, and trust in a process that had been nearly seven years in the making.

That belief culminated on a Sunday night in Worcester, Massachusetts, when the Purple Knights men's team captured the 2026 Northeast-10 Conference Championship, dominating with 11 gold medals, 24 total podium finishes, and 967.5 points, winning the team title by a commanding 183.5-point margin over Adelphi. The women's team finished fifth in the NE10, with Ceyda Genc of Turkey winning an individual championship in the 100-fly, a bronze medal in the 100 back stroke, and gold as a member of UB's 200-medley relay team.

"This first season at UB has been an incredible experience with the help of the best coaches," said Dental Hygiene major Anna Mrozik. "We have great teammates who all push each other in and out of the pool! The standard has been set, and I look forward to continuing to reach my goals as a student-athlete."

The championship marked Bridgeport's first varsity season since 2019 and its inaugural year competing in the NE10. Under first-year head coach Evan Sholudko, the Purple Knights didn't just return, they arrived as the conference's standard-bearer.

"Of course, all the credit goes to the team and their hard work and dedication," Sholudko said. "But we had a vision and a plan. From the recruits we brought in to the depth we built across every stroke, I felt going into the season that we had a real chance to win it right away. Fortunately, that's what happened."

Bridgeport entered championship weekend as the favorite, riding a 10–2 regular-season record, with losses only to Division I programs Fairfield and Bryant. The Purple Knights also placed third at the ECAC Championships and led the conference in top times and weekly awards. Much of that success came from an international freshman class that reshaped the program overnight.

Side Lines

> The NE10 Championship in men's swimming and diving is an incredible milestone for our program.



Christian Toussi prepares to swim



MVP Sultanbek Azat accepts his award from the NE10

"All the freshmen come from different parts of the world," said Christian Toussi of Norway. "We connected so fast. We're doing everything together outside of practice, eating together, living in the same place. We just got close really fast."

Sultanbek Azat of Kazakhstan echoed that sentiment, emphasizing how diversity became a strength rather than a challenge. "Our team is incredibly diverse," Azat said. "There are people from different countries, different pasts, different mentalities. That makes it very interesting and very fun."

Coach Sholudko intentionally recruited with that global lens. "We're a very diverse group from all over the world, and that takes extra effort," he said. "But I was looking to fill every position and stroke so we could have real depth and score points everywhere."

After a strong season, Bridgeport wasted no time asserting control at the NE10 Championships. On opening night, the Purple Knights stunned the field by winning the 800-yard freestyle relay, earning the program's first-ever NE10 title and setting a championship record in 6:40.55.

Azat followed with a dominant victory in the 1000 free, breaking another championship record. By the end of the first session, Bridgeport sat alone atop the standings.

"Winning that first relay by a lot was huge," Sholudko said. "We knew if we set the tone early, especially with our strength in distance events, we could carry that momentum for the rest of the meet."

They did exactly that. Over four days, Bridgeport delivered one of the most comprehensive championship performances in conference history. Azat was nearly untouchable in distance events, winning the 500 free, 1000 free, and 1650 free, breaking three championship records along the way. His performance earned him NE10 Most Outstanding Swimmer honors.

Yet the championship was never about one swimmer. Toussi emerged as one of the meet's most versatile stars, capturing three individual titles in the 100 fly, 100 back, and 100 free, including a record-tying swim in the 100 free on the final night.

"Swimming has always been a passion for me," Toussi said. "Coming here gave me the opportunity to keep improving, stay versatile, and help the team as much as possible. I'm just enjoying the process."

That process was evident across the roster. Bridgeport swept podiums in multiple events, dominated relays, and scored heavily in every session. The Purple Knights closed the meet with yet another championship-record performance in the 400 free relay, fittingly sealing the title in gold.

Azat was voted the MVP for the championship event, Dragun was named the NE10 conference's Swimmer of the Year, and Toussi was voted as the league's Rookie of the Year.

For Azat, the success came from simplicity and trust. "I don't really think about swimming fast," he said. "I just swim my own race and enjoy the process. Everyone was positive, optimistic, and happy. We trusted the work."

That mindset—shared across the roster—was exactly what Sholudko hoped to build. "They embodied everything I was looking for," he said. "They trusted the plan, trusted each other, and brought great energy every day."

"The NE10 Championship in men's swimming is an incredible milestone for our program, agreed Director of Athletics Anthony Vitti. "To win a conference title in our very first year since 2019 speaks volumes about the commitment of our student-athletes and the leadership of our coaching staff. This group didn't just restart the program; they reestablished a standard of excellence and showed what's possible at UB."

As dominant as the championship was, it may only be the beginning. Bridgeport returns a young core, with a roster poised to grow even larger next season.

"Next year will be interesting," Sholudko said with a smile. "We might not even fit everyone in the pool at once." ■



Jurica Dragun earned two All-American honors at the NCAA tournament.

UB Men's Swimming and Diving Shines on the National Stage at NCAA Championships

The University of Bridgeport men's swimming and diving program made a significant national impact this season as freshmen Jurica Dragun and Christian Toussi earned All-America honors at the 2026 NCAA Division II Swimming and Diving Championships in Evansville, Indiana.

Competing at the Deaconess Aquatic Center against the nation's top Division II swimmers, Dragun and Toussi delivered standout performances in their first NCAA appearances, a rare achievement for first-year athletes and a major milestone for the Purple Knights program.

Dragun led the way with the top finish of the weekend for UB, placing sixth in the 100-yard breaststroke with a time of 53.14. The swim earned him First-Team All-America honors and established him as one of the nation's elite breaststrokers. He followed that performance with an 11th-place finish in the 200-yard breaststroke, clocking 1:58.31. The time tied the University of Bridgeport school record and secured Dragun his second All-America distinction of the meet.

"This season at UB was one of my best yet, from winning the NE10 team title and making it to NCAA freshman year," said Dragun. "I had a lot of personal bests and big improvements. I'm proud of the team and the progress I've made with my coaches, and I am excited to keep growing with this team."

Toussi also rose to the occasion on the national stage. He placed 10th in the 100-yard backstroke with a time of 47.57, earning Second-Team All-America honors. Advancing to the finals and scoring points at an NCAA Championship is a notable accomplishment, especially for a freshman competing against seasoned upperclassmen.

"Coming into a new program with a new coach I wasn't sure what to expect but I couldn't have asked for anything better," said Toussi. "I can't wait to continue getting better and growing with my team and coach here at UB"

Head coach Evan Sholudko credited both preparation and experience for the success of his young swimmers. With confidence that Dragun and Toussi had secured NCAA invitations early, the coaching staff emphasized peaking at nationals rather than fully tapering earlier in the season. "From experience, I knew the importance that I needed to put extra emphasis on it with those guys," Sholudko said, noting the goal was to ensure they could "go there as freshmen with no experience there and score and making it to finals."

While Bridgeport narrowly missed qualifying a third swimmer, Sultanbek Azat, who fell just half a second short of the NCAA cutoff, the overall performance highlighted the depth and upward trajectory of the program. Sholudko believes the freshmen's success is only the beginning. "To make it back in the final in their freshman year is a great sign of things to come," he said.

With multiple All-America honors, a tied school record, and valuable championship experience, UB men's swimming and diving closed the season with momentum and a promising outlook for the future.

The Right Moment

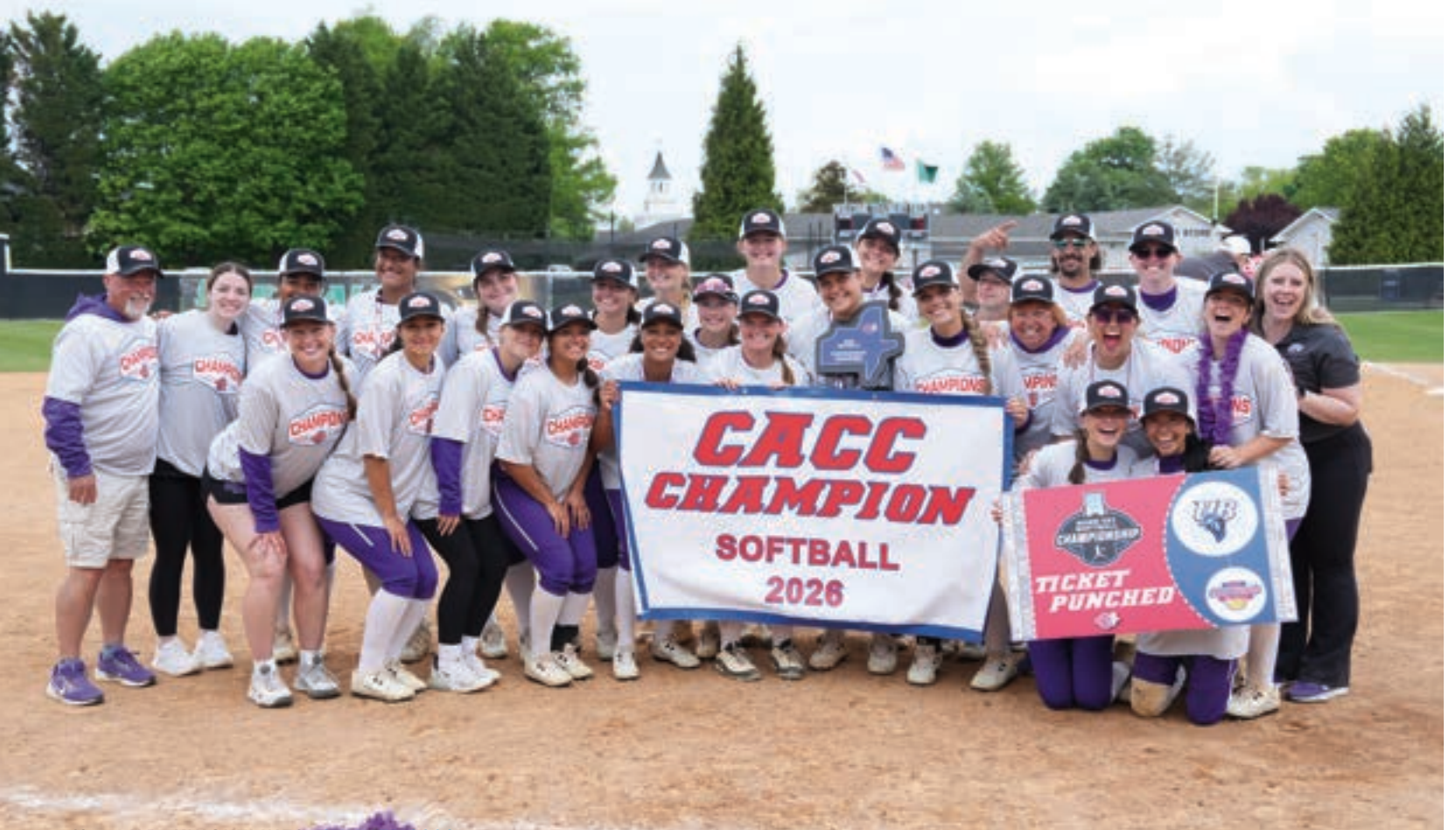
UB Softball Comes Together to Win

The University of Bridgeport softball team's 2026 season will be remembered as a breakthrough built on resilience, chemistry, and timely excellence. The Purple Knights captured their first-ever Central Atlantic Collegiate Conference (CACC) championship with a commanding 5–1 win over top-seeded Caldwell, capping a perfect 5–0 run through the tournament and solidifying one of the most successful seasons in program history.

But the championship was not simply the product of talent. It was the culmination of a season defined by growth and by a team that discovered how to play for each other and with each other at exactly the right time.

Head coach Dawn Stearns emphasized that this year's success was far from guaranteed. Entering the season, the team faced significant turnover and uncertainty, losing key contributors from the previous year. Yet as the season unfolded, something changed.

"We always have a positive attitude when we start seasons," Stearns said. "But you lose your number one pitcher and your two best hitters… and then as the season progressed, it just got really good, and the team gels very well together… we clicked about two or three weeks ago."





UB Softball celebrates their well-earned victory

That late-season cohesion proved decisive. Senior captain Mya Jones, later named the 2026 CACC Player of the Year, pointed to a cultural shift within the team as the defining factor in their championship run. "I think everyone just figured out their role, and everyone was happy for everyone else," Jones explained. "It just worked."

That attitude contrasted sharply with the prior season, when the team struggled to maintain cohesion late in the year. In 2026, players embraced their roles and celebrated one another's success, creating a unified identity that carried into the postseason.

Junior captain Sydnee Perreault echoed that sentiment, emphasizing the difference in mindset and execution. "I think we all figured out our purpose this year," Perreault said. "If the other team has the bases loaded, it doesn't matter. We're going to get an out, and we play for each other, and we're happy to be here."

The team's ability to stay composed in high-pressure moments was evident throughout the CACC Tournament, where they consistently delivered in key situations. Mya Jones was spectacular in the title game, going a perfect 4-for-4 with two RBIs and a home run to set the tone early. The tournament's Most Outstanding Player and pitcher Vise Zarate provided a dominant presence, finishing the tournament 5–0 with just three earned runs allowed over 30 innings pitched. Her consistency anchored the team throughout the week. Sydnee Perreault also played a crucial role, hitting .400 with 10 RBIs across the five tournament wins, delivering timely offense and energizing the lineup.

The Purple Knights combined opportunistic offense with disciplined defense to outmatch every opponent they faced. "Defense and pitching wins games," Stearns said. "Putting it together defensively was the key to our success."

Vice President of Athletics, Recreation, and Student Life Jay Moran captured the UB mindset during the team's postseason push. "Never underestimate the Purple Knights… it's us against the world," Moran said. "You know how we shut them up? We win."

Following their historic conference title, the Purple Knights advanced to the NCAA East Regional as the No. 7 seed, marking the program's third consecutive NCAA Tournament appearance and fifth in six years. Although they lost, the games were closely contested, reflecting the team's competitive level against top regional opponents. The season concluded with a 33–20 overall record, and also brought significant individual recognition.

Jones was the first UB softball player to earn NFCA All-American honors, capping off a decorated collegiate career that included six All-Region selections and multiple conference accolades. Her impact was immense both statistically and as a leader, finishing her career as one of the most accomplished players in program history with a .415 batting average and 170 RBIs. Sophomore Paityn Thibodeaux was also honored, earning NFCA All-Region Second Team recognition and reinforcing the team's strong foundation for the future.

The Purple Knights' 2026 campaign stands as a testament to what can happen when a team learns not just how to play together, but how to win together. "They just love each other," Stearns said. "Being a good teammate is just as important as being a good softball player. I think that's truly been the key to this year's success." ■

Galow and Kenney Honored as Division II's Best

Following another historic season for the Purple Knights gymnastics program, head coach Lorraine Galow and senior Abigail Kenney were each honored with the top individual awards in NCAA Division II by the Women's Collegiate Gymnastics Association (WCGA). Galow was named Division II Coach of the Year, while Kenney was selected as the Division II Gymnast of the Year, capping a banner campaign defined by consistency, culture, and competitive excellence.

For Kenney, the honor came at the end of a final season she describes as both emotional and freeing. "This year was bittersweet," Kenney said. "All the work had already been done, and this year was really just enjoying it with the seniors and letting it all go."

Letting go turned out to be exactly what fueled the best season of her career. Kenney finished the year with an all around National Qualifying Score of 38.970, the highest in Division II. She posted a season best all around score of 39.150 twice, including at the team finals of the Women's Collegiate Gymnastics National Invitational Championship (WCGNIC).

Her performance at nationals earned WCGNIC All America honors on both bars and vault, and she finished the season with event highs of 9.850 on beam, bars, and vault, along with a 9.875 on floor. Kenney recorded six all around victories during the season and earned WCGA Regular Season All America recognition for the third consecutive year as a first team all around selection. After sharing Gymnast of the Year honors in 2025, she claimed the award outright in 2026.

Ironically, her most consistent event came on uneven bars, which she once hated. "I came in freshman year not wanting to do bars," Kenney said. "But I learned a lot and ended up loving it."

Abby Kenney on the beam



Lorraine Galow congratulates Kenney on a stellar routine

According to Galow, that consistency was no accident. "This was the first year we didn't change anything for her," Galow said. "She already had her hardest skill set, so she could finally repeat the same routines as the year before and build real consistency."

While Kenney dominated the individual spotlight, Galow's Coach of the Year recognition reflected the program's broader success. In her fourth season at the helm, Galow guided the Purple Knights to a team NQS of 192.603, the second highest mark in Division II. UB posted a season high score of 194.125 on March 15 and surpassed the 194 mark three times during the season.

At nationals, Bridgeport delivered a third place team finish, with nine gymnasts earning All America honors, four more than the previous year. Junior Nova Staruk highlighted the postseason by qualifying for NCAA Regionals, becoming UB's first regional qualifier since 2022, while also earning GEC Specialist of the Year honors.

Despite the accolades, Galow remains reluctant to take credit. "I don't really know why they gave it to me," she said. "Maybe because this was also our strongest academic year." That academic success was staggering. Twenty seven of the program's student athletes earned Academic All America honors, a number Galow cites as one of her proudest accomplishments.

This year's roster featured 32 gymnasts, a dramatic increase from when Galow took over a program that had dwindled to just five remaining athletes. "We also have the largest roster in the entire country," she added. "Maintaining that many athletes with almost no turnover says a lot about the environment."

One of the foundational elements behind that stability was Galow's implementation of a Unity Council, replacing traditional team captains with a leadership group featuring representatives from every class year. "The goal was that small problems wouldn't have to come to me," Galow explained. "And honestly, I only had to deal with one issue all year and that was before the Unity Council was even in place."

Kenney, who served on the council, praised the system. "Being on the Unity Council worked so much better," she said. "Having someone from each class meant better communication and made everything easier."

As Kenney graduates, she will begin the next chapter of her life with the United States Coast Guard, having qualified for multiple career tracks through military testing. Though she is leaving collegiate competition, her bond with the program remains strong, especially with her younger sister Liberty Kenney now part of the Purple Knights roster. "I'm glad my sister is going to have four years here," Kenney said. "This place really feels like family."

Asked directly whether Galow deserved Coach of the Year honors, Kenney didn't hesitate. "She's taught me so much," Kenney said. "She does so much for us and for this program. She absolutely deserves it."

As the program approaches its 50 year anniversary, with plans for alum outreach and a commemorative leotard, the dual recognition of Galow and Kenney serves as both a celebration of the present and a testament to what the future holds for Purple Knights gymnastics. ■

University of Bridgeport Celebrates the Opening of **Cutting-Edge STEM Facilities**



University of Bridgeport (UB) marked a major milestone in its continued revitalization and investment in innovation with the grand opening of two transformative STEM facilities: the New England FIRST Robotics Hub and the Interdisciplinary Emerging Technologies (IET) Laboratory. On Friday, October 3, 2025, campus leaders welcomed state representatives, community partners, students, faculty, and guests to celebrate spaces that collectively position UB as a regional leader in experiential learning, workforce development, and industry collaboration.

The celebration began in the Steans Manufacturing Center in Mandeville Hall, where guests toured the newly established New England FIRST Robotics Hub. The event then moved to the School of Engineering for a ribbon-cutting ceremony unveiling the IET Lab, a state-of-the-art facility designed to support hands-on learning and advanced research. Together, these spaces reflect UB's deep commitment to preparing students for success in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics while strengthening pathways from K–12 education to higher education and into the workforce.

Developed in partnership with Access Educational Services and New England FIRST (NE FIRST), the robotics hub provides a dedicated space where local high school students work alongside UB undergraduate and graduate engineering students to design, build, and program industrial-sized robots for regional competitions. The hub is more than a workspace—it is a community-centered STEM ecosystem rooted in mentorship, collaboration, and early exposure to advanced engineering concepts.

"We're excited to have a home here," said Gwen Brantley, founder and executive director of ACCESS Educational Services. "UB is allowing us to grow." Brantley emphasized that UB faculty, staff, and students will play a key role in mentoring high school robotics teams, helping Bridgeport-area students envision futures in STEM fields.

President Danielle Wilken highlighted the broader impact of the partnership, noting, "Together, UB and NE FIRST are building an innovation, manufacturing, and robotics ecosystem—one that inspires today's youth to explore careers in STEM and strengthens Connecticut's future workforce." Her remarks underscored UB's role as both an educational institution and a community anchor invested in regional economic growth.

Following the robotics hub tour, guests gathered for the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the Interdisciplinary Emerging Technologies (IET) Lab, located in Area 150 of the TECH Building. This new innovation hub brings together advanced tools and research equipment—many integrated with artificial intelligence—into one open, collaborative space. The lab

supports teaching, research, design, and prototyping across a wide range of disciplines, including artificial intelligence, robotics, nanofabrication, 3D printing, smart manufacturing, Internet of Things (IoT), and cybersecurity.

"The IET Laboratory at University of Bridgeport represents our commitment to preparing students for the future of engineering and technology," said Dean Khaled Elleithy. "It provides hands-on, experiential learning that bridges theory and practice, equips students with industry-relevant skills, and strengthens UB's role as a driver of innovation and workforce development in our community."

The ceremony opened with a memorable moment as Pepper, a humanoid social robot and the IET Lab's resident ambassador, welcomed guests and introduced the space. The presence of Pepper symbolized the lab's forward-looking mission and its focus on human-centered technology.

Invited to speak by President Wilken, Michael Banton, executive director of New England FIRST, described the lab and UB partnership as "an exciting entryway for our students into higher education," reinforcing the idea that exposure to advanced facilities can inspire students to pursue college-level STEM education.

Elected officials also emphasized the lab's broader economic implications. Congressman Jim Himes highlighted the workforce demand associated with emerging technologies, stating, "It's remarkable how many jobs will be available to people who understand AI and its effects on robotics." He praised UB's leadership, adding, "The revitalization of UB has been a spectacular thing." Bridgeport Mayor Joe Ganim echoed this sentiment, expressing appreciation for the cutting-edge development taking place on campus and noting how the partnership with NE FIRST is creating new opportunities within the city.



Additional remarks were delivered by State Senator Herron Gaston, UB's Vice President of External Affairs and Chief of Staff; State Representative Antonio Felipe, UB's Manager of Community Partnerships; and State Representative Cristin McCarthy Vahey.

Together, the New England FIRST Robotics Hub and the Interdisciplinary Emerging Technologies Lab embody the University of Bridgeport's mission to deliver transformative education through innovation, collaboration, and community engagement. By investing in spaces that bring together students, educators, and industry partners, UB is creating pathways that prepare learners not only for today's careers, but for the rapidly changing demands of the future workforce here in Bridgeport and beyond. ■

University of Bridgeport Earns NCAA Presidents' Award for Academic Excellence

Presidents' Award

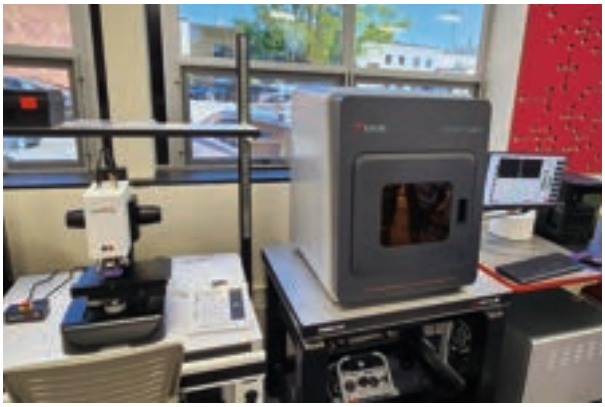
For the first time in the 15-year history of the honor, University of Bridgeport has been named one of just 43 Division II institutions to receive the NCAA Presidents' Award for Academic Excellence. The award is presented to schools that post a 90 percent or higher Academic Success Rate, the NCAA's measure of student-athlete academic achievement, accounting for eligibility, retention and graduation while also including transfer student-athletes.

"Our student athletes work hard, and our coaches work hard," says Vice President of Athletics, Recreation, and Student Life Jay Moran. "And our work pays off in the classroom and out of classroom."

"This has been a great year for our department, and it's a direct reflection of the culture our coaches and student-athletes have built," agreed Director of Athletics Anthony Vitti. "Athletics plays a vital role in creating the student experience at UB. It builds community, drives school pride, and teaches life lessons that extend far beyond competition."









A Tour of the **IET Lab**

Walking into the Interdisciplinary Emerging Technology (IET) Lab in the TECH Building at University of Bridgeport is like walking into the future. It is a comfortable space created to spark collaboration and hands-on learning. But it is also full of state-of-the-art tools and research equipment designed to fuel discovery in artificial intelligence, robotics, nanofabrication, 3D printing, smart manufacturing, IoT, and cybersecurity.

Laboratory Engineer Mohammed Aljamal emphasizes how critical access to modern equipment is for student success. "When students graduate and go to the market, they should not feel there is a gap between what they studied and what exists outside," Aljamal says. "By having laboratories with the latest machines—used today by companies like Apple and GE—students feel comfortable when they start working, because they already have the right skills."

The IET Lab represents a cornerstone of UB's strategy to foster interdisciplinary collaboration and experiential learning. Whether developing novel prototypes, conducting applied research, or gaining hands-on technical skills, users of the IET Lab have access to resources that accelerate learning and innovation.

"To do research, you need results, and getting those results is not easy without the right tools," Aljamal explains. "When we have these kinds of resources, we can enhance our research quality and even open new research areas based on the machines we have."

Students, staff, alums, and dignitaries all marvel at the groundbreaking technology of the new IET lab.

Beyond academics, the IET Lab is designed to serve as a bridge between the university and industry. "We open the door for companies by helping them understand what is possible and where we can truly support them," Aljamal said. "When we designed the IET Lab, we focused on three things: strong resources for students, expanding research areas, and opening the door to industry."

At its core, the lab reflects a recognition that technology is reshaping every aspect of modern life. "Technology is not just evolving," Aljamal noted. "It's transforming how every industry, every business, and every person lives." And this Lab is where the next generation of UB innovators will gain the skills and confidence necessary to thrive.

For tours, lab use, and collaboration inquiries, please contact iet@bridgeport.edu. ■

Engineering the Future

UB Team Wins Recognition in Statewide Quantum Challenge

The UB School of Engineering demonstrated its commitment to innovation and applied learning through its participation in the 2026 statewide Quantum UP! Challenge, a competitive program that invites students to explore how emerging quantum technologies can solve real-world business and societal problems. Held on April 8 at the UConn School of Business in Hartford, the multi-phase challenge brought together leading Connecticut institutions, including Yale, UConn, Fairfield University, and SCSU. The event was sponsored by industry leaders such as Google, GE Healthcare, and Travelers and emphasized not only technical innovation, but also the commercial and ethical dimensions of quantum computing.

UB's team earned special recognition for their project, "A Hybrid Quantum–AI Framework for Predictive Cyber Defense," which secured a split of the $5,000 first-place award in their track alongside the University of Southern Connecticut. The team was composed of Computer Science PhD students Shatha Alhazmi, Hepseeba K., and Abulaziz Alwehaibi, whose work highlighted how quantum-enhanced approaches can strengthen cybersecurity systems and was mentored by Dr. Khaled Eleithy, Dean of the College of Engineering, Business, and Education.

"Our students' success in the Quantum UP! Challenge reflects the strength of UB's commitment to cutting-edge, interdisciplinary education," said Dr. Elleithy. "By integrating quantum computing with artificial intelligence, our students are not only advancing technology but also addressing critical challenges in cybersecurity and society at large."



UB's Quantum UP! Challenge Team with Dean Khaled Elleithy

University of Bridgeport's **Renaissance**

AI: Co-create Inaugurates a New Era at the Schelfhaudt Gallery



The AI Cocreate show initiated a new era for the gallery





The Schelfhaudt Gallery in the Arnold Bernhard Center at the University of Bridgeport was relaunched Thursday, October 2, 2025. Located on the edge of the beautiful Seaside Park, the Bernhard Center features theaters, galleries, and performance spaces that showcase the visual and performing arts.

"University of Bridgeport is undergoing a renaissance," said President Danielle Wilken, EdD. "This opening fits in with everything that we're doing and all that we're doing to bring back the ABC building and creating community space and creating vibrant opportunities. It's especially important that the first exhibit is related to artificial intelligence when we have the first Artificial Intelligence master's program in Connecticut."

President Wilken, trustees Ann Clark and Barbara James, and the namesake for the gallery, Peter Schelfhaudt, took part in the official ribbon cutting at 5:00 p.m. and everyone enjoyed an evening of art, conversation, and refreshments as they celebrated the return of one of the university's most cherished cultural spaces.

Curated and presented by Schelfhaudt himself, University of Bridgeport's first exhibition since 2019, *AI: Co-create*, seeks to explore the space where the artist and artificial intelligence work with—or even push—each other to collectively create better art than either could do alone.

"Artificial intelligence is overhyped in many ways, and the art world has been especially critical of AI," said Schelfhaudt. *"AI Co-Create* seeks to explore the space where the artist and AI work with--or even push--each other to collectively create *better* art than either could do alone."

"It was the first show that I saw that actually encouraged people to use AI in the ideation process," agreed sculptor Zvi Goldman of Trumbull. "I use AI to check my ideas and make sure that they are original and worthwhile doing."

Paintings, sculptures, poems, and video by artists like Yuliya Lanina, Horst Weber, Alison Pasquini, and Claudia Conroy were complemented by the illumination of the famous dome on the exterior of the building, featuring the artwork of Bridgeport resident Phillip Baldwin. "My art brings awareness of how a culture interprets mental illness, and how its funneled through AI," said Claudia Conroy, whose ten pieces in the show blur the line between artifice and reality.

Top: Oressa by Yuliya Lanina. Bottom: Peter Schelfhaudt cuts the ribbon on the Schelfhaudt Gallery with Pres Wilken, Barbara James, and Ann Clark

Many of the artists used AI in different ways and for different processes. Alison Pasquini's floral paintings are inspired by Dutch still lifes and contemporize the historical genre using new technology. After many years of painting in oil and acrylic, she began by digitally painting, altering those paintings with AI, printing them, and then continuing by hand with paint. "It's a mixture of hand and technology where you have to look closely to see what parts are hand detailed, and what parts were made on the computer," said Pasquini. "I really like the idea of hybridity, which is reflected in the paintings. You're not really sure if the plants are growing, or if they're decaying."

Nearly 100 people gathered on the Bernhard Center's terrace and in the gallery to enjoy the art, cocktails, and conversation. Some of the student volunteers and attendees shared their excitement and curiosity. "I've loved art all my life," said health science major Genevieve Fayo. "Having a gallery that we can just visit on campus is amazing."



Peter Schelfhaudt speaks with patrons about the beauty and joy of art

"The art is beautiful," agreed nursing major and wrestler Lindsey Rwolt. "I took art in high school and the fact that artificial intelligence can help make these things is just amazing."

Other guests expressed their admiration for the exhibit and the revitalized Bernhard Center. "It's a beautiful gallery," said Broadway producer Jana Shea. "I enjoyed the poems above some of the paintings that talked about how we let our phones control us and we can't detach anymore and live in the real world."

"We have many provocative pieces that make us ask much-needed questions," said UB Provost Kierstyn Hunter. "I also value being able to see members of our UB community display their interest in AI and skills and artistic talents."

One of those members is Dean of the College of Science and Society, Amy Nawrocki, whose AI-assisted art and original poetry feature in the exhibit. "The ribbon cutting and opening reception for *AI Co-Create* signals not only the relaunch of the gallery and Arnold Bernhard Center arts assets, but also the coming together of art, innovation, and community," said Nawrocki. "Seeing students, staff, faculty, and community artists engage in conversation, interact with exhibits, mingle and celebrate was inspiring."

The revitalization of the Schelfhaudt Gallery at University of Bridgeport has brought back an incredible resource for artists, community members, and students. And that gallery is just one of the many innovations in technology, business, and the arts taking place in the renaissance at UB.

"Bridgeport is a city with a vibrant art community, and we are glad to provide opportunities to showcase local artists as well as rising national and international creators," says Peter Schelfhaudt. "University of Bridgeport is reinforcing its decades-long support of the arts in this unique cultural center with gallery, theatres, and event halls under one roof on the shores of Long Island Sound." ■

Bridging Communities Through Art

In November, Suzanne Kachmar of City Lights Gallery curated Connections, the second exhibition of the season at the Schelfhaudt Gallery. Co-produced by City Lights, the Bridgeport Art Trail, and the Westport Artists Collective, the show also marked the Schelfhaudt Gallery's first appearance as a stop on the Bridgeport Art Trail.

Connections brought together artists from Bridgeport, Westport, and the surrounding region, underscoring the collaborative nature of the local arts community. The exhibition featured large-scale works including fiber art by Carlos Biernnay, sculptures by Iyaba Ibo Mandingo and Carlos Davila, drawings by Rick Shaefer, and photography curated by Thomas Mezzanotte and Yolanda Vasquez-Petrocelli.

"There's no real boundary between the towns in southwest Connecticut," said Suzanne Kachmar, the director of City Lights Gallery and the Bridgeport Art Trail. "We all know each other, and we work together frequently. We were honored and thrilled to come together in this amazing facility at University of Bridgeport."

In January, the gallery's exhibit "Winter in America," featured a variety of local, national, and international artists, including Sandra Cavanagh, Carin Kulb Dangot, Laura Heijn, and Monica Tiulescu. For Schelfhaudt, curator of the exhibit, winter is a time for reflection, assessment, recalibration, preparation, and transition. "We've had an overwhelming response from artists expressing a wide variety of perspectives from whimsical to worried," he said. "But it's not all Norman Rockwell."

In March, "Immigrant Song" was a hymn to those who left their homelands and gave up cultural and family ties to become strangers in a strange land, a daunting prospect not for the weak-hearted. "As a first-generation immigrant from Costa Rica, this theme deeply resonates with both my personal experience and my artwork," said participating artist Pamela Araya. "It means a great deal to see spaces created where these stories and experiences can be shared."

The local, national, and international artists that are exhibiting their work at the reborn Schelfhaudt Gallery have already made an impact. As University of Bridgeport reaches its Centennial, it is already looking forward and embracing the future of artistic expression. ■



University of Bridgeport Celebrates the Class of 2026

University of Bridgeport proudly celebrated the achievements of the Class of 2026 during its commencement ceremonies on Saturday, May 2, 2026, marking a major milestone for more than 1,400 graduates across undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs. The ceremonies were held at the Hartford HealthCare Amphitheater in Bridgeport, Connecticut, bringing together graduates, families, faculty, trustees, and University leadership for a day of recognition and reflection.

Commencement featured two separate ceremonies, with the undergraduates walking to the stage at 10:00 a.m., followed by the graduate and doctoral ceremony at 3:00 p.m. President Danielle Wilken presided over both ceremonies and welcomed Carl Wilkens, humanitarian, author, and internationally recognized advocate for peace and moral courage, as the keynote speaker for the Class of 2026. Wilkens delivered the commencement address at both ceremonies and received an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters in recognition of his lifelong commitment to ethical leadership and humanitarian service.

The ceremonies also highlighted the achievements and perspectives of two student speakers chosen to represent the graduating class. Ananda L. Lindsey, representing the undergraduate class, graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Health Sciences and a minor in Pre Medicine. At the graduate ceremony, Sebastian Alix Trabucco, who earned a Master of Business Administration with concentrations in Management and Marketing, represented the graduate class. A first generation graduate and academic achievement award recipient, Alix Trabucco balanced full time professional work with his studies and reflected on resilience, growth, and opportunity in his remarks.

"Education teaches us how to ask better questions," he said. "It's how we replace doubt with direction and potential into progress. The world is about to see what happens when Bridgeport believers go out and build the future."



UBelong Here

Two Alumni Shaping the City's Future

When Constance Vickers first stepped onto the University of Bridgeport campus in 2007, she was a young woman from a rural Pennsylvania town, captivated by the spectacular view of white sailboats on Long Island Sound. "I will never forget standing outside Marina," she recalls. "It was such a cold day, but so clear and beautiful. Coming from a place where I had to drive five hours to see the shore, having that right in front of me was incredible."

For Danielle Wedderburn, the story began differently. Growing up in Bridgeport, she dreamed of leaving. "I wanted to get out of Bridgeport so bad," she admits with a laugh. "New York was the goal." But when financial aid and convenience tipped the scales, UB became her choice. "UB offered the best package. At the time, I didn't realize they didn't have enough Bridgeport students. That blew me away."

Today, both women hold influential roles in Bridgeport's government—Danielle as Director of Communications and Constance as Deputy Chief Administrative Officer. Their paths to City Hall couldn't have been more different, yet both credit UB for shaping their careers and their love for the city they now serve.

Together, Constance and Danielle help make the City of Bridgeport run smoothly

Constance's decision to attend UB was rooted in legacy. "My adopted father graduated from UB in the class of '72," she says. "He passed away when I was five, but he always spoke highly of the university." Seeking a smaller campus experience, she chose UB over larger schools like Penn State University or Temple University. "I never looked back," she says. "Half my life has been spent in Bridgeport now."

For Constance, the diversity was transformative. "Coming from a town where everyone looked the same, UB was eye-opening," she says. "I met people from dozens of countries and different states. That experience prepared me for the real world."

What surprised Danielle most was UB's sense of community. "The small classroom sizes were everything," she says. "My professors knew me, knew my name, knew the type of work I could produce. I didn't feel like just a number." She smiles, recalling the continuity of having multiple classes with the same professors. "They watched me grow, which as a young adult, you're not always aware of."

Danielle entered UB as a biology major but soon pivoted to English. "My first English class changed everything," she says. "I realized I loved writing." That passion led her to creative writing and later graduate school, where she combined writing and photography.

After graduating, Danielle earned her Masters of Arts in Broadcast Journalism nearby, and then started in the role of Press Secretary for the City of Bridgeport before moving up to Director of Communications. "It was my foot in the door," she says. "Now, I manage messaging for the entire city."

> "I thought the city had nothing to offer. Now, I love it here. Bridgeport is growing like no other. It's big enough to feel like a big stage, but small enough that you can make a difference."

Her UB education provided the foundation. "It taught me how to write well and think critically," she says. "Today, my writing is less creative and more news-driven, but those fundamentals help me craft messages that resonate. I wanted to tell stories and I'm telling the stories of what's happening in Bridgeport, stories about our community, our residents."

Constance's double major in Psychology and International Political Economy and Diplomacy might seem tangential to municipal government, but she uses those skills daily. "Psychology helps me communicate and stay calm," she says. "Global development taught me diplomacy." She began working for the city as Director of Legislative Affairs, liaising with state officials and other municipalities. She later became Deputy Chief of Staff and now serves in the Chief Administrative Office, overseeing health, housing, economic development, and the city budget process. "No two weeks are the same," she laughs. Initially, she envisioned a career in international diplomacy. "I thought I'd work for the UN or an embassy," she says. "But as I got involved in Bridgeport politics, I realized I could make a difference here."

University of Bridgeport alums have always been involved in local, state, and even national politics. Many have gone on to work for the City of Bridgeport, including several mayors. In that way, the university has helped shape the future of the city it calls home, and Danielle and Constance are the latest generation of alums to take on that challenge.

Danielle reflects on her teenage perception of Bridgeport. "I thought the city had nothing to offer," she says. "Now, I love it here. Bridgeport is growing like no other. It's big enough to feel like a big stage, but small enough that you can make a difference." Constance agrees. "Bridgeport is welcoming," she says. "It's not a city that will swallow you like New York. It gives you space to create and contribute."

Both women are also passionate about changing the narrative about the city itself. "We want residents to feel proud," Danielle says. "Bridgeport has amazing things to offer—culture, community, opportunity." Moreover, they get to do it together as friends, colleagues, and UB alums. "Danielle and I spent two hours this morning in a marketing meeting," Constance says. "We're figuring out how to showcase Bridgeport—not just to outsiders, but to residents who need to see the city's potential."

Their advice to current UB students is clear: take risks and get involved. "Every good thing that's happened to me is because I stepped outside my comfort zone," Constance says. "College is the time to figure out who you are." Danielle echoes that sentiment. "Get involved as much as you can," she says. "Try new things. I wish I had joined more clubs or a sorority. Those experiences build community."

These two remarkable women from vastly different backgrounds found their paths converging at UB and later at City Hall. Their stories reflect not just personal growth but the evolving relationship between the university and the city.

"Bridgeport has a lot to offer," Danielle says. "And UB gave us the tools to see that—and to help others see it too." ■



Changing the Narrative

The Leadership Journey of Dr. Damon Lewis

By Abigail Levandoski

Damon Lewis celebrates winning Middle School Principal of the Year

On the first Wednesday of every month, the front doors of Ponus Ridge STEAM Academy swing open. Parents, caregivers, and community members come in, not for a presentation or a planned tour, but to see the school as it really is. They walk the halls during class, look into classrooms, and listen to students learning.

Even with over 650 students in the building, the hallways stay calm and focused on learning. "You can stand at one end of the hallway and look all the way down, and see no one," says Dr. Damon Lewis, principal of Ponus Ridge.

Fourteen years ago, this scene would have been hard to imagine. Now, it's a clear sign of a school and a leader who have worked hard to change the story.

Long before national recognition and transformed hallways, Dr. Lewis was a college student at University of Connecticut with a very different plan. He entered undergraduate studies intending to pursue business, imagining a future that included a corner office and financial success.

Then the letters from his mother began to arrive.

While he was away at school, his mother started sending him newspaper clippings from the *Connecticut Post*. The stories were about young people from their Bridgeport neighborhood who were making poor choices. Some were people he knew, even friends, whose lives had taken a wrong turn.

> We're preparing kids for jobs that don't exist yet.

"I remember sitting in my dorm room and calling my mother," recounted Lewis. "I called her and said, 'I'm going to change my major.'"

This wasn't a slow, agonizing decision. It was sudden and deeply personal. "How selfish was it of me to chase that million-dollar dream," he remembers thinking, "When there are people who could benefit from a young Black man in education, giving back to his community." That day, he decided to switch his major to English and Sociology. "I gave up a million dollars before I ever even had it in my hand," he says, "And I never looked back."

After graduating from UConn, Lewis returned home to Bridgeport to begin his journey into teaching. While earning his master's degree at University of Bridgeport, he went back to where it all started — interning at Harding High School, which he had attended as a teen.

While completing UB's paid-internship program, he worked at Harding during the day and took Education courses at night, fully immersed in the daily realities of being a full-time working adult and student. This experience shaped him in ways that no textbook ever could. It was during his internship that a student pulled him aside and put words to what Lewis was feeling that day in his dorm room. "They told me I was a father figure," he says. "That I was firm but fair. I had expectations and that I taught them self-respect."

That moment made everything clear. "I wouldn't have that experience in a corner office," he says. "Not even close." Lewis knew then he had made the right choice.

Lewis started at Ponus Ridge Middle School in Norwalk, CT in 2010 as an assistant principal. When he became principal, he took his time and didn't make big changes right away. He focused on listening first. "That's why we have two ears, two eyes, and one mouth."

He met with families and staff. He observed classrooms, paying attention to culture and climate (understanding that they were not the same thing). Slowly and intentionally, he began to reshape both. Under Lewis's leadership, Ponus Ridge became Ponus Ridge STEAM Academy, a shift that went far beyond just a name change. Today at Ponus Ridge, coding is taught to every sixth grader. Students explore robotics, immersive media, music technology, and advanced art. More than 20 after-school clubs keep the building buzzing long after dismissal.

"We're preparing kids for jobs that don't exist yet," says Lewis. "They don't know they'll need these skills. But they will."

Families started to notice. Enrollment grew quickly. Now, students from 10 out of 11 Norwalk elementary schools choose Ponus Ridge. Sixth and seventh grades are full. Fourteen years ago, it was the other way around. "The school has really been transformed."

For Lewis, the real proof came when state assessments showed strong performance across the board. More importantly, the School Accountability Index revealed no achievement gaps between multilingual learners, special education students, and their peers. "That's when I knew," Lewis says. "Maybe we've got something here."

Chronic absenteeism fell sharply from almost 30 percent to less than eight percent. This change didn't happen by chance. It took emails and letters home, visits to families, and honest talks about why being at school matters. "School is too important," said Lewis. "Way too important."

At first, Lewis thought being a leader meant doing everything himself. Over time, his thinking changed. "You can't do it all," he said. "You'll never sleep." Inspired by his studies and experience, Lewis embraced distributive leadership, trusting the team he built and focusing on the bigger picture. "When you hire the right people, and you trust them, things take off," Lewis continued.

Lewis earned three degrees from University of Bridgeport: a master's in education, a Sixth-Year Certificate, and a doctorate in Educational Leadership. His preparation was practical, rigorous, and deeply connected to the realities of schools. Lewis still draws on his UB education every day. "Sixty percent of my education happened right there on Park Avenue," he says. "I owe a lot to UB."

In early 2025, Lewis was named Connecticut's Middle School Principal of the Year and National Middle School Principal of the Year from the National Association of Secondary School Principals. Still, he deflects that spotlight. "I won the award. But it's always a 'we' award."

On Walk-Through Wednesdays, Dr. Lewis greets families at the door and invites them to see what Ponus Ridge is like now. "No script," he says. "Just come in." This open invitation comes from years of hard work and confidence. The hallways are quiet, the students are engaged, and the school's reputation has changed.

Lewis keeps that tradition alive by welcoming UB interns to Ponus Ridge STEAM Academy. He gives future teachers the same real-world experience that shaped his own career. For him, mentoring new educators is an important responsibility.

UB is proud to honor Dr. Damon Lewis and celebrate his inspiring journey in educational leadership. ■

UB Gala and Golf **Make Memories for All**



A relaxing day on the links

Alum Michael Schneider '84 toasts another successful Homecoming





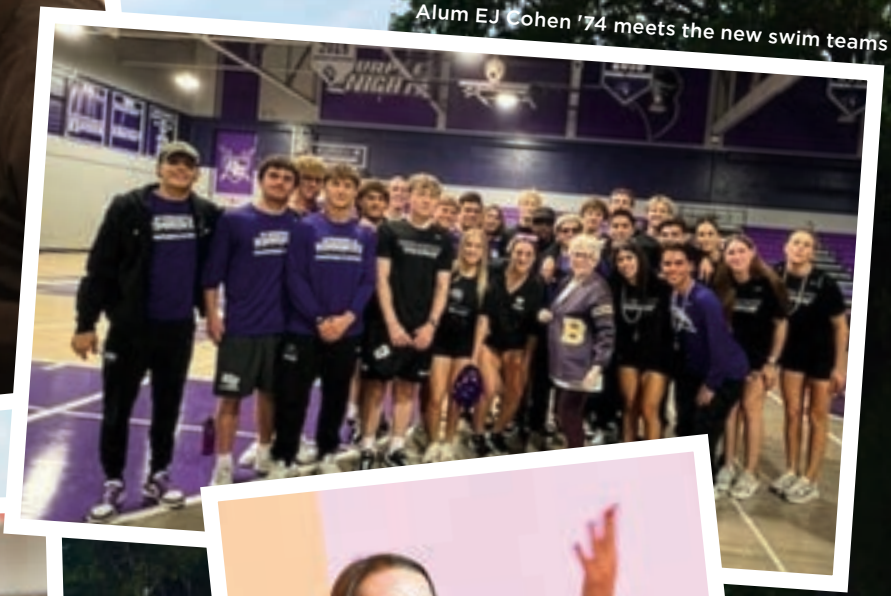
President Danielle Wilken and VP Elena Cahill scouting the course



UB brings old and new friends together



Goodwin President Mark Scheinberg and bookstore manager Richard Hebert share a moment



Alum EJ Cohen '74 meets the new swim teams



President Danielle Wilken and Vice President Jay Moran



Elise Fles receives the award for faculty and staff



Celebrate a century of innovation, resilience, and community at the University of Bridgeport by watching our Centennial Film Series. These inspiring stories capture the people, moments, and milestones that have shaped UB's legacy—and continue to define its future. Follow this link to relive the journey, honor the impact, and share in the pride of 100 years of excellence.

And for those of you who want to do more than watch, we are asking for $75,000 to name this series of documentary films, with your named contribution acknowledged in all print and online materials.

Alumni Notes

Elena Cahill ('88, '91) was awarded the Distinguished Woman in Higher Education Award from the Connecticut ACE Women's Network (CTAWN) in March 2026.

Kenneth A. Graham, Esq. ('71), retired state Assistant Attorney General, has been reappointed by the Chief Justice of the Connecticut Supreme Court to his eighth term of office as state Superior Court Trial Referee.

Adejoke C. Ifafesobi ('23) gave birth to baby girl named Ademide Flourish Awe-Ifafesobi on January 21st, 2026.

Double-graduate **Alice Lennon** ('76, '87) earned the St. Vincent's Medical Center's Nursing Excellence Award in 2024. She says, "I look forward to continued collaboration with UB's nursing program and supporting excellence in nursing practice!"



Denzel Luna ('25) has launched a fintech app, Nexa Tax, which is a tool that guides student-athletes on tracking NIL income, organizing receipts, and preparing for U.S. tax filings. Denzel is in active conversations with five-plus NCAA Division I programs for onboarding, and athletes on Nexa include representation from UCLA Women's Basketball, UConn Football, and Wake Forest Football. "Eighteen-year-olds making six-figure incomes is a surreal thing," shared Denzel. "I wanted to build a tangible tool to help these students."

Left to right: Denzel Luna; Dr. Nadine Spring

Clovia McIntosh ('11, '23), was featured in the March 6, 2026 Hartford *Courant* because her baby bathtub, Tubee, is now hitting the market as "The bathtub that grows with your baby."

Baltimore Sun columnist and UB journalism major **Dan Rodricks** ('76), recently stepped down from his role after 50 years and 6500 bylines. But he will keep writing, since he is now a columnist at the *Baltimore Brew* and *Baltimore Fishbowl.* His play, *Wicked Good: A South Shore Anthology* is premiering on Saturday, April 11, at the Judith A. Riordan Performing Arts Center at East Bridgewater Junior-Senior High School to benefit a scholarship fund for high school students in his Massachusetts hometown.



Biology major and public health expert, **Dr. Nadine Spring** ('06), has published a new book, *Mastering Clinical Research: Pathway to a Six-Figure Career.* She writes that, "As a proud UB alum, my work reflects the University's mission of fostering academic excellence, innovation, and service to humanity."

Juliet Taylor ('21), a graduate of the masters' in Counseling program, will be inducted into the Connecticut Veterans Hall of Fame as a member of the class of 2025, ■

Purple Gold

We are saddened to announce that UB has lost a dedicated alumnus, supporter, and Alumni Board member. Lawrence (Larry) Santora '68, '69, '81 passed away Sunday, December 7, 2025, at the age of 80. Larry received three degrees from the University; an AA from the Junior college in 1968, a BS from the College of Business Administration in 1969, and an MS in Art Education from the College of Arts and Humanities in 1981. In fact, for Larry, UB was a family affair. His brother, Frank, received a BS in Industrial Engineering and an MBA from UB, and his great-niece, Abbey (Frank's granddaughter), graduated with a Masters in Elementary Education from UB as well. Both Larry and Frank were also honored as Golden Knights.

Larry taught art and photography in schools in Fairfield County, CT, and Westchester County, NY, and was an accomplished marketing communications and graphics designer and illustrator. Following in family tradition, Larry was a volunteer police officer with the Greenwich Specials in the late 1960s into the early 1970s, and in the 1990s he served as a volunteer Auxiliary Connecticut State Trooper.

Larry was a kind, honest, and decent man, husband, father, and UB alum. He will be deeply missed.



Remembrances

Joyce H. Everson Nadeau ('75) of New London, Connecticut passed away on September 14, 2025. She graduated with a B.S. in Political Science in May 1975.

Susan Ferency passed away in May 2026. After a 27 year career at St. Vincent's Medical Center in Bridgeport, she joined the UB faculty full-time in August 2015. She taught courses in both Health Sciences and Medical Laboratory Sciences and served as the Faculty Council president and representative to the Board of Trustees. She was an avid photographer and good friend, and will be missed by everyone at UB.

Hans van der Giessen ('68), passed away in April 2026. Following his graduation from UB, Hans earned his Ph.D. in Political Science from NYU and went on to dedicate a life of service to the University of Bridgeport. He began his career in 1973 as a part-time lecturer in political science and over almost four decades held numerous roles of increasing responsibility, including Lecturer, Instructor, Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, Dean, and Provost.

Carol J. Kontos-Cohen ('71) passed away in September 2025 after serving many years as Director of Human Resources at Georgian Court University.

Raymond G. McGuire, Jr. ('58), a graduate of the School of Business (B.S.), passed away on January 21, 2026.

Wayne Miller ('65) of Connecticut passed away on August 21, 2020.

Robert F. Riccio ('61) passed away in 2025.

Arthur Sullivan ('63) passed away in October 2018.

Kenneth Weiss ('65) was an American entrepreneur, the founder and CEO of Universal Secure Registry, and inventor of the SecurID Card. He passed away on February 8, 2025.

Anthony G. Zanavich ('73) of Waterbury, CT passed away on July 14, 2020. He received his masters in Education from UB and worked as a teacher for the City of Waterbury Department of Education for over 25 years until his retirement.

UB's Centennial Is Almost Here

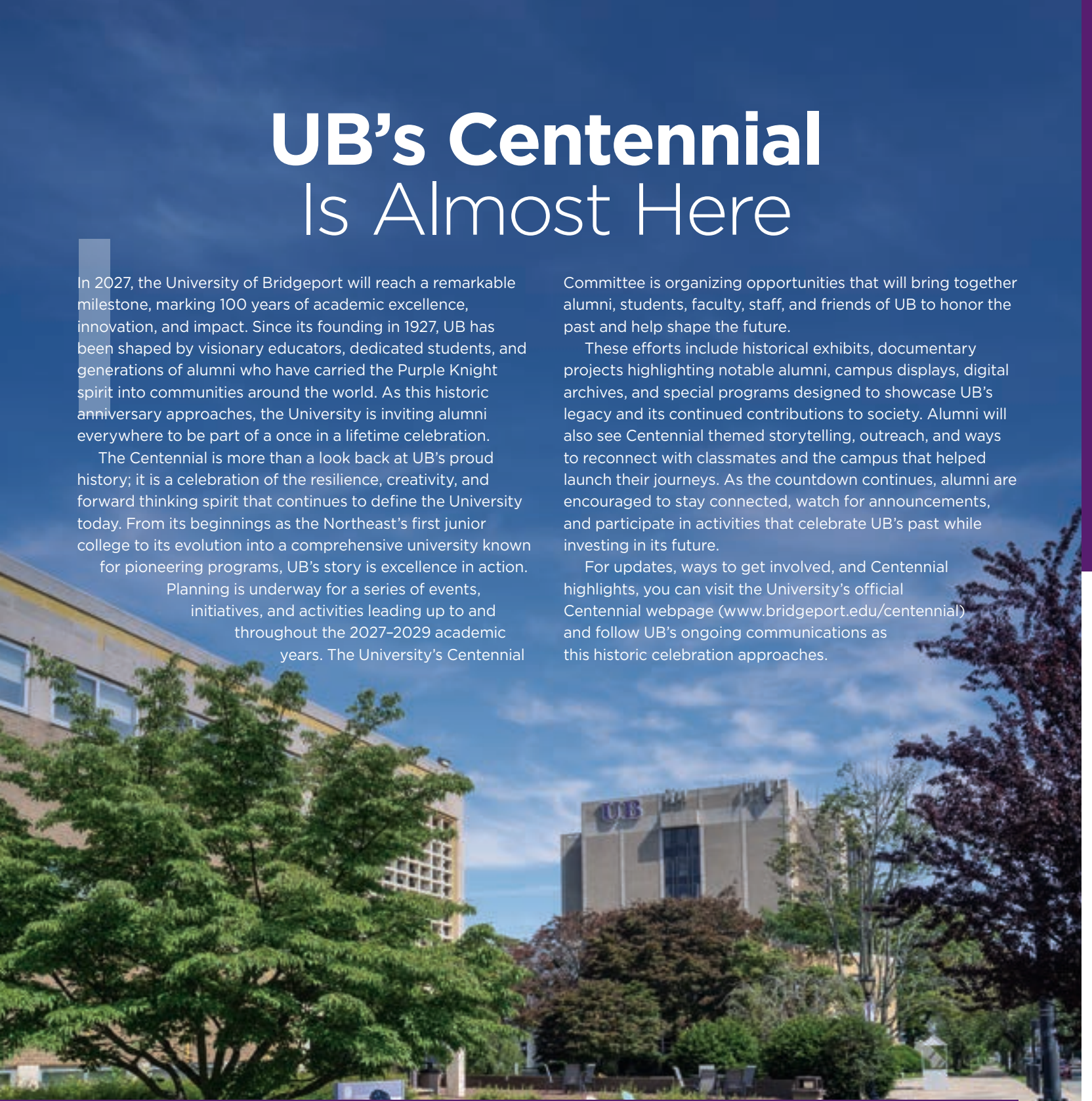
In 2027, the University of Bridgeport will reach a remarkable milestone, marking 100 years of academic excellence, innovation, and impact. Since its founding in 1927, UB has been shaped by visionary educators, dedicated students, and generations of alumni who have carried the Purple Knight spirit into communities around the world. As this historic anniversary approaches, the University is inviting alumni everywhere to be part of a once in a lifetime celebration.

The Centennial is more than a look back at UB's proud history; it is a celebration of the resilience, creativity, and forward thinking spirit that continues to define the University today. From its beginnings as the Northeast's first junior college to its evolution into a comprehensive university known for pioneering programs, UB's story is excellence in action.

Planning is underway for a series of events, initiatives, and activities leading up to and throughout the 2027–2029 academic years. The University's Centennial Committee is organizing opportunities that will bring together alumni, students, faculty, staff, and friends of UB to honor the past and help shape the future.

These efforts include historical exhibits, documentary projects highlighting notable alumni, campus displays, digital archives, and special programs designed to showcase UB's legacy and its continued contributions to society. Alumni will also see Centennial themed storytelling, outreach, and ways to reconnect with classmates and the campus that helped launch their journeys. As the countdown continues, alumni are encouraged to stay connected, watch for announcements, and participate in activities that celebrate UB's past while investing in its future.

For updates, ways to get involved, and Centennial highlights, you can visit the University's official Centennial webpage (www.bridgeport.edu/centennial) and follow UB's ongoing communications as this historic celebration approaches.



As we gear up for our Centennial Celebration next year, we're thrilled to share some great news. Thanks to the leadership of alumni like you, including a matching challenge from Gordon Stier '77, the Centennial Campaign has already hit its first goal, raising $10,000 and building real momentum. Now the excitement continues: Trustee and alum Art Landi '74 has stepped forward with a new $5,000 matching gift, doubling every dollar given today. Your participation—through a gift or by spreading the word—will help fuel an unforgettable year of celebration, reflection, and pride, while laying a strong foundation for the next hundred years of our community.



UB **Abroad!**

In April, the PAI Global Outreach Team of ten PAI students, Professor Mirofora Paridis, and adjunct instructor Dr. Monica Lockwood, spent a week in Peru in service to individuals in two mountain communities; low-income workers in the municipality of Cusco; and a school for students with special needs. Among their activities, the team led workshops in preventive healthcare, conducted education sessions in nutrition, and distributed personal care kits. They also made time to explore the breathtaking surroundings of Machu Picchu, Llaquepata, and Cusco.



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STOCKS AND BONDS
A donation of stock by an electronic stock transfer or by gifting the stock certificate form to UB. Contact the Office of Annual Giving for instructions at 203.576.2433.

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If you own property that is not subject to a mortgage and has appreciated in value, a gift of real estate to the University may be an attractive option.

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You may also make a deferred gift by naming the University in your Will. If you plan to do this, please notify us of your intentions.

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UNIVERSITY OF BRIDGEPORT

2025-2026 Annual Report

In fiscal year 2026, our financial giving has **increased by over 220%**. This is a testament to your generosity and dedication to the future of our great university.

The number of dedicated donors has **increased by 29%**, and our alumni donors in particular have **increased 31%**. You are making this university better every day, and we thank you for your support.



By the Numbers:

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Alumni Giving

$6,041,314
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$169,663
Annual Giving

530
Total Donors

310 Alumni donors have increased 31% from 2025

Class of 1974 was the top donating class of the fiscal year

2025–26 Snapshot:

1,500 Degrees Conferred

3,589 Total Enrollment

51% Students of Color

28% First-Generation Students

959 New Students

11:1 Student to Faculty ratio

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RNB Enterprises
Rosas Florist LLC
Securitas Inc.
SMG Corporation
Stop & Shop Foundation
TSKP Studio
Vazzano Bros Properties LLC
Whalley Computers



University of Bridgeport

Golf Tournament

September 28, 2026

10 a.m.

Racebrook Country Club
246 Derby Ave
Orange, CT 06477





Join us at the University of Bridgeport Golf Tournament, where we will be playing at Racebrook Country Club in Orange, CT. Enjoy a round of golf, along with breakfast, lunch, and a cocktail hour to follow, along with raffles, tournament contests, and prizes!

Assemble your foursome and sign up now to come out and be part of an exciting day and to support UB!

Starting at $300 a ticket