

LUMINA FOUNDATION

# FOCUS™

Fall 2024

## Building a better bachelor's

Four-year colleges are finding  
new ways to help students succeed





PAGE  
**2**



Georgia college  
transforms itself to  
fit today's students

PAGE  
**12**



Carolina university  
ranks high with  
military families

PAGE  
**22**



Arizona school  
batters the barriers  
to student success

**On the cover:** Heather Scott (center), is an associate professor of interdisciplinary studies and the assistant dean for inclusive leadership at Agnes Scott College, an all-women's college in Decatur, Georgia. Here she talks with students Dax (left) and Cass Vandevoorde, sisters who attend the 135-year-old college. Dax, a 21-year-old senior, is focused on a career in the sciences, but she loves the college's interdisciplinary approach—one that combines the traditional liberal arts with foreign travel, real-world business experience, and leadership training.



**Editor's note:** The stories in this issue of Focus were reported and written by Susan Headden, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and communications professional with many years of experience covering education issues. Headden, a former staff writer at The Indianapolis Star, also worked for nearly 16 years at U.S. News & World Report, ultimately serving as a managing editor. She later held senior positions at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. She now works as an independent communications consultant based in Washington, D.C.

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

**F**our-year colleges are taking a lot of flak these days. In poll after poll, Americans are questioning the value of the bachelor's degree, with growing numbers saying the credential fails to provide sufficient return on investment. The findings come as tuition and student debt continue to climb, and as certificate programs and other alternatives emerge as gateways to well-paying jobs. With public confidence in college eroding, it's understandable that more students choose these alternative paths.

These developments add to the demographic trends that have steadily shrunk the pool of college-age individuals. With enrollment down and tuition revenue declining, many colleges and universities have been forced to cut programs, eliminate majors, and lay off staff. Fourteen nonprofit colleges shut their doors in 2023, and many others are fighting for survival.

Yet the data continue to point overwhelmingly in favor of the bachelor's degree. College graduates can expect to earn substantially more income than those who lack a degree—65 percent more, on average, over a lifetime, economists say. And most importantly, the vast majority of jobs in coming years will require a credential beyond the high school diploma. By 2031, according to Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, 42 percent of jobs will require *at least* a bachelor's degree.

To meet those workforce demands in ways that better serve today's students, forward-thinking colleges and universities are changing how they do business. These schools recognize that the status quo is not enough; they need to change what they do to meet the demands of today's students. They're not abandoning their commitment to liberal education; they are *adding* a commitment to give that education practical purpose. These committed colleges are offering students better advising, clearer pathways, lower costs, flexible delivery systems, and tighter connections between classroom and careers. And they are doing all of this in ways that boost success among populations of students who have been poorly served by bachelor's-granting institutions.

These innovative institutions have an important story to tell, a story of transformation driven by one overarching goal: student success. This issue of Focus magazine aims to tell that story—or more accurately, three specific versions of it.

In this Focus, you'll visit three very different colleges that have been in the vanguard of the effort to transform the four-year experience to benefit today's students.

◆ In Decatur, Georgia, you'll meet Dax Vandevoorde, 21, a self-described "math nerd" who sought a college where she could thrive in STEM courses while getting a solid grounding in the liberal arts. She found such a place in tiny Agnes Scott College, a private all-women's institution that blends traditional academics with hands-on learning, career preparation, and leadership development. The college's innovative global curriculum and expansive undergraduate research opportunities have been an inspiration for students like Faith Lockhart, 23, who is on her way to a master's program in neuroscience, and for Madison Jennings, 22, a political science and religion major who has been named a 2024 Rhodes Scholar.

◆ In North Carolina, you'll visit Fayetteville State University, an HBCU near Fort Liberty, the nation's largest Army base. Fayetteville State goes the extra mile to attract and retain military veterans and their families, who represent 30 percent of the student body.

One such student is Jeremy Ricketts, a 45-year-old Army veteran who served multiple tours of combat duty, including deployments in Kosovo, Iraq, and Kuwait. Ricketts felt out of place as an older student at a previous college, but he's found genuine community and tailored supports at Fayetteville State. The university's robust online offerings also make college possible for students such as Veronica Chance, 46, who is juggling her studies with a full-time job and caring for a special-needs son. And its exceptionally low tuition is a dealmaker for many students, including Casey Gregg, 39, who is getting a fresh start at Fayetteville State after 20 years of incarceration.

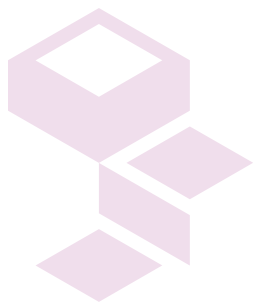
◆ Finally, you'll hear from students at Northern Arizona University, a large public institution in Flagstaff. NAU is attracting record enrollments with new policies that improve access and affordability—including strong partnerships with community colleges and free tuition for Native Americans. The university's Jacks on Track program breaks down the barriers to re-enrollment for students like Cassandra Brown, 33, who stopped out years ago to raise a family, and Jason Watchman, 39, a biology major and member of the Navajo Tribe whose earlier studies were interrupted by an Army stint, the birth of a son, and COVID-19.

In addition to the stories and photos in this printed version of Focus, you'll find more on our website, [www.luminafoundation.org](http://www.luminafoundation.org). There, Focus offers several extra features, including compelling videos of students and links to related content.

All of the students featured—and thousands of others at forward-looking colleges and universities across the country—are benefiting from higher education's new commitment to enhance the four-year experience. Administrators and faculty are employing strategies proven to boost student success: designing well-defined pathways to quality degrees; helping students find—and stay on—the paths best suited to their needs; and ensuring high-quality teaching and learning.

They do all of this to ensure that their students—whatever their backgrounds, whatever their ages—complete their education and launch as critical thinkers on a sure path to rewarding careers.

If that's not a solid return on investment, I'm not sure what qualifies.



**"To better serve today's students, forward-thinking colleges and universities are changing how they do business."**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. P. Merisotis".

Jamie P. Merisotis  
President and CEO  
Lumina Foundation

## AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE

### Georgia women's college sheds the white gloves, grabs diversity with both hands

DECATUR, Ga.—At her top-rated New Jersey high school, Dax Vandevoorde was a stand-out math student and self-described nerd who became president of the school's prestigious robotics team her senior year. There she joined fellow students in designing and building a 120-pound robot impressive enough to be entered in a global competition. There was just one problem: All but three members of her 50-person team were men.

When it came to selecting a college, Vandevoorde looked at several highly regarded schools. But she wanted a place where women in STEM weren't anomalies.







**Leila Reed (right), a senior psychology major, works on an art project with Nell Ruby, professor of visual practice. In keeping with Agnes Scott's wide-ranging approach, Reed's foreign travel experience—mandatory for all students in their second semester as freshmen—involved neither art nor psychology. Her visit to Manchester, England, focused on the scientific process and the Industrial Revolution.**



"I was so tired of being the *female* engineer," she said. "I wanted to go someplace where the top student in the class is female, where the class clown is female, where the person leading *everything* is female. That way everyone focuses on your accomplishments and your passion and your drive, and not on the fact that you are a woman."

Vandevoorde, 21, found such a place at Agnes Scott College, a private 1,016-student all-women's institution with an innovative, globally focused curriculum that blends the traditional liberal arts with foreign travel, real-world business experience, and leadership training. Originally one of the "Seven Sisters of the South"—the below-the-Mason-Dixon-Line version of a Wellesley or a Smith—"Agnes" has gone from educating largely

privileged white women to a college where women of color represent over half of the multi-ethnic student body.

At first, Vandevoorde hadn't even considered a liberal arts college, instead looking at engineering schools. But Agnes Scott's interdisciplinary approach, small and inclusive atmosphere, and opportunities for hands-on research provided all that she wanted and then some. Would a traditional engineering school have offered "Fashion, Ethics and Capitalism?" A favorite course that pulls together economics, philosophy, and art "is just not something the average computer science enthusiast gets the chance to do," Vandevoorde said.

The course is offered as part of Agnes Scott's signature SUMMIT curriculum, a unique four-year experience that focuses on global learning and leadership development



Dax Vandevoorde, a math and robotics whiz at her New Jersey high school, wanted a college that was strong in the STEM fields—but not one where science-focused women were oddities. "I was so tired of being the *female* engineer," she recalls. At Agnes Scott, she says, "everyone focuses on your accomplishments and your passion and your drive, and not on the fact that you are a woman."



in a way that builds critical thinking and communication skills. With immersive travel experiences, the coursework creates crucial links between students' academic studies and the world beyond the college's historic gothic walls. (Agnes Scott's idyllic campus says "college" so iconically that it has served as a backdrop for numerous movies and television shows.)

In the second semester of their first year, students take a required course called Global Journeys, which examines four common topics—globalization; identity of self and "the other;" imperialism, colonialism, and diaspora; and the ethics of travel—through the study of different regions and countries. Among this year's destinations were Morocco, Peru, the Navajo Nation, and Florence, Italy. Students prepare by studying the geography,

economy, culture, and politics of the region, then take a faculty-led, eight-day trip. The weeks afterward are dedicated to presentations, reports, and reflections through which students further build cross-cultural knowledge. "It's not a tourist trip," said President Leocadia (Lee) Zak. "It's an investigation."

For her trip, Vandevoorde traveled to Paris, where she and her group dove into the history and sociological implications of fashion, its economic aspects, and the societal forces shaping various designers' work. "And then you come back and you are just interacting with the world in a completely different way," said Vandevoorde. "And that gives you the kind of perspective you are going to use when making business connections and talking to people who are very different from you."







**Faith Lockhart, a senior studying neuroscience, catches up on her lab work. Lockhart, who will begin a doctoral program this fall at Pennsylvania State University, raves about the research opportunities afforded her at Agnes Scott. "Instead of teaching you to merely be a lab assistant, they teach you how to be a scientist," she says. "They give you a lab animal, they give you a budget and say: 'OK, you've got to figure this out.'"**

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, senior Faith Lockhart, a neuroscience major, didn't get to visit China, which she studied through a lens of immigration and international trade. Still, her group met virtually with Chinese professors and others in the country. Leila Reed, a senior majoring in psychology, focused her global studies on Manchester, England, digging into the scientific process and the Industrial Revolution. And Madison Jennings, a political science and religion major, made up for her COVID-canceled trip to China with a later trip to Jordan, where she studied humanitarian aid practices in the Middle East.

## A global perspective

"The global study tour really changed my life," Jennings said. "Not only was the classroom learning great, but just being in another country, communicating with locals, learning different languages—it changed the way I approach situations and people from different backgrounds." Along with an internship at The Carter Center in Atlanta, where she worked with teams stationed in Liberia, the Jordan trip fed Jennings' aspirations to become a human rights lawyer. She's on her way: This fall she is off to the University of Oxford to study for a master's degree in public policy as a 2024 Rhodes Scholar.

Every student at Agnes Scott is required to participate in Global Journeys and, significantly, they often do so before they know what their major will be. "The major is not really germane," said Rachel Bowser, vice president for academic affairs and dean of the college. "What we want them to see is the universality of the experience, about how what they are getting in their liberal arts courses applies to all kinds of settings and situations."

She continued: "There is kind of an illusion in the way people think about a liberal arts education, because that sector has often served students who are disproportionately privileged. So we think of the liberal arts as being oriented toward those students." But in fact, Bowser said, "distributed learning of the liberal arts 'gen-ed' core, in the way that it touches all these places and builds bridges, is actually the *most universally* applicable kind of education there is. It allows students to see into ideas and fields that they haven't necessarily had first-person access to before."

Global Journeys is not junior year abroad. Those traditional immersive experiences, while they can create a sense of belonging and a connection to academic studies, usually happen late in one's undergraduate career, President Zak pointed out. By moving the travel experiences to the front end and making them universal, she said, Agnes Scott creates that sense of belonging early on, bringing immediate relevance to classroom learning.





**Agnes Scott President Leocadia (Lee) Zak stands in front of an array of student portraits painted by an alumna of the college. Zak, president since 2018, lauds the educational benefits of Global Journeys, the college's foreign travel requirement for first-year students. "It's not a tourist trip," she says. "It's an investigation."**

SUMMIT also serves a less obvious but important purpose: It gives students a way to talk about their education. “First-generation students, especially, when someone asks them what they are learning and what they are going to do with that, they have to have an answer that they believe in,” Zak said. “And it’s often not until your junior year, when you do an internship or study abroad, that you have a way to talk about what you are doing. But we give them these experiences up front, and they can see themselves in the story.”

Their horizons now broadened, all second-year Agnes Scott students participate in a program called SCALE, or Sophomore Class Atlanta Leadership Experience. It connects students to nonprofits and global corporations with offices or headquarters in Atlanta. Students in this course learn about organizations as diverse as BlackRock investments, AT&T, and the Consulate General of Switzerland.

In their SCALE experience, students build on the leadership skills and global outlook they developed in their first year. They see how these qualities apply to multinational corporations and NGOs that serve ethnically and culturally diverse populations in Atlanta and abroad. “They are able to bring that learning full circle,” said Heather Scott, assistant dean for inclusive leadership.

This year, one group of students met with executives at the Atlanta office of Kuehne and Nagel, a Swiss

logistics and supply company with offices worldwide. They learned how the company benefits from employee diversity and how current events affect trade and transportation—how piracy, for instance, might force a firm to move cargo via planes rather than ships. “So the students are saying, ‘Wow, what is happening around the world impacts this business right here in Atlanta,’” Scott said.

Vandevoorde’s SCALE experience took her to BlackRock, the multinational investment company, and it sparked a passion she sees as a target for further study. The BlackRock team connected with students over issues related to energy, the environment, and corporate governance—“how you can kind of throw your weight around to get more eco-friendly investments,” Vandevoorde explained. She zeroed in on BlackRock’s massive capacity to collect and analyze data—in particular, how the necessary computing power might harm the environment.

“You are looking at so much data running all the time—every minute, every second—and that really opened my eyes. My interest is in making large data centers more efficient, cutting down on the energy they use,” she said. “SCALE helped me narrow my mission. All this theory I’m learning can be quickly applied to help solve the pressing problems of today, and the ones on the horizon.”



**Mina Ivanova (right), an assistant professor of communication and the college’s faculty director, confers with Tracey E.W. Laird, a professor of music. Agnes Scott’s interdisciplinary approach can be a challenge for faculty, but Ivanova and Laird say instructors get plenty of support. Workshops help them adapt, with master teachers sharing ideas across disciplines.**





Assistant Dean Heather Scott helps oversee the Sophomore Class Atlanta Leadership Experience (SCALE) program, which gives every second-year student at Agnes Scott real-world experience with an Atlanta business or nonprofit. “In their first year, students have had the leadership theory, but they now must put those theories into action,” Scott explains. “The students are doing a deep dive into leadership challenges, and the partner organizations are addressing them.”



As with Global Journeys, the days-long SCALE site visits are bookended by preparation and debriefing. Before visiting their chosen organization, students learn how to conduct research—differentiating between unreliable and vetted sources. They then assess the organization, reviewing financial documents, mission and value statements and the like. Afterward, they write reports, and those who choose to do so present their findings and observations to students and faculty.

## Lab partners from business

"This is really a lab experience," Scott explained. "In their first year, students have had the leadership theory, but they now must put those theories into action. Like how does Porsche (a college partner) tackle the challenge of having electric cars on the road by whatever year they have set? The students are doing a deep dive into leadership challenges, and the partner organizations are addressing them."

The American Association of Colleges and Universities has designated several "high-impact practices" that, research shows, bring significant educational benefits to students. Among them are common intellectual experiences, diversity and global learning, first-year experiences, collaborative projects, writing-intensive courses, community-based learning, and undergraduate research.

"Scotties" appreciate that their college checks all of those boxes.

Lockhart, who came to Agnes Scott on a music scholarship and changed her major to neuroscience, especially welcomes the opportunities for deep research more commonly available at the graduate level. "A special

thing they do here, especially with STEM, is that instead of teaching you to merely be a lab assistant, they teach you how to be a scientist," she said. "They give you a lab animal, they give you a budget, and say 'OK, you've got to figure this out.'"

Her professors and advisors have also been instrumental in helping Lockhart build her professional network.

Through her newfound contacts, she has worked as a neuropsychology trainee at the Shepherd Center hospital in Atlanta and as a summer research fellow at the Medical University of South Carolina. Having also associated with programs at UCLA, Spelman College, and Johns Hopkins University, Lockhart is now headed for a master's program in neuroscience at Pennsylvania State University.

Vandevoorde's research experiences, likewise, helped her land a 10-week computer science research job at Carnegie Mellon University, among others, and a spot in the doctoral program in computer science at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

The mission of Agnes Scott, founded in 1889 by Presbyterian leaders, was always to educate the underserved, but originally that simply meant women—"for the betterment of their families and the elevation of their religion." For decades those women were exclusively white. In recent years, the college has worked hard to broaden its target population—not to men, but to women who traditionally lacked access to private schools. (The shift in thinking coincided with a drop in enrollment, common among single-sex institutions, that at one point cut the college's student population to just 500.)

Today Agnes Scott's student body is remarkably diverse. No single race or ethnicity represents a majority, and 60



**Machamma Quinichett** is Agnes Scott's director of academic advising. As with instruction, advising at the college is handled via a team approach. In addition to faculty, advising teams include professional advisors, student peers, and career coaches.





**Biology Professor Srebrenka Robic is also faculty chair of the Science Center for Women. Students at Agnes Scott have historically taken more advanced science and math courses than women attending co-educational institutions. In fact, more than one-third of Scotties come to the college intending to major in the sciences.**

percent are students of color. Encouraged and celebrated, the diversity reinforces the college's global sensibilities. It fosters a climate of inclusivity that has long been a hallmark of this intimate institution and is seen as essential to student success.

A key aspect of SUMMIT, for instance, is that every student has the same experience. While students may travel to different countries, they all share the excitement and challenges of learning about the world at the same time—regardless of their background, their major, or their family finances. "It's a great way to begin that process of inclusion," Zak said. "It opens them up to each other. While we initially intended to focus on global learning, SUMMIT has also had the consequence of creating a common bond."

As is the case with most private liberal arts colleges, an Agnes Scott education doesn't come cheaply. Tuition, room and board, and other fees come to \$64,759 a year—just over the average for independent colleges overall. But all of the college's students receive institutional aid, which averages \$30,000 per student. And starting this fall, all students will receive at least \$25,000 annually

in renewable merit-based aid—an initiative known as the \$100K Promise. With a retention rate of 80 percent, a completion rate of 71 percent, and high job placement and graduate school acceptance rates, Agnes Scott is rated as a "best value" in several national rankings.

Leila Reed, who is starting a master's program in the fall, is among the satisfied customers. Four years ago, she approached her college investment thinking of it as a sort of renewable annual subscription. "Every August I wanted a reason to come back," she said. And every year she looked to the college to give her one.

The first year, Reed committed to the school for its close-knit community. Sophomore year, SCALE was her reason to re-up. In her junior year, the draw was having leadership positions and the ability to engage in directed research. And in her senior year, she said, the appeal was her commitment to her professors, who have helped her navigate graduate school options and job opportunities.

"With college choices, people are always looking at how they are going to fit in that first year," Reed said. "But I wanted a college where I would never stop growing."

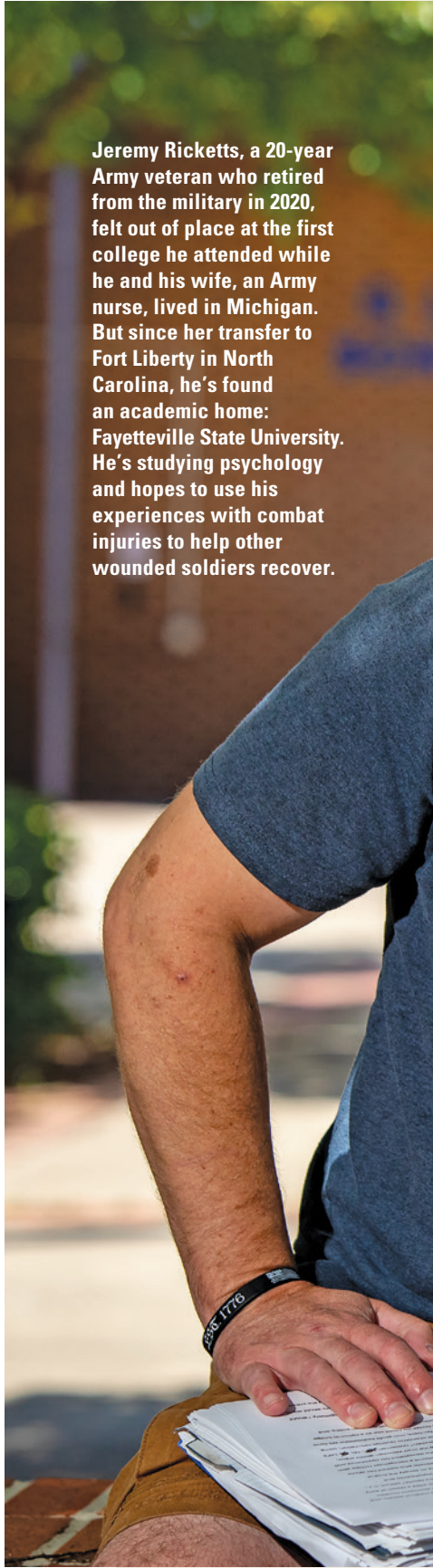
She, and her classmates, found one in Agnes Scott. ♦

FAYETTEVILLE STATE UNIVERSITY

## North Carolina school takes an adult approach by serving those who serve

FAYETTEVILLE, N.C.—Growing up the son of blue-collar workers in a small town in the Ozarks, Jeremy Ricketts, 45, didn't seem destined for college. His Arkansas high school was hardly known for its academic rigor—foreign language courses were considered a luxury—and the small percentage of students who did go on to college were the children of local professionals. Students like Ricketts were tracked early on into vocational fields.

Following the presumed path after graduation, Ricketts went to work for the furniture manufacturer that employed his father.



Jeremy Ricketts, a 20-year Army veteran who retired from the military in 2020, felt out of place at the first college he attended while he and his wife, an Army nurse, lived in Michigan. But since her transfer to Fort Liberty in North Carolina, he's found an academic home: Fayetteville State University. He's studying psychology and hopes to use his experiences with combat injuries to help other wounded soldiers recover.









**Flanked by his 2-year-old son Sol'ar Moore, Fayetteville State student Casey Gregg makes a point during an on-campus discussion. He's joined by fellow students (clockwise, from lower left) Weseley McIntyre-El, David Williams III, Desmond Vaughn, and Brian Kiptanui.**

His father, a high school graduate who never attended college, had a talent for building, engineering, and fixing things. Ricketts had inherited many of the same skills and had them in mind a couple of years later when he decided to join the Army.

Adventures awaited, demand for soldiers was high, and the pay and benefits were good. Ricketts took quickly to military life—so much so that he served for the next 20 years, retiring in 2020. He left with full disability benefits because of injuries suffered in five tours of duty that included deployments to Kosovo, Iraq, and Kuwait.

Stateside, Ricketts took a few classes at Western Michigan University where his wife, an Army nurse, was studying. But as a veteran, a conservative, and an older student, he felt out of place. So he welcomed his wife's transfer to Fort Liberty (formerly Fort Bragg) in North Carolina, and was encouraged to learn that the huge Army base had a longstanding relationship with Fayetteville State University. A federally designated Historically Black College and University (HBCU), Fayetteville State is known for providing affordable higher education to an exceptionally diverse population of students.

It is here, despite being white and two decades older than most of his classmates, that Ricketts says he has found his true community.

"It's a university that allows people from all different ethnic backgrounds and different experiences to just speak up, where nobody belittles each other for their beliefs," he said. "It's like, 'Hey, you like Democrats, I like Republicans. Cool; let's go get something to eat.'"

With 6,847 students (5,845 undergraduate), Fayetteville State is playing a key role in the University of North Carolina System's effort to improve educational attainment among low-income, rural, and military students. As a member of the Frontier Set, an effort funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, it joins a group of some 30 institutions across the country that are working to transform how they operate: realigning their cultures, structures, and business models to improve outcomes for all students.

At Fayetteville, that has meant enhancing the university's already robust online offerings, intensifying and expanding student advising, and finding ways to award students credit for work-based and other non-academic experiences.

Most significantly, the university is making a concerted effort to recruit students older than 25, who now account



for nearly half of its undergraduates. It is one of five North Carolina universities participating in the HBCU Adult Learner Initiative, a Lumina Foundation-funded effort designed to help these schools better serve their older students.

Fayetteville State also gets high marks for return on investment—a top-of-mind issue for today's college students. Though students at HBCUs typically work nearly 12 years after graduation to recoup their college investment, Fayetteville State students take just 2.6 years to realize the return, according to an independent study commissioned by the school.

That's partly because the university is exceptionally affordable.

## A massive military discount

Until last year, in-state tuition here was \$2,262, compared with the national average of \$11,560. But it just got even better: As part of its NC Promise program, the State of North Carolina recently provided the funds for Fayetteville State to drop its in-state tuition to \$1,000 a year. And for active-duty military members, veterans, and their spouses or dependents, the price is often even sweeter: As of 2023, tuition for eligible students is free. No surprise, then, that military-connected students now make up more than 30 percent of the student body.

Fayetteville State welcomes veterans not just with military scholarships (housing, meals, and other costs are extra), but with several university departments dedicated to their success. These departments offer one-on-one advising, tailored career counseling, and a comfortable physical space for military-affiliated students to connect with advisors and each other. The university subscribes to the U.S. Veterans Administration's Principles of Excellence, which require colleges to adopt best practices for supporting military veterans.

Along with its popular and well-regarded business major and graduate business school, the university offers a range of professional certification programs. These programs—which provide students with new skills that build on those developed in the armed forces—lead to well-paying jobs.

Statistically, military-connected students are strong performers, earning higher average GPAs than other students despite facing more obstacles to completion. They are more apt to be first-generation students—and more likely to have disabilities, families, and jobs. Yet studies show that military-connected students are also more likely than other populations to complete their degrees and to pursue occupations in high-demand fields such as health care, business, and STEM.

Disciplined about their studies, students who serve or have served in the armed forces also bring a wealth of experience and diverse perspectives to the classroom.





"They bring a lot of life experiences, trial and error," said Cierra Griffin, Fayetteville State's executive director for adult learners, transfer, and military students. "They are very focused, very eager to use that higher education in careers they already have—or to switch gears to a career they've always dreamed of."

Ricketts came to Fayetteville State thinking he'd pursue a career that played off the technical and security skills he had developed in the Army. But based on the results of a Fayetteville State skills assessment, his credits from Western Michigan, and suggestions from his advisor, he now plans to change his focus to psychology. "I had never thought about it," he said. "I did a lot of occupational therapy when I was doing rehab programs for TBI (traumatic brain injury), but I never considered taking my experience from my military injuries and flipping it around. I was, like: 'One day I could possibly help soldiers.'"

Military-affiliated students like Ricketts can and do have challenges participating fully in campus life, Griffin acknowledged—more so than students who come straight from high school. "While they want to participate as much as the 'traditional' college student, their work schedules get in the way. And deployments get in the way, or their spouse's move gets in the way." (Ricketts, for his part, has a 12-year-old son to look after.) And despite their age, training, and global outlook, these students often exhibit insecurity about being on a college campus, she said. "They can feel they don't have much to contribute when in fact they have so much to contribute."

Griffin, herself an Air Force veteran, leads a team that is there to help, with flexible hours and approaches that meet students on their schedules and their terms. "You have to actively listen, and that means being available after business hours," she said. She has also established chat groups for adult and military students, where participation is high. "Somebody will ask the question that everybody else was wondering about but didn't want to ask, and then people just start chiming in and sharing information," she said. Griffin also is pushing to hold more campus events in a hybrid format so these students can feel more closely connected to campus life.

Remote learning has long been a key strategy to increase opportunities for adult students at Fayetteville State, and it is expanding its offerings and regularly boosting its capacity. Not surprisingly, the number of students enrolled exclusively in online courses has grown steadily. Today, nearly half (46.7 percent) take classes entirely online. Remote learning is not considered a separate program here. All faculty members and new hires must have the capacity to teach effectively online.

The online option has made all the difference for Veronica Chance, who at age 46 finally has the plan for higher education she lacked after graduating from high school. Back then, her options seemed limited: One of six children of a single mother, she knew nothing about financial aid, and no guidance counselor had bothered to fill in the gaps. So upon graduation, her low-wage after-school job became her full-time employment.



**When Jeremy Ricketts confers with Cierra Griffin, he knows he's talking with someone who understands. "You have to actively listen," Griffin points out. An Air Force veteran herself, Griffin is well aware of the challenges facing military-affiliated students, and she and her team do all they can to help them overcome those challenges.**







When Chance gave birth to a son at age 20, she decided to improve her financial prospects, enrolling at her local community college and eventually earning an associate degree in computer programming. But the hoped-for employment offers didn't come, so she bounced from job to job. She had another son and ("foolishly," she says) got married.

By age 30, Chance had developed an addiction to crack cocaine. Earning a decent living and taking care of her boys became more of a struggle until one day she quit her habit cold turkey. "I just got so tired of being in the place that I was in," she said. "Thank the good Lord I have been delivered from that." Now working as a medical records clerk in a mental health clinic, she has taken an interest in social work. For that, she needs a college degree.

"I had a conversation with one of the ladies in the office, and she said, 'Do you know how many people in their 40s, and even 50s, go back to school?'" Chance enrolled at Fayetteville State this year. Most of her community college credits transferred, and—with a Pell Grant and a low-interest loan—she is attending full time and set to graduate in 2026.

What makes the program possible is Chance's ability to take all but one of her classes virtually. The online

option, she says, is the only way she can manage her academic work with her job duties and the responsibilities of caring for her now 17-year-old son, who has special needs. "I feel like if I can overcome (a drug habit), then me being able to go to school, go to work, and take care of my son should be nothing, right?"

It's not "nothing," of course. It's an opportunity made possible not only by Chance's determination and discipline, but also by the deliberate efforts of a university that has transformed its practices to meet adult students where they are.

And sometimes where they are is a hard place.

## A difficult personal path

As routes to higher education go, Casey Gregg's has been longer and more complicated than most. At age 17, while away from his Maryland home and visiting relatives in South Carolina, he joined an older cousin in attempting to rob a group of presumed drug dealers.

Perhaps predictably, things went terribly wrong. Gregg shot a man and was arrested on charges of assault and battery with intent to kill, criminal conspiracy, and grand larceny. Tried as an adult, he was convicted and served nearly two decades in prison before his release in 2020.



**Veronica Chance, 46, has turned her life around, thanks in part to Fayetteville State's robust online program. Chance, who overcame an addiction to cocaine in her 30s, is now studying for a career in social work. Taking all of her classes virtually—while working full time and caring for a teenage son—she's on track to graduate in 2026.** (Photo by Ezekiel Best, Fayetteville State University)





**Casey Gregg and his son Sol'ar Moore enjoy some time together on the Fayetteville State campus—a place that represents a fresh start for Gregg, who was incarcerated for nearly 20 years. He is majoring in interdisciplinary studies while working to establish a mentoring business to help troubled youth avoid the mistakes he made as a teen.**



While incarcerated, Gregg, now age 39, earned his GED and read, by his count, hundreds of books—everything from history to economics to world religion. “I have always had a curious mind,” he said. Released to live with his mother in North Carolina, he has worked at factory and janitorial jobs and volunteered as a mentor to at-risk young people in the hopes of keeping them off the path he took.

It was while giving a talk to some young probationers that Gregg was approached by a dean at Fayetteville State. He hadn’t even considered college, but Gregg listened to the dean’s pitch with growing interest. “I was like, ‘I can’t go,’ and he was, like, ‘Just fill out the application, man.’ And I did. It took five or six months, but I am here.”

Money at first seemed a big barrier. Gregg was doing two years of probation and community service, and his jobs paid little. “The economic situation was definitely not good,” he said. But with the help of financial

advisors at Fayetteville State, he received a Pell Grant and other need-based aid that covered his tuition.

A first-year student, Gregg is majoring in interdisciplinary studies while working to establish a mentoring business serving educational institutions and nonprofit organizations. “Most of these (mentees) are 18 to 25, and they come from a poverty background,” he said. “I provide them with some social-emotional learning, some career readiness, a little bit of professional development...Most of the other jobs I could get wouldn’t be aligned with my passion and my purpose. So I took the entrepreneurial route.”

Gregg is taking 13 credits this semester, including classes in health care management, political science, criminal justice, and math. To help with his transition from prison to college, he enjoys the support of one-on-one advisors and meets with an academic coach every week. “She gives me everything I need, directs me to the





people and resources I need. We plan assignments and make sure I am held accountable for my workload."

Keeping students accountable and on track is the goal of Fayetteville State's "30-60-90" initiative. It gives students clear guidelines about how they must progress and makes sure they are hitting milestones—and reducing costs—along the way. Advisors urge students to take 15 credits each semester, making it clear that with 30 hours, they become sophomores, with 60 they become juniors, with 90, seniors, and with 120 they graduate.

Still, officials know that adult students often hit bumps in the road. So along with other supports, the university helps them stay on the path with free summer school. Undergraduates who need to make up credits or who want to accelerate their progress can qualify for two courses or up to seven credit hours in the summer—with book rental fees, housing, and meals provided. Gregg, for one, is taking advantage.

Meanwhile, all students, advisors, and faculty use "Bronco Navigate," an online tool that makes it easy for advisors to review student records, keep notes, and share information. It also gives students access to financial resources and social services.

This online tool at first presented a learning curve to Gregg, who had extremely limited access to internet technology in prison. "Understanding the tech and learning how to navigate through the laptop—that was a bit much because of my situation," he admitted. But—just as he has in learning academic writing style, taking math for the first time since high school, and being the old guy on campus—Gregg has adapted.

And he knows he couldn't have done it alone.

In a way, he speaks for hundreds of his fellow adult students when he says: "This place is very comfortable. They have put their arms around me and helped me figure things out." ♦



With Sol'ar in tow, Gregg makes his way across campus—a rare moment of down time, given his heavy course load. Still, he says Fayetteville State gives him all the support he needs—technological and personal. "This place is very comfortable," Gregg says. "They have put their arms around me and helped me figure things out."



**NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY**

## **Access2Excellence effort signals a seismic shift at this school in the Southwest**

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz.—When Cassandra Brown thinks back on her days at Prescott High School in Arizona, the word she uses is “overstimulating.” Citing “typical teen drama stuff,” she struggled to focus on her coursework and—just three months shy of graduation—dropped out. Then came a GED, a series of odd jobs and, at age 21, a son. Seeking better opportunities, she earned an associate degree at a local community college with the hope of pursuing a career in psychology. But when a second son arrived in 2017, Brown chose to be a stay-at-home mom.







The kitchen counter is homework central for Cassandra Brown, husband Garin Becker, and their sons, Korey, 6, and Jace Becker, 11. Brown, 33, is working toward a bachelor's degree in strategic leadership from Northern Arizona University. It's been a long road—complicated by her own teenage troubles, pandemic problems, and the constant demands of motherhood. But thanks to NAU's Jacks on Track program for returning adult students, she's due to graduate in December.



Higher education remained in the back of her mind, though, so at 29 she enrolled in an online program at Northern Arizona University (NAU) that gave her the flexibility to care for her children while her husband managed a tile store. What seemed a perfect arrangement, however, was quickly undone by the COVID-19 pandemic. Forced to care for her young son *and* help the older one with his online schooling, her grades took a dive, and the resulting academic probation put a stop to her financial aid. "I was thinking, 'I just can't do this,'" Brown recalled.

Enter NAU's Jacks on Track program. The program, whose name is a nod to the university's Lumberjack mascot, aims to bring back students who have left college anywhere from a semester to three years short of a degree. NAU is recruiting this untapped pool as part of an overall effort to boost college success, particularly for students who've typically been poorly served in higher education. "People would have probably gone their whole life without a degree because they were on academic probation or owed a couple of thousand dollars and so couldn't register again," said President José Luis Cruz Rivera. "But we fixed everything for them."

Before she learned about Jacks on Track—and before the program learned about her—Brown had been frustrated. Several of her phone calls were transferred from one administrative department to another, with no one providing a clear solution. But then she got an email from JJ Boggs, assistant director for enrollment management and head of the Jacks on Track program. "JJ said: 'Just tell me your story. Tell me what's going on.'" Brown explained her predicament, and before long Boggs had her working out a new path to a degree with her financial aid restored.

## Shifting the mission

Brown, now 33, is among hundreds of NAU students who are benefiting from a shift in mission and strategy at the 28,195-student public university that is based in Flagstaff and has satellite campuses throughout the state.

Not long ago, NAU was focused intensively on its research imperative—hiring top scholars to compete with the flagship Arizona State University and other institutions. But university leaders realized that this approach, however worthy, was taking precedence over the effort to make NAU more affordable and welcoming, especially for first-generation students and students of color. A new commitment, Access2Excellence, has spawned several initiatives to improve affordability, completion, and teaching. The overall aim is to make the university an engine of economic mobility.

In Arizona, that mission is crucial. With a fast-growing technology sector driven in part by new microchip manufacturing plants, the state's economy is booming: Its GDP grew by an annual rate of 3.2 percent in the first quarter of 2024, compared with 1.4 percent for the nation overall. Yet only about half of Arizona high school graduates even apply to college—a rate that's among the







Cassie Brown gives 11-year-old son Jace Becker a postgame hug—a common occurrence for the Phoenix-area family, as Brown is heavily involved in her sons' sports teams. Though she lives two hours south of NAU's Flagstaff campus, the university's flexible online program puts college education well within Brown's reach.



lowest in the nation. “If you are a ninth-grader in Arizona today, and nothing changes, your likelihood of having a postsecondary degree by the year 2030 is 17 percent,” President Cruz Rivera said. “So we started to look very methodically at all of the obstacles that stood in the way.”

One barrier to enrollment was NAU’s list of admission requirements. To be assured admission, students needed at least 16 core courses in high school and a 3.0 grade point average—the same standards required by the University of Arizona and Arizona State University. But high schools serving tens of thousands of young Arizonans don’t offer all 16 courses, Cruz Rivera said. Students at these schools aren’t offered calculus, for instance, or a foreign language.

To boost opportunity for these disadvantaged students, NAU is engaged in a six-year pilot that sets the GPA standard at 2.75 and requires just 14 courses.

Affordability presented another obstacle to attending NAU, which has an average overall sticker price of \$29,202 per year for in-state students and \$44,464 for out-of-state students. By leveraging every public and philanthropic dollar and by shifting money from merit

scholarships to need-based ones, the university will allow students whose families earn under \$65,000 a year to attend tuition-free, starting in 2025.

NAU’s access policies benefit a disproportionate number of families of color, Native families, Hispanic and Latino families, and rural families. And at a time when other schools are seeing their enrollments drop, NAU’s policies have yielded two consecutive, record-breaking first-year classes—with no apparent decline in quality. According to Cruz Rivera: “The class of 2028 is the largest, most diverse, most academically accomplished we have had in 125 years.”

Third-year student Izabella Flores appreciates NAU, a designated Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), for “getting” her and her culture and for making it possible for her to attend college in the first place. Flores, a member of a huge extended Hispanic family from Covina, California, is majoring in art education with a minor in disability studies. She comes from a family of teachers—including her mother, who recently earned her master’s degree, with certification as a special education teacher—and has family members with disabilities.



**President José Luis Cruz Rivera stands among the stately ponderosa pines that surround the NAU campus. He says the university’s ongoing efforts to boost student success have helped NAU as well. “The class of 2028 is the largest, most diverse, most academically accomplished we have had in 125 years,” he says.**





**As vice president for enrollment management, Anika Olsen is focused on making NAU more affordable for students and increasing their chances for academic success. The university is making several efforts toward these goals, including partnerships with community colleges, outreach to older students, and free tuition for qualified students from low-income families.**

As close as Flores was to her family, she knew she wanted to go to college out of state. Living with her single mother in a low-income part of town, she said: "I saw the people around me who were selling drugs, who were in gangs, and I didn't want to associate with that. I knew that education was the only way out. And when I went to the NAU campus, I just fell in love with it. It felt like a true college town compared to back home."

But how would she afford it? Her mother had lost her hospital job during the pandemic. Her father, who had emigrated from Mexico with only a fifth-grade education and was divorced from her mother, died when Flores was 16. But with NAU's help, Flores applied for and received a number of need-based scholarships. That aid, along with a federal Pell Grant, covered virtually all of her tuition. "NAU is very generous when it comes to

resources," Flores said. She now also has a scholarship from the Arizona Teachers Academy, which forgives tuition loans in exchange for employment at Arizona public schools following graduation.

Still, Flores struggled to adjust to campus life. Because she had taken Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes in high school, academics weren't the problem. The social interactions were. "The true college dorm life—dealing with neighbors, dealing with other people—it wasn't something I was really prepared for," she said. "There are so many people from different walks of life, different parts of the world. And the weather! I wasn't prepared for the weather. The snow here is insane."

Mainly, though, Flores missed her exceptionally close extended family. "It was a really difficult transition for



me," she said. "I wanted to drop out multiple, multiple times. Even last semester I was so close to leaving that I did the paperwork."

Her advisors worked with her to make sure that didn't happen, helping her find her community—in particular, a multicultural club called Hermanas United for Change, of which Flores is the incoming president.

"I found people with similar identities, who understand the family dynamic and how hard it is to be so far away," she said. "I'm Mexican, and a lot of my friends are Mexican, and they understand that the family is everything, that families are so tight-knit that even a fourth cousin is still your cousin ... so being so far away is just really hard."

Flores is grateful to the university for understanding the importance of that heritage and how it has delayed her adjustment. "The school hosts so many events on campus, and if it weren't for that I don't think I would have found my friends," she said.

And she's found the financial assistance invaluable. Beyond the tuition, NAU provides funds for students who are unable to pay for regular meals, as well as those with housing problems, medical emergencies, and other pressing needs. "If it's urgent that you go see your family and you don't have the money, you just need to ask," Flores said. "And that's what I did. And that really helped, because without that I really wouldn't be here."



**Izabella Flores (right) works with Cynthia Salazar, a fellow student and member of Hermanas United for Change, a student group at NAU whose mission is to empower Latinas and other women of color. Flores, recently elected as the group's president, is a junior from Covina, California, who is majoring in art education with a minor in disability studies.**



President Cruz Rivera, a former provost at the City University of New York (CUNY), knows the importance of having smooth connections and close alignment between community colleges and the four-year state system. In New York, universal transfer agreements made for a high-functioning pipeline. In Arizona, by contrast, there are 10 community college districts all run by different elected boards with no overriding coordinating council. This arrangement leads to dozens of different transfer agreements. So NAU stepped into the breach, creating the Arizona Attainment Alliance to streamline the pathway. The university now works with 10 community college districts on five major initiatives to connect

community colleges to bachelor's degrees and careers.

Further expanding access, the university also has adopted a universal admission policy, albeit a qualified one. "Either we admit you immediately, or you get a letter saying you have been admitted but the best way for you to become a Lumberjack is to get started in one of these community colleges," Cruz Rivera explained. "And once you are ready, you will transfer automatically. You don't have to apply again." His main point: "There are zero letters of rejection for any student who applies."

NAU piloted this policy this year with one community college. As a result, the community college enrolled 256 students it would not otherwise have received, Cruz Rivera





said. The hope is that these students—many of whom already live in NAU dormitories—will transfer to the university.

Getting more Arizona high schoolers to buck the trend and actually *apply* for college also means meeting them at the secondary level, prompting them to prepare early on. To that end, NAU is launching a network with 21 high school superintendents to streamline dual enrollment, which allows high school students to earn college credit—or even an associate degree—at little or no cost. “Now that we have the community college pipeline, we want to get the 10th-grade students who will start taking college classes and making progress toward a degree at NAU,” Cruz Rivera said.

Cole Catron, a 21-year-old senior from Flagstaff, has taken advantage of all these pathways, along with considerable financial assistance. He’s on a fast track and is already looking toward a master’s degree—but it didn’t start that way.

For starters, Catron dropped out of high school at age 18. It was a COVID year, forcing him into isolation, complicating some existing health issues, and intensifying what he calls a “demotivating” case of senioritis. He hadn’t wanted to go to college anyway, even though he had picked up several college credits as a dual enrollment student. “I didn’t think college would be useful. There are such huge tradeoffs,” he said. “But one of the first concerns was how am I going to pay for it? So I thought I might as well just go to work and advance that way.”

He easily picked up a GED, however, and thanks in

part to pressure from his single mother, quickly changed his mind. “I just figured (college) was the next thing to do,” he said. His dual enrollment credits allowed Catron to start as a sophomore at his local community college. He paid for it with need- and merit-based scholarships, including one from the Navajo Nation, of which he is a member.

Transfer to NAU was seamless—all of his community college credits were accepted—and brought more need- and merit-based aid.

With his financial worries behind him, Catron says he has benefited from undergraduate research opportunities in computer science and business, as well as his professors’ thoughtful advice about graduate schools and careers. Though he has been on campus only two years, he feels fully a part of the NAU community—in part because of his participation in the Native American Cultural Center.

With 22 federally recognized tribes in Arizona and the Hopi and Navajo nations close by, Native Americans make up about 6 percent of NAU’s student population. The university is a federally designated Hispanic-Serving Institution with a student population that is 26 percent Hispanic, but colleges that serve Native students have no official designation. Still, the numbers are not what the university would like them to be. Enrollment, retention, and graduation rates for Indigenous students “are not anything to be proud of,” Cruz Rivera said—at NAU or elsewhere. In 2022, just 17 percent of Native adults in the United States held a bachelor’s degree.

To address this, the university’s strategic plan targets



**Vidal Mendoza (left), an assistant director of student life experience at NAU, walks on campus with Izabella Flores. Mendoza, who oversees the university’s programming for Hispanic and Latino students, has been a friend and mentor to Flores, who at times has struggled with being separated from her extended family. “It was a really difficult transition for me,” Flores recalls. “I wanted to drop out multiple, multiple times.”**



Cole Catron, a 21-year-old senior, enjoyed a seamless transition to NAU from a community college in Flagstaff. Though on campus only two years, he feels fully comfortable at NAU, partly because of his involvement with the Native American Cultural Center. Catron, a member of the Navajo Nation, will begin a master's degree program immediately after graduation and plans to pursue a doctorate in public policy.





Native populations with strategies designed to significantly bolster their access and success. Most important: It guarantees free tuition and fees, regardless of family income, for members of Arizona's federally recognized tribes. Catron did not tap into this scholarship because his other aid fully covered his costs. With significant philanthropic support, the university has attracted its largest-ever class of Native students, a population that has been growing by double digits year after year.

For the enrollment jump, administrators also credit learning communities in residence halls, as well as more robust programming offered by the Native American Cultural Center, where tribal elders offer guidance to students like Catron. "We're really focused on this piece because, from a cultural perspective and the DNA of our university, if we're not doing right by our Indigenous students, we're not doing right by anybody," Cruz Rivera said.

Jason Watchman, 39, says NAU is doing right by him. The son of a single mother and a member of the Navajo Nation, Watchman moved frequently as a child and

attended 10 schools before graduating from high school in 2002. They included a tribal school in the early years and a religious boarding school, which he particularly disliked. Throughout his educational journey, though, he learned to love and excel in math.

## 'Numbers in front of me'

"When I was younger, I would get into trouble a lot, and these Christian schools would discipline you by isolating you and having you stare at the wall for hours," Watchman said. "But luckily for me, there were numbers in front of me that I played with in my mind. So that gave me something to do."

A four-year college still didn't feel right, so after high school, Watchman went on to earn an associate degree in automotive engineering. Though he loved working on cars, he still felt unsettled. "I was just being an immature kid, running around and having fun," he said. In 2007 he joined the Army and spent 15 months in a combat brigade in Afghanistan before being medically discharged.



**Cole Catron is poised for career success—for which he is quick to credit the advice he's received from NAU professors. Still, officials recognize that Catron's success story is the exception among Native students. NAU President José Luis Cruz Rivera says the university is working hard to increase enrollment and support of Native American students, adding: "If we're not doing right by our Indigenous students, we're not doing right by anybody."**





**In a university art studio, Izabell Flores works to replicate a ceramic piece from 17th century Korea. She will graduate in 2025 as an art teacher with K-12 certification, and she's eager to apply what she's learned at NAU. "I'm not doing this just for myself," Flores says, "but for my family and for all the people back home who are supporting me."**

An otherwise satisfying experience at the two-year Yavapai College in Prescott was clouded by the breakup of his marriage, which made him a single father. But the community college experience made for a smooth transfer to NAU, where Watchman at first majored in sociology so he could help fellow veterans. When he realized that the veterans' stories could trigger disturbing memories of his own deployment, he switched to biology with a certificate in wildlife conservation.

COVID slowed Watchman's progress; he struggled to take courses online while caring for his preschool-aged son. Resulting course failures muddled his eligibility for federal GI Bill benefits, and he stopped out. But NAU met him where he was, providing both academic and financial counseling and accommodations for the complications of his life. Again, Jacks on Track leader JJ Boggs made the difference, Watchman said. "JJ is the only one who knows what I have been through, and she is always there for me—not just academically, but for anything. She gave me all the encouragement that I didn't even know I needed."

Watchman is scheduled to graduate in the spring of 2026. While he finishes his degree program, he is helping students with administrative tasks at the college's Veteran Success Center, working to smooth the college path for others who have served. "One of my

goals is to help with outreach, to make sure that (student veterans) are not isolated the way I was, because I literally just went to school, did what I had to do, and came home and did nothing else."

Catron, meanwhile, will enter an NAU master's program next fall, studying business analytics and looking forward to using his data analysis skills in the public policy field.

Flores, for her part, is on track to graduate in 2025 with a certification to teach any K-12 grade. While she still misses her family and finds it difficult to return to campus every time she visits home, she feels far more independent than she did three years ago, even as her relatives stay top of mind: "I'm not doing this just for myself," she said, "but for my family and for all the people back home who are supporting me."

And Cassandra Brown? She continues to juggle a full course load while mothering two young boys with exceptionally busy sports schedules. With a bachelor's degree in strategic leadership due to be conferred in December, she hopes to work in human resources management or a related field. But first, she says, she is going to take a break.

"My plan is to focus on finding a job that is in line with our schedule for our children and our lives," she said. "But I'm planning on taking off a couple of months just to kind of live in the glory that I did this." ♦





Lumina Foundation  
P.O. Box 1806  
Indianapolis, IN 46206-1806  
[www.luminafoundation.org](http://www.luminafoundation.org)

© 2024 Lumina Foundation  
All rights reserved.

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. Lumina envisions a system that is easy to navigate, delivers fair results, and meets the nation's need for talent through a broad range of credentials. The foundation's goal is to prepare people for informed citizenship and for success in a global economy.

August 2024

Writing: Susan Headden • Photography: Shawn Spence Photography • Editing: David S. Powell and John Strauss  
Editorial assistance: Ruth Holladay • Design: IronGate Creative • Printing: Post Printing