WINTER 2025

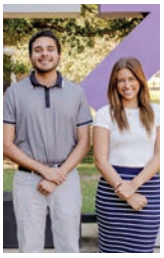
RUSCHE REVIEW

RUSCHE COLLEGE OF BUSINESS ★ STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY ★ THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS SYSTEM

SFA STUDENTS LEARN HOW TO LAUNCH BUSINESSES FROM LOCAL BUSINESS OWNERS

Economics Reading Group members and "Discovering Business Abroad" course participants spent the semester exploring local businesses to learn how to start their own businesses. Read the story on Page 4.

HIGHLIGHTS



Students compete in Fastenal's National Sales Invitational

Blount named recipient of Sanner-Berry Business Professorship

Rusche hosts first Human Resources Professionals Day

Students explore banking, financial planning careers

SPRING 2025 CALENDAR OF EVENTS

JANUARY 15
SPRING CLASSES BEGIN

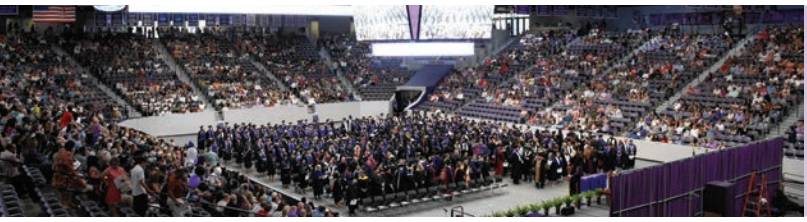
MARCH 3-7
SFA RING WEEK

MARCH 10-14
SPRING BREAK HOLIDAY

APRIL 4
EXECUTIVE ADVISORY BOARD MEETING

APRIL 29
SENIOR SEND-OFF

MAY 2
THE BIG DIP



MAY 9-10
SPRING COMMENCEMENT

MESSAGE FROM THE DEAN

Our students are making their mark!

As we welcome the start of a great new year, I am pleased to extend greetings and best wishes for a prosperous 2025 from everyone in the Rusche College of Business!

Our students are truly making their mark as they engage in meaningful projects on campus, and in the community. This edition of Rusche Review showcases the many ways they are applying the skills they develop as they pursue their degrees in the Rusche College of Business. In addition to all that they are learning within the walls of the McGee Business Building, our students are taking their drive, innovation, and knowledge to the world by applying them to community-focused projects, and by competing with students from around the world. With the drive they demonstrate and the skills they possess, the future is indeed bright for these exceptional Lumberjacks. Employers will one day be fortunate to have them on their teams, and as SFA alumni they are going to make us proud!

For students to have such amazing experiences in the Rusche College of Business, it takes a collaborative effort from our faculty, staff, and administration, as well as the continuous support of our alumni and friends. As dean, I am so appreciative of the team that we have and the commitment we receive. A great experience for our students builds a brighter future for us all.

Thank you, and axe 'em, Jacks!

Tim Bisping, Dean

RUSCHE BRIEFS

ARNOLD CENTER FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP

• ACE hosted three field trips for business students during October. With the theme of "Ignite," the TEDxSHSU event at Sam Houston State University gave students the opportunity to hear new ideas and engage in conversations to ignite change. At the GenHERation Campus Connection Tour at Texas Christian University, students met industry leaders, explored career opportunities and learned how they can connect with executives at the most innovative companies in America. Students also took a tour of The Arnold Companies headquarters in Dallas and met with Greg Arnold, the center's namesake, for a Q&A session.

• ACE and the Small Business Resource Hub continue to foster regional networking by hosting monthly meet-ups of the Piney Woods Entrepreneurship Network. This initiative has connected SFA with the East Texas community and engaged 150 participants throughout the year.

• The Economics Reading Group and the Society for Entrepreneurial Advancement in ACE hosted "Catching Up With Casey: Transitioning From Educational Leadership to Consulting" on campus in November. At this event, Casey Watts '05 & '10, an SFA alumna and founder of Casey Watts Coaching & Consulting, shared her journey from educational leadership to entrepreneurship, focusing on her experience in founding a microbusiness and turning a side gig into a successful career.

For more information, visit sfasu.edu/ace.

BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

• East Texas Community Health Services is working with students in a graduate marketing course taught by Dr. Wenjing Li, associate professor of marketing, to create a strategic marketing plan for the nonprofit.

• The Best Water Store in Nacogdoches is working with students in a graduate strategic management course taught by Dr. Marcus Cox, coordinator for the Business and Community Services office and associate professor of management and marketing, on a plan for future growth. The store is also working with students in Cox's undergraduate compensation and benefits course to set up health insurance and retirement plans for employees.

For more information, visit sfasu.edu/cob/services/bcs.

CENTER FOR BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC RESEARCH

At the request of the Nacogdoches Economic Development Corporation, the center is updating the economic impact assessment of SFA on the local economy. The original assessment was conducted in 2016. The following SFA entities are assisting the center in this effort: Office of the Registrar, Residence Life, Micky Elliott College of Fine Arts box office staff, SFA Athletics, Office of Admissions, New Student Orientation and Family Programs, and Campus Recreation.

For more information, visit sfasu.edu/cber.

FALL 2024 TOP POP-UP PITCH IDEAS ANNOUNCED

The following budding entrepreneurs from SFA's six colleges each received $1,000 in scholarship funds and have advanced to the next level of ACE's pop-up pitch competitions.

- **THE ARTS APP** by **Adrianna Sanchez**, Micky Elliott College of Fine Arts
- **THE HYDROPONIC PANTRY** by **Chloe Culver**, Arthur Temple College of Forestry and Agriculture
- **RIPPLE** by **Kyle Charbonneau**, Nelson Rusche College of Business
- **SFA NUTRITION COUNSELING CLINIC** by **Hailey Gamboa**, James I. Perkins College of Education
- **TILTED TILES** by **David Lebaillif**, College of Sciences and Mathematics
- **ULTRA-SONIC LOCUST DETERRENT** by **Jack Dancy**, College of Liberal and Applied Arts

Next up, the finalists' recorded idea pitches will be shown to attendees during halftime of the SFA men's basketball game versus Lamar University at 2 p.m. Feb. 1 at Johnson Coliseum. The winner, as designated by audience applause-o-meter, will advance to the annual Lumberjack Entrepreneurship Competition in April.

Guiding Lights

SFA students learn how to launch businesses from local business owners

More than two dozen Economics Reading Group members and "Discovering Business Abroad" course participants spent the semester exploring local businesses to learn how to start their own businesses.

"The entrepreneurial spirit is growing fast among SFA students, and we want to be intentional about nurturing it," said Dr. Tim Bisping, dean of the Rusche College of Business. "Opportunities like these help a variety of students come together to share ideas and learn how to run businesses that reflect their diverse passions, from fitness centers to clothing lines to medical practices."

Inspired by the book "The $100 Startup: Reinvent the Way You Make a Living, Do What You Love, and Create a New Future," by Chris Guillebeau, students visited with the owners of three Nacogdoches businesses: SuSu's Popcorn & Candy Café, Brendyn's BBQ and Jeffie Brewer Studio.

"All of the business owners were phenomenal," said Dr. Ryan Phelps, associate professor of economics and finance, as well as faculty advisor for the Economics Reading Group and the "Discovering Business" study abroad courses. "This term really had something for everyone."

Susan Sowards and her husband, former SFA education professor Dr. Alan Sowards, were considering retirement after rewarding careers in Nacogdoches. Instead, they recruited family members to help them launch SuSu's Popcorn & Candy Café in March 2023 in Nacogdoches. Despite the cost of refurbishing a historical building downtown, the Sowardses quickly earned back their investment and more.

Jeffie Brewer, SFA alumnus and owner of Jeffie Brewer Studio, shares his adventures in "artrepreneurship" with Economics Reading Group members. (Photo by Colby Keen)

"The Sowardses have been pillars of the Nacogdoches community for decades," Phelps said. "Our students saw firsthand the power of enthusiasm and a commitment to the local community. We also learned about the potential of opening new distribution channels — you can now get a taste of Nacogdoches anywhere with SuSu's monthly subscription popcorn box."

Brendyn Todd, who graduated from SFA in 2013 with a bachelor's degree in communication and a minor in business communication, was managing the Nacogdoches Chick-fil-A location when he decided to open the city's first food truck in 2018. By 2020, Brendyn's BBQ had expanded to a brick-and-mortar store in downtown Nacogdoches.

"Brendyn is an advocate for entrepreneurial freedom and a true professional who fuses warmth with an unwavering commitment to excellence," Phelps said. "He openly credits Ramsey Parr, his former boss at Chick-fil-A and the namesake of a Brendyn's BBQ sandwich, for providing him with guidance, expertise and a promise of monetary backing if needed as Brendyn launched his new enterprise. In a town where losing a good manager can cost you your restaurant, Parr encouraged Brendyn to step out on his own."

Jeffie Brewer, who earned a Master of Arts in 1998 and a Master of Fine Arts in 2000 from SFA, has turned his doodle-based sculptures into a successful business.

"Jeffie said his transition from the academic world into 'artrepreneurship' was 'lucky' and relatively seamless," Phelps said. "To be successful as an 'artrepreneur,' Jeffie believes you need to offer a product that captures people's attention, be on time and avoid being a jerk. My two key takeaways were ignore the haters and just keep producing. Just get your work out there for sale and don't let fear keep you from getting started."

The Rusche College of Business continues to offer students more ways to explore businesses and their entrepreneurial spirit with its "Discovering Business in Estonia and

Economics Reading Group members and "Discovering Business Abroad" course participants spent the semester exploring local businesses to learn about the challenges owners faced on their paths to success. One stop was SuSu's Popcorn & Candy Café in downtown Nacogdoches, where they learned how Alan and Susan Sowards enlisted family members to help launch the business in March 2023.

Finland" course planned for July 23 through Aug. 3. The study abroad trip, which is open to incoming first-year students regardless of major, offers:

- Faculty-led, three-credit-hour course
- Immersive experience in a foreign culture with tours of Estonian and Finnish businesses
- Scholarships to offset trip costs
- Opportunities for students to meet Lumberjacks before arriving on campus

"No matter a student's major, that student will most likely either work for someone else's business, start their own or both," said Dr. Drew Thornley, SFA associate professor of legal studies and a co-instructor for the course. "We want to better equip these students for their professional lives, regardless of their future paths."

For more information about the Estonia and Finland trip, visit gosfa.com/3SN3gkm.

SFA Economics Reading Group officers visit with Brendyn Todd, SFA alumnus and owner of Brendyn's BBQ in Nacogdoches. Pictured, from left, are Iris Cordova of Nacogdoches; Barret Williams of Wake Forest, North Carolina; Todd; Rian Bartley of Shady Shores; and Nashally Arellano of Dayton.

NEW FACULTY

Dr. Thomas Corbin Jr., senior lecturer, Department of Business Communication and Legal Studies, is an attorney and educator with more than two decades of international teaching experience at institutions in six countries on four continents. Before joining SFA, he served as associate professor and chair of the General Business and Management Department at American University in Dubai. A licensed attorney in Michigan, he completed his Juris Doctor at Cooley Law School and his undergraduate work at Eastern Michigan University. His research focuses on law, management and best ethical business practices.

Dr. Thomas Corbin Jr.

AARC BRAVO AWARD

The Academic Assistance and Resource Center presented Dr. Pamela Rogers, associate professor of management and marketing, with the AARC Bravo Award for outstanding support of AARC tutoring programs. Rogers demonstrated dedication to the success of her students by assisting the AARC in developing tutoring specific to her courses to increase student participation.

Dr. Pamela Rogers

WALTON NAMED OUTSTANDING REVIEWER

Dr. Derek Walton, assistant professor in the Department of Management and Marketing, earned the 2024 Emerald Literati Award as Outstanding Reviewer for Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal. The award recognizes the importance of reviewers to the scholarly publishing process.

Dr. Derek Walton

ACE HOSTS SUMMER CAMP FOR LOCAL TEENS

Nearly 70 East Texas students from grade 6 through 10 got a head start on their entrepreneurial dreams in July at the Arnold Center for Entrepreneurship's CTE Summer Camp.

ACE hosted the teens from 12 schools across six districts at two summer sessions. The center partnered with Startup High as well as local businesses and industries to show how entrepreneurship in career and technical education, or CTE, jobs can open doors and opportunities.

"The camp aimed to ignite the entrepreneurial spirit in middle and high school students by blending practical career skills with innovative business concepts," said Matthew Smilor, ACE director. "Our goal was to prepare students for future career opportunities through hands-on learning experiences and real-world interactions."

The camp's sessions included field trips to gain guidance from entrepreneurs at local businesses, including Elliott Electric Supply and McWilliams Heating, Cooling and Plumbing. Attendees also visited SFA's Todd Agricultural Research Center and the A.L. Mangham Jr. Regional Airport to meet with faculty and staff from SFA's aviation sciences program. In addition, attendees participated in professional development activities focusing on networking, creating business pitches and meeting rejection with resilience.

"Students engaged in innovative learning experiences that enhanced their confidence and creativity while networking opportunities with industry professionals further enriched their understanding," Smilor said.

Out of the more than 130 schools and districts that applied, ACE was one of 61 organizations to receive the Texas Education Agency grant for a career and technical education camp during summer 2024. SFA was also the only school from The University of Texas System to be awarded the grant.

"I believe that TEA selected us due to our effective regional approach for the summer camp," Smilor said. "Instead of focusing on an individual school or independent school district, SFA committed to serving a broader regional community and addressing the educational needs of a diverse student population."

Arnold Center for Entrepreneurship's CTE Summer Camp

Melissa McGinley, the parent of a camp attendee, said she appreciated the camp's approach.

"The camp was an extraordinary experience for my child," McGinley said. "Its innovative approach and the opportunity to engage with local business leaders made it a standout program."

Her daughter, Natalie, a seventh grader at Central Heights Middle School, also gave the camp high marks.

"The camp was fun, and meeting local business leaders gave me a new perspective on what it takes to start a business," she said. "My biggest takeaway was not to let others convince you that your idea is bad when your gut is telling you it is good."

Smilor said ACE plans to expand the camp next summer.

"This year's camp reached capacity within one week of being announced," he said. "There is a significant need in our region for educational offerings like this, which highlight how entrepreneurial skills can benefit students in their future pursuits across various fields, industries and trades. Our goal next summer is to be able to offer four sessions and impact over 120 students."

If you're a local business interested in helping with the 2025 camp, email ACE at ace@sfasu.edu.

SFA STUDENT COMPANY GROWS WITH SMALL BUSINESS RESOURCE HUB HELP

Asa Moore of Frisco is graduating from SFA this May with a bachelor's degree in mass communication, but he launched a successful business before he even got to the university.

The Arnold Center for Entrepreneurship's Small Business Resource Hub, which provides free services including loan proposals, advertising and personnel management to students and local businesses, is guiding him as he expands his company.

Asa Moore Productions, otherwise known as AMProductions or AMP, began providing audio, video and lighting crews for church, corporate events and concerts in the Dallas-Fort Worth area in 2019. Moore established the business as a limited liability company in 2021.

By his sophomore year, Moore needed help with the growth of the company, which now offers event management and logistics as well as AVL equipment purchasing assistance. Moore wants to expand into the lucrative AVL equipment rental market next. He reached out to the Small Business Resource Hub for guidance.

Larry Cain, director of the hub, helped Moore in several ways, including finding a reliable bank that catered to the student's needs as a business owner.

Dr. Justin Blount, Asa Moore and Larry Cain

"Asa's ability to balance his AVL business, sports broadcasting work and academics shows he is driven to succeed," Cain said. "The hub's free services and guidance help Asa take care of the business side so he can focus on his schoolwork, passion and the big picture."

Cain also connected Moore with Dr. Justin Blount, the Sanner-Berry Business Professor in SFA's Department of Business Communication and Legal Studies.

"Dr. Blount helped me get on my feet with the legal side and guided me through the process of drafting some contracts," Moore said.

Blount said he enjoys the opportunity to help small business owners through the Small Business Resource Hub, especially when they are students.

"Asa has done a great job with his business, and it has been exciting to see it grow," Blount said.

Moore, who is paying his way through college, plans to work on his business full time after graduation. He'll also use his concentration in broadcast journalism and minor in sports business to work in the sports broadcasting industry. And if his classmates need a gig in the DFW area, Moore said he plans to hire Lumberjacks in the future.

To learn more about the Small Business Resource Hub, visit sfasu.edu/ace/sbrh. To learn more about Asa Moore Productions, see @amproductions_1 on Instagram or X, formerly known as Twitter.

NACOGDOCHES COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Undergraduate students in the business communication technologies course taught by Dr. Kristen Waddell, assistant professor of business communication and legal studies, are helping the Nacogdoches County Chamber of Commerce create a guide that small business owners can use to communicate effectively both internally with their employees and externally with their customers and potential customers. As part of a project for the Business and Community Services office, students examined the best tools small businesses can use for different audiences, how to apply each tool and how to effectively measure the impact of the tools, from email to Microsoft Teams to social media platforms. Kelly Augustine, president and CEO of the chamber, pictured far left, and Waddell, pictured second from left, guided the students as they conducted surveys and presented their findings.

BLOUNT NAMED INAUGURAL RECIPIENT OF SFA'S SANNER-BERRY BUSINESS PROFESSORSHIP

SFA's Rusche College of Business recently awarded the inaugural Sanner-Berry Business Professorship to Dr. Justin Blount, professor in the Department of Business Communication and Legal Studies. The new professorship was created through an endowment by Christine "Chris" Sanner Berry and James "Jim" Berry, both 1985 graduates of SFA.

Professorships are designed to honor distinguished faculty members and provide financial support to attract and retain exceptional educators while supporting them in their professional endeavors. Endowed professorships, such as the Sanner-Berry Business Professorship, are most often established through the generosity of donors and provide financial support to the recipient on an ongoing basis.

"This professorship means so much to me, and I'm incredibly grateful for the Berrys' generosity," said Blount, who was also selected as one of the inaugural recipients of SFA's Scholarly Excellence Award in April.

Blount earned his Bachelor of Business Administration in finance from Southwestern Oklahoma State University, Master of Business Administration from The University of Texas at Austin and Juris Doctor from Baylor University School of Law. A licensed attorney in Texas and Oklahoma, Blount's main research interests are corporate governance and social responsibility.

Dr. Justin Blount

"I work very hard to develop rigorous learning experiences for students while maintaining a very active research agenda," Blount said. "The Sanner-Berry Business Professorship is a wonderful reward for that hard work and also enables me to continue impacting Lumberjacks through my research and teaching."

The purpose of the endowment is to retain and attract quality faculty members to the Rusche College of Business, said Dr. Tim Bisping, dean of the college.

"A great education starts with great professors," Bisping said. "We are fortunate to have outstanding professors in the Rusche College of Business who impact thousands of students throughout the course of their careers. The generosity of Jim and Chris will help ensure that we are able to continue to attract and retain for our students outstanding professors such as Dr. Blount."

The Berrys established the endowment because of their strong belief in education.

"We have always believed in the importance of education, both formal education and through life experiences," said Chris, who earned a Bachelor of Arts in political science and broadfield communication with an emphasis in photojournalism. "Whatever the means of learning that people experience — university, trade or apprenticeship — education offers the opportunity to expand their horizons and, by doing so, creates even more opportunity for the next generation."

This professorship is one way the Berrys can ensure future Lumberjacks have the opportunity to learn from accomplished faculty members just as they did.

"As we reflected on the continued importance of getting the best professors and instructors at SFA to maintain and grow the Lumberjack experience, we became convinced this was a significant way to help make that impact," said Jim, who earned a Bachelor of Business Administration in accounting and is a retired partner and past vice chair for Deloitte & Touche. "We know the endowment will serve Lumberjacks for years to come."

CHRISTIAN WOMEN'S JOB CORPS

As part of a project for the Business and Community Services office, Rusche students are consulting with the Christian Women's Job Corps in Nacogdoches to help craft a strategic plan and create future human resource development programs. Pictured, from left, are Dr. Kristen Waddell, assistant professor of business communication and legal studies; Demetrius Waters, CWJC project director; Jasmine Hassan, CWJC executive director; and Dr. Marice Kelly, assistant professor of business communication and legal studies. "This is a multi-class real-world learning project under the guidance of several faculty members, and we're really excited about it," said Dr. Marcus Cox, coordinator for the Business and Community Services office and associate professor of management and marketing. "We want to thank the CWJC leadership team for this opportunity for our students to not only apply their business skills but also give back to the community."

VEGA NAMED SCHLIEF SCHOOL OF ACCOUNTANCY DIRECTOR

Dr. Jose (Jay) Vega, Director of the Schlief School of Accountancy

Dr. Jose (Jay) Vega, associate professor of accounting, was named director of the Schlief School of Accountancy over the summer. He and the rest of the school's faculty and staff have big plans for SFA's accounting curriculum.

"We are working to make SFA's accounting graduates more career-ready by moving to a cohort model that helps students with networking and preparing for industry certification exams," said Vega, who succeeded Dr. Kelly Noe as chair. Noe continues to serve as a professor of accounting.

With around 250 students, the school has an integrated five-year Bachelor of Business Administration in accounting/Master of Professional Accountancy program that puts students on the fast track to becoming certified public accountants.

"A CPA license helps an accountant start at a higher salary and advance more efficiently through their career," Vega said. "But most accountants don't even think about studying for the CPA Exam until after graduation when they have families and jobs but no time to dedicate to the exam."

To prepare students before they graduate, the school is enacting a new curriculum requirement: a free zero-credit-hour CPA Exam review course that is required to graduate with the MPA.

"By the time our students graduate, they will have the opportunity to complete all four parts of the CPA Exam, and they will be able to focus on their careers," Vega said. "We have been asking for donations from alumni to cover the CPA Exam fees for students."

In addition to CPA Exam preparation, the school's faculty members help students create and publish fraud case studies and find paid internships that offer real-world experience.

"We have an incredibly supportive alumni base who cares and pushes success for the school, and we help students obtain jobs in the accounting industry before they even graduate," Vega said. "Students enjoy recession-proof careers with starting salaries of $62,000 to $75,000 a year."

Before becoming director, Vega worked with graduate accounting students in his fraud courses, "but now I get to help all Schlief students on a wide variety of issues."

First-generation students constitute more than 40% of SFA's student body, and many join the school of accountancy.

"Because we have a lot of first-gen students, our faculty members communicate our expectations to them," Vega said. "They're great students. If you let them know what the bar is, they'll rise to that bar."

Vega believes his most significant success during his first semester as director is reflected in the school's faculty and staff.

"They are willing to evolve and try new, innovative ways to make student success more pronounced," he said. "And they are dedicated to mentoring our students."

For more information on the Schlief School of Accountancy, visit sfasu.edu/acct.

John Chambers and Taylor Alvarez

RUSCHE ROAD TRIP

Faculty and staff visited six local schools during the fall semester to educate students about the Rusche College of Business and SFA as part of the fall Rusche Road Trip.

John Chambers, recruiting and marketing specialist with the Arnold Center for Entrepreneurship, and Taylor Alvarez, director of external relations for the Rusche College of Business, talked with juniors and seniors at Pineywoods Community Academy in Lufkin as well as seniors at Garrison and Zavalla high schools. Dr. Drew Thornley, associate professor of business communication and legal studies, joined the duo at Center High School to share information about the "Discovering Business Abroad" trip and course. Alvarez also attended the College to Career event at Hudson High School.

NEW SFA PRESIDENT

We thank Dr. Neal Weaver, SFA president, for taking the time to tour the Rusche College of Business in October. Our faculty, staff and students were excited to showcase our commitment to academic excellence, community engagement and leadership development.

THANK YOU TO CAREER SUCCESS PASSPORT SPEAKERS

We appreciate all the knowledge and experiences our Career Success Passport speakers shared with us during the fall semester:

- **Jennifer Chavira**, HR generalist at Eaton in Nacogdoches
- **Lana Calton**, executive managing director at Hilltop Securities Inc. in Dallas
- **Jamie Derrick**, lecturer in the Department of Management and Marketing
- **Juan Gonzalez**, business development officer and lender at Commercial Bank of Texas in Nacogdoches
- **Saville Harris**, senior production manager at Smith Sawmill Service and owner of Big Fella's BBQ in Nacogdoches
- **Jerome Jones**, captain and assistant professor of military science in the College of Liberal and Applied Arts
- **Dr. Mikhail Kouliavtsev**, chair of the Department of Economics and Finance
- **Monica Pina**, co-owner of AE Cruz Construction in Houston
- **Curtis Tran**, financial professional at New York Life Insurance Company in Dallas

PASSPORT SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS ANNOUNCED

Fall Career Success Passport program scholarship winners received $1,250 and runners up received $500.

FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

Cara Helton, Winner; Brynn Markham, Second; Rian Bartley, Third; Gabrielle Klawinsky, Fourth; Arelle Castro, Fifth.

SOPHOMORES

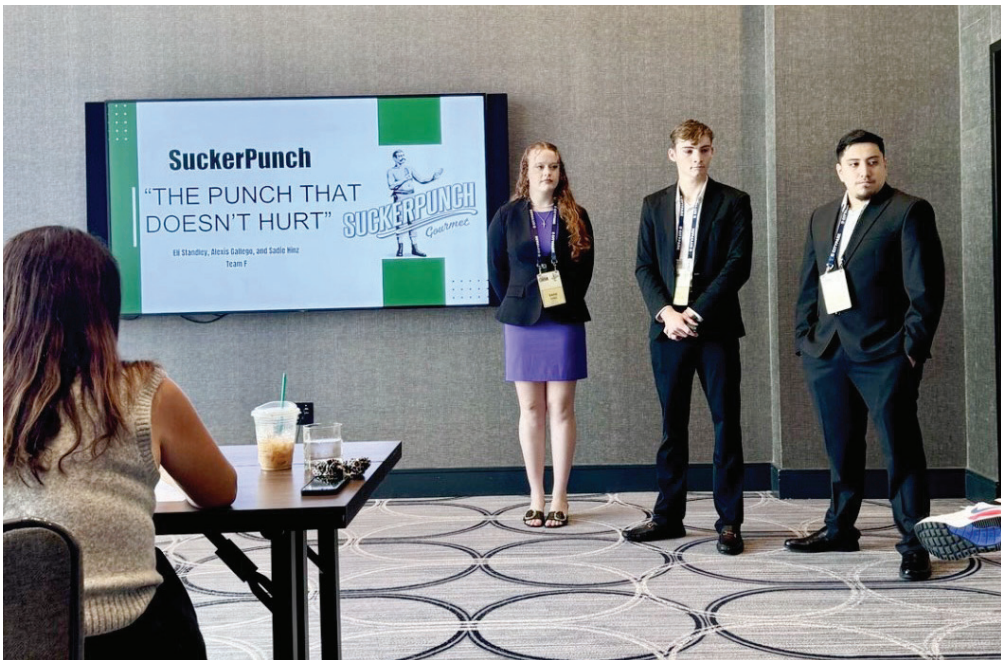
Bridget Collier, Winner; Hilario Pasillas, Second; Iris Cordova, Third; Tyler Hubbard, Fourth; Joanna Ramos, Fifth.

JUNIORS

Rory Price, Winner; Linnea Gorman, Second; Ryquell Green, Second; Alyssa Fite, Third; Cutter Willmeth, Fourth; Mir Raciv Tayamen, Fifth.

SENIORS

Jaret Acosta, Winner; Jessica Gutierrez, Second; Lauren Neel, Third; Thazin Mu, Fourth; James Day, Fifth



Students compete at the Sport Marketing Association's 2024 Case Study Competition in November in St. Louis, Missouri.

STUDENTS PITCH PICKLES AT SMA COMPETITION

Three marketing students worked to increase SuckerPunch pickles' visibility in the college sports environment at the Sport Marketing Association's 2024 Case Study Competition in November in St. Louis, Missouri.

Sadie Hinz, a sports business junior from Dallas; Eli Standley, a sports business junior from Warren, Texas; and Alexis Gallego, a December 2024 marketing graduate from Houston, worked to create campus and gameday activities, pinpoint ways to involve student-athletes in promotion, and develop a social media strategy for SuckerPunch, a pickle brand that focuses on hydration and healthy snacks.

"Though we did not make the finals, the team gave a great performance," said Dr. Derek Walton, assistant professor of sports marketing and one of the faculty sponsors for the team. Dr. Robert McDermand, senior lecturer of sports business and management, is the other faculty sponsor.

"A huge thank you to my professors, Dr. Walton and Dr. McDermand, for preparing me for opportunities like this," Hinz said. "From what I've learned in the classroom to the valuable advice they've shared outside class, I've gained so much and wouldn't be where I am today without their guidance."

Standley also thanked his advisors and teammates.

"Sadie, Alexis and I had some great ideas, from naming bowl games to creating an actual pickle persona for SuckerPunch," he said. "I encourage students that have the chance to go on this trip to take advantage of it because it is well worth it. This event was a great learning experience that I will definitely use as a guide in the future."

In addition to participating in the competition, Hinz, Standley and Gallego toured St. Louis sports stadiums, including Energizer Park and Busch Stadium, and heard from a variety of sport industry leaders, including Dr. Nancy Lough, co-director of the Sports Innovation Institute at the University of Nevada Las Vegas, and Diego Gigliani, president and general manager of St. Louis CITY SC men's soccer club.

For more information on SFA's sports business program, visit sfasu.edu/mgtmkt.

SAC SPOTLIGHT: MYA TIPTON

The Rusche College of Business Student Advisory Council is organizing a get-together to introduce first-year business students to organizations in the college. One of the council's members, Mya Tipton, an entrepreneurship senior from Richmond, provided an update.

"We are facilitating a large event in early spring for the freshmen," Tipton said. "We love being involved and helping others get involved with the Rusche College of Business."

During the event, different business student organizations will "host" a room with games and different themes, she said. The goal of the event is to show first-year students the variety of ways they can get involved and find an organization that best meets their interests.

When Tipton's not studying or working to connect business students, she's running SunDance Horse Training, which she launched in 2019 while she was still in high school. Because of COVID-19, horse owners began moving their horses from a typical stable/barn atmosphere to their own properties, and trainers at the big barns were not willing to travel to the owners' land.

"Being young and lacking capital, I saw a niche market," Tipton said.

With her truck and national ranking in hunter/jumper and dressage competition, Tipton began traveling throughout Houston to train and work with clients.

"In three months, I was able to develop a client base of over 75 people and horses," she said.

Tipton was drawn to SFA because of its small class sizes, which allow for close interaction with professors.

"And the Rusche College of Business was one of the few colleges that offered entrepreneurship as a major, which aligned perfectly with my background in founding and operating small businesses," she said.

For the past four years while she was studying at SFA, Tipton has traveled to Houston to teach and train every weekend. As she looks toward graduating in May, she's also expanding her business to breeding, specifically Irish sport horses. She credits serving on the Student Advisory Council with helping her hone her business and networking skills.

"Working on this council, especially working closely with our advisor, Dr. Laurie Rogers, I've had amazing opportunities to meet and network with some business professionals, help host events, and speak in front of incoming students and their family members," Tipton said. "The skills and relationships I have built from this council have enhanced my life both personally and professionally."

Mya Tipton

MARLETA CHADWICK STUDENT FINANCIAL ADVISORS

Launched in 2014, the Marleta Chadwick Student Financial Advisors is a student-run organization that provides free smart money management advising for the SFA and East Texas communities. From one-on-one financial advising appointments to financial literacy group presentations, these finance and banking majors want to help clients improve their financial health. Pictured, from left, are Alura Lovell of Burleson; Trent Jordan of Argyle; Dr. Matthew Jaramillo, financial planning lecturer and faculty advisor for the group; Evan McDaniel of Austin; Alex Soto of Spring; and Micah Collins of Houston. Not pictured is Sanden Leavers of Baltimore, Maryland. Watch the next Rusche Review for a recap of the group's Money Smart Week events planned for spring. Learn more at gosfa.com/studentfinancialadvisors.

New Student CONVOCATION

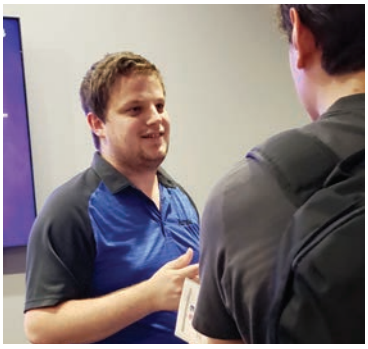
FALL 2024

New students visited with business student organizations and heard from the dean and faculty members at the college's Fall 2024 New Student Convocation in September.

MATTRESS FIRM COMM
RUSCHE

Handful of Candy
Free AARC Button
Free AARC Drink
Free AARC Gift
Free AARC Pen
AARC
Free AARC Pencil
Free AARC Sticker
Free AARC Water
Free AARC Wristbands

MATTRESS FIRM C
MATTRESS FIRM



RUSCHE
COLLEGE
New Student
Location

AMA STUDENT CHAPTER EARNS AWARDS AT AAF ADVERTISING COMPETITION

Members of SFA's American Marketing Association student chapter made their mark during this year's District 10 American Advertising Federation Student Conference in Houston, earning top honors for their creative strategies and teamwork. Competing alongside students from across the region, SFA's talented representatives brought fresh ideas, built connections and gained real-world experience by crafting full-scale advertising campaigns in a high-stakes, industry-style challenge.

The client for the 2024 AAF-Houston competition was Rodney Jones, a personal injury lawyer in Houston, who provided a budget of $1 million for the student teams to create media plans and creative strategies spanning one year. AAF-Houston officials randomly assigned students with varying majors from different universities to teams of six or seven. Those teams worked from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. to prepare complete advertising campaigns for Jones on the first day of the conference.

"Each student who participated in this event just moved forward in their career development," said Dr. Marlene Kahla, professor of management and marketing and faculty advisor for SFA's AMA student chapter. "They entered the industry challenge, met new people and created a complete campaign within seven hours. Then, they selected people from their team to present their campaign to the industry judges. They are all winners."

> *"Each student who participated in this event just moved forward in their career development."*
>
> **Dr. Marlene Kahla**
> *Professor of management and marketing and faculty advisor for SFA's AMA student chapter*

Annabeth Wilkerson, first-year marketing student from Diboll, and Liz Canales, senior general business major from Houston, received top honors on the first-place team. Tess Cohen, first-year entrepreneurship student from Spring, earned second-place honors with her team. Bradley Cavanaugh, junior English major with a marketing minor from Moscow, Texas, served on the third-place team.

Other members of SFA's AMA student chapter participating in the AAF-Houston competition were Madden C. Bennett, junior from Austin; Jorge Cantu, junior from Houston; Katie Carcerano, junior from Orange; Amanda Flores, junior from Houston; Alexis Gallego, senior from Cleveland, Texas, and president of SFA's AMA student chapter; Isabel Jedmears, junior from Little Elm; Edna Rodriquez Mendoza, senior from Dallas; Caroline Oteiza, senior from Houston and vice president of SFA's AMA student chapter; Emily Ponce, junior from Nacogdoches; and Jennifer Rivas, senior from Lufkin.

In addition to the competition, the conference offered résumé and portfolio reviews as well as a career fair to students.

"Several marketing professionals at the career fair said they met SFA students and were impressed by them," Kahla said. "It's so exciting when you can tell that your students got the big picture during the conference."

For more information on the Department of Management and Marketing, visit sfasu.edu/mgtmkt.

BANK ON YOUR FUTURE

Business students learned from Texas banking, bank regulation and financial planning experts that their industry is far more about people than money at a career exploration day in November. Sponsored by the Chadwick Banking Program, the event featured one-on-one meeting opportunities with nearly 20 Texas banks and financial planning institutions as well as bank regulators from the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas and the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency. Pictured, from left, are Isaiah Smith, business economics junior from Allen, and C Welch, a certified fraud examiner and assistant deputy comptroller for midsize and community banks with the OCC. "Jobs happen through people — through contacts like these," said David Kaiser, banking program director. "Students are meeting key members of their new banking and financial planning industry network today." For more information, visit sfasu.edu/banking.

SFA STUDENT MAKES MARK AT FASTENAL NATIONAL SALES INVITATIONAL

Brylee Adams, marketing senior from Houston, placed 14th out of nearly 500 students competing in Fastenal's online National Sales Invitational in November. Adams advanced through two rounds of competition by making compelling "elevator pitches" for fictional companies as part of pre-announced case studies to reach the national final round.

Oscar Sanchez, a recent management graduate from Jasper, also earned a spot in the regional second round competition with Adams. They earned $200 each from the Rusche College of Business.

Jason Maes, a Fastenal customer solutions manager, served as one of the judges who provided real-time feedback during the first-round pitches. He said the students received high scores for their industry insights, knowledge of customer challenges and ability to secure "the next meeting." He also congratulated the SFA faculty members who helped the students build their sales foundational knowledge.

"The participants demonstrated a thorough understanding of the content," Maes said. "Everyone who has prepared them for this has done a great job."

By advancing through the second round, Adams received a $100 bonus prize from the Rusche College of Business. As part of the final round, she met with the chief financial officer of a fictional company over Microsoft Teams for 30 minutes. During this proposal and negotiation stage of the sales process, Adams was judged on her ability to gain attention and build rapport, match her solutions with the buyer's challenges and concerns, and apply her professional sales skills.

Oscar Sanchez and Brylee Adams

Adams said the competition will assist her in her future career.

"Not only did it help me gain valuable skills for what it's like in the sales industry, but it also helped me network and start building valuable connections for after I graduate," she said.

In addition to helping SFA students hone their sales skills, the competition helps Fastenal assess students for possible participation in the company's fast-growing regional internship program.

"The Rusche College of Business and Fastenal corporate partnership is a win-win," said Kathryn Blevins, lecturer of management and marketing. "It helps our students explore their career options before graduating and helps Fastenal find key employees for its workforce."

Fastenal representatives attending the competition say they've already spotted some talented students who would be strong culture fits for their company, which provides supply chain solutions for a variety of industrial products in 25 countries. Six of the 15 Fastenal district managers in the region are SFA alumni.

"All our decisions are made locally — as close to the customer as possible — because our goal is to be where our customers are and help them innovate," said Kent Birdwell, a Fastenal customer solutions consultant based in Nacogdoches. "To achieve that, we work to give our employees the support they need to have every opportunity for success."

FASTENAL ETIQUETTE DINNER

Rusche College of Business students and faculty members as well as business professionals from Fastenal participated in an etiquette dinner as part of the personal selling course taught by Kathryn Blevins, lecturer of marketing. Sponsored by Fastenal, the event featured a happy hour to practice mingling and a two-hour dinner during which students were assigned seats at tables of eight including one business professional or faculty member. Students switched between periods of eating, networking and listening to a lecture on formal dining etiquette.

SFA BUSINESS STUDENTS GAIN INSIGHT INTO HUMAN RESOURCE CAREERS

The Rusche College of Business hosted its first Human Resource Professionals Day in September to recognize alumni working in the field of human resource management and to showcase career opportunities for HR majors and minors. Alumni representing different industries and different career paths shared their insights with students and faculty.

When Emily Smith graduated with a marketing degree from SFA's College of Business in 2006, she didn't know which career path to follow.

"I just knew I wanted a job that I loved," she said during her keynote presentation at SFA's inaugural HR Professionals Day. "I wanted to be passionate. I wanted to make sure that I could make an impact. And then I found human resources."

Smith's goal of achieving a dynamic career led her to Baker Hughes, where she progressed from an internal auditor to HR staffing specialist. She then landed a job as an HR generalist at Huntsman Corporation, where she advanced to Americas regional HR manager of corporate functions. For the past year, Smith has served as HR director for Indorama Ventures, a $21.5 billion chemical company with 24,000 employees worldwide.

"If you can treat somebody respectfully and kindly, you can work in HR," she said.

Dr. Marcus Cox, director of SFA's human resource management program, invited business alumni back to SFA to share about the success they found in HR.

"Though SFA didn't have an HR management program when some of these alumni graduated, they are thriving and navigating this ever-changing field expertly," Cox said. "Our current students can learn from them to help them launch their careers."

Just a decade ago, HR involved mostly transactions for payroll and benefits, Smith said. Today, HR is more "transformational" by encompassing change management and organizational design.

Emily Smith, human resources director for Indorama Ventures and 2006 marketing graduate, answers students' questions during SFA's inaugural Human Resource Professionals Day hosted by the Rusche College of Business.

"Now, HR representatives have a seat at the table for everything a company wants to do," she said in reference to a seat at the boardroom table with other C-suite executives.

Sitting at the table means knowing about changes before anyone else in the company does.

It also involves a lot of data analysis to understand shifts in the workforce and legal knowledge to anticipate the impact that an HR decision might have on a company. HR specialists also need the ability to have difficult conversations and explain the "why" behind company changes that may involve restructuring and layoffs.

A shortage of skilled vocational workers and the delicate balance of remote, in-person and hybrid positions are two of the biggest challenges Smith's department faces. But she's embracing them.

"I love this career," Smith said. "I plan to stay in it until I retire."

Brittany Crockett, Workday HR information systems manager at Stewart Title, joined Smith during a Q&A session with students to discuss the technical job opportunities in HR. She considers herself more "back office," while Smith is more "front office."

Crockett took her first step toward an HR career by accepting an HR internship at Nacogdoches Memorial Hospital while she was studying at SFA. After she graduated with her general business degree in 2013, the internship turned into an HR assistant position.

As an HR assistant at Fugro, a Dutch surveying services company, Crockett caught the HR information systems bug. There, she helped implement Workday Enterprise Management Cloud, the HR and financial system that more than 60% of Fortune 500 companies use. She then took those skills to Stewart Title, where she manages seven people.

"Companies used to have multiple systems, but Workday helps bring them all together," Crockett said.

Much of Crockett's job involves ensuring the right people have the right data at the right time to make the right decisions.

"Everybody has their own goals and priorities, so I have to clarify a lot to different personalities what I need to prioritize and why," she said.

Though they both have experience working in HR for international companies, they speak only English. Smith and Crockett said HR workers for global companies need to understand cultural differences.

"A lot of my co-workers spoke basic English, so I tried to avoid slang and jargon and put as much information as I could in writing," Crockett said. "But just learning the basics of a culture, like

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‘DISCOVERING BUSINESS’ TRAVELS TO CROATIA

Nearly 20 SFA students kicked off this fall’s “Discovering Business” course in the Rusche College of Business with a trip to Croatia at the end of July.

The course, now in its second year and focusing on its second country, is designed to introduce incoming first-year students and nonbusiness majors to business concepts and principles while helping them meet fellow Lumberjacks and faculty members before the fall semester starts.

“Up until going on this trip, I wasn’t 100% sure how college would be,” said Ryan Bledsoe, first-year student from Lumberton. “I was worried about making friends and moving to a completely new place. Now that I have been on this trip and met so many amazing people, I feel much more prepared for the social aspect of college.”

Dr. Drew Thornley, associate professor of legal studies, a co-instructor for the course and faculty leader for the trip to Croatia, said he is pleased with the growth of the “Discovering Business” course.

“Last year, we took nine students on our trip to Costa Rica,” Thornley said. “This year, we took 17 students to Croatia. Last year, four first-year students participated. This year, that number was 11. We aim to grow even more next year.”

During their eight-day trip, students visited historical sites like Ban Jelačić Square, Lotrščak Tower and St. Mark’s Church in Zagreb; Diocletian’s Palace, the statue of Gregory of Nin and the Golden Gate in Split; and Sponza Palace, the Onofrio Fountain and the Minčeta Tower in Dubrovnik.

Students also got down to business with visits to the Museum of Illusions in Zagreb; Stella Croatica, a sweets producer in Split; Hotel Kompas Dubrovnik, a beach resort run by Adriatic Luxury Hotels; and Etnoland Dalmati, a family-run historical and cultural site 10 miles from Krka National Park. The area is considered the origin point of the Dalmatian dog breed.

Nearly 20 SFA students kicked off this fall’s “Discovering Business” course in the Rusche College of Business with a trip to Croatia at the end of July.

“From the owner of Etnoland creating his business out of personal experiences to the Hotel Kompas employee having the best hospitality, this trip helped open my eyes to not only the business world but also to creating relationships with my peers,” said Rian Bartley, first-year student from Lake Dallas. “I always wanted to study abroad, and I’m so glad it was with SFA. Not many people have the opportunity to do what we got to do, but I am very grateful I had the chance and I’m thankful to the college for doing something like this, especially for incoming freshmen.”

Thornley believes the connections students made during the trip will contribute to their success at SFA.

“I hope these friendships continue to grow throughout their respective tenures as SFA students,” he said. “I believe the trip helped students become more culturally aware and sensitive and that the trip opened students’ eyes to the myriad possibilities travel and business can afford them.”

The next “Discovering Business” cohort will explore businesses in Estonia and Finland from July 23 to Aug. 3. For more information on this study-abroad opportunity, email Thornley at thornleyam@sfasu.edu.

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how to say ‘good morning’ and ‘thank you’ will go a long way in making those co-workers feel appreciated.”

Smith said she completed cultural training to understand which cultures will speak up in meetings and how men and women interact in different cultures.

In addition to their global perspective, both Crockett and Smith embrace artificial intelligence in their roles. Workday, Crockett’s specialty, involves machine learning, an application of AI. HR workers at Indorama Ventures use AI to write policies, Smith said, but she doesn’t think AI can replace HR workers.

“A lot of my customer base is in vocational manufacturing, so they’re not at a computer,” Smith said. “There’s still a strong need for boots on the ground if you’re an HR person in manufacturing. You meet the employees where they are.”

For more information on SFA’s human resource management program, visit sfasu.edu/mgtmkt.

BUSINESS STUDENTS SELECTED FOR UTIMCO SCHOLARS PROGRAM

Three Rusche College of Business students were selected for The University of Texas/Texas A&M Investment Management Company Scholars program this year.

Iris Cordova, finance junior from Nacogdoches; Julian Ieva, accounting junior from Houston; and Conner Stover, finance junior from Apple Springs, were the first three SFA students chosen for this opportunity, which was made possible by the university's affiliation with the UT System last year.

"SFA selected Iris, Julian and Conner to represent the university in this program because they have already shown high character, perseverance and a strong willingness to learn," said Dr. Mikhail Kouliavtsev, chair of the Department of Economics and Finance and coordinator for the UTIMCO Scholars program nomination process at SFA.

UTIMCO, the first external investment corporation formed by a public university system, oversees investments for the UT and Texas A&M University systems. In addition, the company forms a cohort every year of up to five students from each institution in these systems for its scholars program.

To be eligible for the cohort, students must be Pell Grant recipients or first-generation college students who are about to enter their sophomore or junior year of college. They also must be interested in asset management careers.

"It feels amazing to be part of the program because you learn so much in such a short period," Cordova said. "I learned what to do and not to do in an interview. It actually helped me feel more confident about interviewing."

Ieva said being part of the cohort was a great opportunity because he "was able to learn about the many different areas of the asset management industry while obtaining valuable information on interviewing and résumé writing."

> ***The students' commitment to this rigorous program over the spring and summer has been impressive. Being selected for one of the internships will be a well-earned honor.***
>
> **Dr. Mikhail Kouliavtsev**
> *Chair of the Department of Economics and Finance and coordinator for the UTIMCO Scholars program nomination process at SFA*

Stover said the program helped him learn about investment strategies, risk management and portfolio construction, as well as honed his professionalism and analytical skills.

"It has been an incredible experience," he said. "It has provided SFA's group with valuable networking opportunities and professional advice from some of the leading financial institutions — an opportunity most students can only dream of."

Since March, Cordova, Ieva and Stover have participated in professional development activities that not only introduced them to the investment management industry but also helped them build their peer networks and obtain early career advice from experts in the field. They met with professionals from such firms as BlackRock, PIMCO, Bridgewater, Dimensional Fund Advisors, Alliance Bernstein, Brevan Howard and JP Morgan.

In addition, the program included a trip to The University of Texas at Austin to work with cohort participants from other UT institutions.

"One piece of advice that hit home for me during my visit to Austin was the analogy that learning finance is like learning a new language," Stover said. "The experience emphasized the importance of hard work and studying before the concepts would begin to make sense and then could be applied to real scenarios."

Cordova highly recommends the program to other students.

"They are really trying to help you make connections and get you some experience," she said.

Ieva added, "This will continue to help me and all other scholars in our future career paths."

Stover confirmed that the program helped him pinpoint his true career interests.

"I learned that asset management and investment research are the things that interest me most," Stover said. "I can't wait to make a future career out of them."

The students completed the program in July, and UTIMCO began sharing their résumés with its recruiting partners who are filling internship positions for summer 2025. UTIMCO team members will work with program participants during the 2024-25 academic year to help them secure internships.

"The students' commitment to this rigorous program over the spring and summer has been impressive," Kouliavtsev said. "Being selected for one of the internships will be a well-earned honor."

BUSINESS STUDENTS REPRESENT SFA AT INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

A three-student cohort, including two Rusche College of Business students, represented SFA at the 12th University Scholars Leadership Symposium in August at the United Nations Conference Centre in Bangkok, Thailand. This marks the first time SFA students have participated in the symposium.

Facilitated through SFA's Office of International Programs, Oscar Sanchez, a recent management graduate; Brianna Patterson, a recent kinesiology and exercise science graduate; and Mackenzie Damon, a recent marketing graduate, joined fellow students from around the world in Thailand to gain tools and confidence to tackle some of the world's most pressing issues.

The symposium, organized by Humanitarian Affairs Asia, is designed to empower young leaders who are passionate about addressing global humanitarian challenges. The symposium gathers university students and emerging leaders from around the world to engage in meaningful discussions, workshops and networking sessions focused on sustainable development, social justice and humanitarian efforts.

"This was a new opportunity for SFA to provide students a chance to connect with peers from around the world, learn about the United Nations development goals and participate in humanitarian projects abroad," said Ines Maxit, study abroad coordinator in SFA's Office of International Programs. "We hope every experience abroad is transformative in students' lives and that they use it to enhance their education and open the door for future opportunities. We also hope that by sharing their experience, they will encourage fellow students to follow their steps."

With this year's theme "Be the Change," attendees interacted with likeminded individuals and learned from experts with extensive experience

Oscar Sanchez, Mackenzie Damon and Brianna Patterson

in social change and humanitarian work. Sanchez, a participant in two study abroad opportunities prior to the symposium, considered this an opportunity of a lifetime.

"Being at the United Nations Conference Centre really made you feel the weight of this event," Sanchez said. "The speakers were experts in their fields and held a plethora of knowledge that they were willingly imparting to us future leaders in hopes that we would take that knowledge and do the same. Being amongst not just experts from across the world but students from all walks of life also allowed for unique interactions that I never would have experienced otherwise. Truly, it was a chance that I did not believe I ever would have had."

Presenters ranged from tech visionaries, such as Jack Growden, to social activists, like Ifrah Admed and former MMA champion Bahir Ahmad, who all provided inspiring words for their respective causes and initiatives. According to Damon, the speakers were passionate, inspiring and thought-provoking.

"The speakers gave excellent methods on enhancing our leadership skills as global change makers," Damon said. "Going to the Leadership Symposium was a life changing experience where I have met many new lifelong friends, and I will cherish those memories for as long as possible."

For Patterson, the symposium offered a chance for self-evaluation and means to push herself out of her comfort zone.

"The symposium was an incredible way to connect with inspiringly motivated people from all over the world," Patterson said. "Some of whom had taken steps to start working towards what they felt pulled to do after witnessing what they've identified their communities need. I was blown away by other people's drive, motivation and compassion. Being in this environment pushed me to take a hard look at myself and push myself out of my comfort zone."

In 2024, OIP recorded a record high 183 students who participated in a study abroad opportunity. Aside from those who participated in the symposium, 176 students participated in a faculty-led program and four students studied abroad independently.

"International experiences such as the symposium bring personal and professional growth, challenge perspectives and help build a global network," Maxit said. "In today's global society, all these things help to gain a competitive edge in the job market. SFA offers many international opportunities either to study, intern, research or volunteer, and students looking for a global experience just need to contact OIP for information and guidance. Furthermore, students need to keep in mind that they have a tremendous network of support at SFA."

For more information about OIP, visit sfasu.edu/oip.

Being on the campus and meeting the SFA staff and faculty when I visited my daughters made my heart ache for my younger self, who missed out on all that SFA had to offer. It created a deeper longing to complete my degree...

Kristi Lee, *Class of 2024*

SFA FAMILY MATRIARCH EARNS HER BBA

In August, Kristi Lee graduated summa cum laude from SFA with a Bachelor of Business Administration in general business. She had been working on that college degree ever since she graduated as valedictorian from Newton High School in 1987.

"After high school, I enrolled at Texas A&M University but soon realized it was not the right environment," she said. "The transition from a small town where everyone knows each other to the overwhelming size of A&M was a significant challenge. The class sizes were larger than my entire graduating class at NHS."

So, Lee followed a different path.

"I got married, beginning my lifelong dream of becoming a wife and mother," she said. "In hindsight, SFA would have been a better fit for me, and I kept that in mind when my children were considering their college options."

Over the years, Lee never let go of her dream of higher education. In 2005, as a mother of three working full time for Newton Independent School District, she drove to Angelina College in Jasper for classes, but that took her away from her family too much. When online classes became an option — albeit it an expensive one — at Ashford University, she worked a little more on her degree, but she was unable to sustain her enrollment financially. She used her experience to motivate her children to complete their college degrees while they could — before other responsibilities crept into their lives.

"They have always known that college was a requirement, not an option," Lee said. "I often used myself and my husband, Charles, as examples of how hard and long they would have to work to establish themselves without a degree. We both greatly emphasized higher education, and all our children knew our expectations."

RING OF INSPIRATION

For Kristi Lee, her class ring is more than a symbol of her college career — it's a source of inspiration that helped her complete the last leg of her general business BBA.

"I was eligible for a ring long before I ordered one because I did not know when my actual graduation year would be," Lee said. "But last year, I realized that I could potentially graduate in 2024."

Potentially then became reality.

"Little did I know that wearing this ring on my finger would instill so much pride in myself and what I was about to accomplish," she said. "It inspired me to push harder and graduate in August."

Lee's determination to finish her degree grew from watching her children complete each of their degrees at SFA.

"Being on the campus and meeting the SFA staff and faculty when I visited my daughters made my heart ache for my younger self, who missed out on all that SFA had to offer," she said. "It created a deeper longing to complete my degree, a regret I could not overcome."

Emily Jefferson, Lee's oldest daughter and former director of undergraduate recruitment at SFA, earned a Bachelor of Science in family and consumer sciences in 2012 and a Master of Arts in student affairs and higher education in 2015. Anna Jefferson, program coordinator in the dean's office at SFA's College of Sciences and Mathematics, earned her Bachelor of Science in mass communication in 2016 and her Master of Science in human sciences in 2021. Jacob Lee, who was in third grade when Emily entered college, earned his Bachelor of Science in engineering physics in 2023 and is currently a graduate student.

Lee clearly got her point across about the importance of higher education, even to her second daughter, Anna, who said she initially didn't want to go to college.

"Unlike my siblings, I was reluctant to attend college," she said. "My mom pushed me and made sure that I was not limiting myself or my future. Through the breakdowns and major changes, she was always there cheering me on."

Anna added that she is glad she got to return the favor.

"The fact that I got to cheer her on is something that not many children get to experience," she said. "She has unlocked doors that have been closed to her for so long, and I could not be any prouder to say that I am her daughter."

By 2017, SFA had officially become the family's second home when Emily told Lee about a new online degree in the Rusche College of Business.

"At the time I enrolled, I was serving as the finance manager for Newton ISD, overseeing financial operations in the administration office," Lee said. "My experience encompassed payroll management, accounts payable and audit

Pictured, from left, Jacob Lee '23 (and soon to be '25), Anna Jefferson '16 and '21, Kristi Lee '24, and Emily Jefferson '12 and '15 celebrate Kristi Lee's summa cum laude graduation with a BBA in general business in August.

oversight in school business. Pursuing a general business degree aligned with my career trajectory and provided the flexibility of an online program, which was relatively scarce at the time."

Lee said she faced a lot of challenges, including work-related issues and having to sit out a semester due to an extended family illness.

"I struggled a lot during the last seven years," she said. "I often wanted to give up, but my family supported and encouraged me. Without their unwavering love and support, I would not be where I am today. I'm just so proud to have my kids feel as proud of me as I am of them."

Lee also attributes her success to the faculty, staff and friends she considers family at SFA.

"Every professor I've had at SFA has really wanted students to succeed, from giving me their cellphone number so I could discuss homework with them to nominating me for scholarships," she said. "As an online student, having a sense of connection with instructors is crucial, and I am grateful that all of my professors were readily available to help."

Today, Lee works as an Ascender business consultant in the information management department at the Region 5 Education Service Center in Beaumont.

"It is such a privilege to serve the districts in Region 5," she said. "Being able to provide support to other school business officials in this capacity has been the highlight of my career."

Though many of SFA's general business classes are tailored toward for-profit enterprises, Lee said she did gain skills that directly apply to the nonprofit education sector.

"The leadership and team management expertise I have acquired are not just theoretical but have been put into practice in various teaching and team-based scenarios," she said. "The accounting principles have deepened my understanding of external audits, and the technology courses have significantly enhanced my skills in Excel and database usage, which I have used to streamline tasks.

"But I think developing a school business emphasis for SFA's MBA program would be beneficial to district professionals across the state who are seeking higher education in school finance," she added.

Though her current position does not require a bachelor's degree, Lee receives an added stipend with each degree she earns.

"Earning my bachelor's degree opens the door to more opportunities for growth and development, as many careers require a degree to even apply," she said.

Next up to walk across the Johnson Coliseum stage is Jacob, who will earn his Master of Science in cyber security in spring 2025.

"When my son graduates, it will mark 16 years of continuous SFA enrollment for our family," Lee said. "SFA not only offers the opportunity for higher education, but it is also a place to watch your children grow into the adults they were meant to be."

When presented with the idea of extending her family's continuous SFA enrollment by going for a Master of Business Administration, Lee's pretty certain she's met her higher education goals.

"Unless they create a school business emphasis for the MBA."

FORENSIC ACCOUNTING EXPERT KICKS OFF SPEAKER SERIES

Forensic accountant Jesse Silvertown

Around 100 SFA students, faculty and staff examined careers in forensic accounting with the help of Jesse Silvertown, a certified public accountant who has spent 15 years focusing on financial fraud in professional sports, media, tech and entertainment.

The virtual presentation in October launched the Schlief School of Accountancy's new speaker series (see "SFA alumna, former faculty member helps launch speaker series").

Silvertown, who is now a principal at The Ledge Company in New York City, said his job is similar to Ben Affleck character's role in the feature film "The Accountant" except with "a lot fewer guns."

"Forensic accounting is financial firefighting," he said. "You put out and prevent financial fires."

The forensic accounting industry will see a 6.5% growth rate between 2022 and 2030, and economic downturns will not affect this growth, Silvertown said.

Starting as an accountant in one of the big four firms — Ernst & Young, PricewaterhouseCoopers, KPMG and Deloitte — is the first step in becoming a forensic accountant, he said. Moving to Hollywood to investigate fraud in the entertainment industry or to New York City for sports is the next step.

"To me, sports is one of the riskier industries in the country," Silvertown said.

Outsized money and attention, growth that's outpaced the controls of some of the organizations, and a "keeping up with the Joneses" culture all lead to a sizeable amount of fraud in the sports industry.

When sports organizations suspect financial malfeasance such as occupational fraud (misappropriation of funds) or corruption (bribes), they call forensic accountants like Silvertown.

"They need someone like me — an independent person in the middle to assess financial damages," he said. "I ask three questions: How did it happen? Why did it happen? How can it be prevented from happening again?"

With cases ranging from Amit Patel's embezzlement while working for the Jacksonville Jaguars to Toronto Raptors player Jontay Porter making "prop bets," Silvertown showed students how a forensic accountant tracks down irregularities.

Mergers and acquisitions also can be risky, so organizations looking to purchase a sports team hire forensic accountants to conduct due diligence background checks. These checks usually involve risk assessment with the Corruption Perceptions Index, extensive data analytics, interviewing and public records searching.

Though the forensic accounting industry is growing, the number of accounting graduates taking the CPA Exam is not.

"That's a problem," Silvertown said. "We need certified public accountants because they're the gatekeepers of the financial markets."

According to cfo.com, CPA Exam test-takers fell to 67,355 in 2022, down from 72,271 in 2021. The number of unique CPA candidates peaked in 2016 at 102,291.

Silvertown said the "CPA" behind a name represents rigor, preparation for leadership and cross-border reciprocity.

"They're letters you can use as part of your brand," he said. "I'm a big supporter of the designation."

To future forensic accountants in the room, Silvertown offered this advice: Look for patterns but also look for the absence of patterns, document everything, be skeptical and try not to quit during that first year in an accounting job.

During his first year as a staff accountant at Ernst & Young, Silvertown was sure he'd be fired, but he stuck with it.

"Don't think, 'Do what you love and you'll never work another day,'" he said. "Instead, spend some time doing something you don't like a lot, get better and move on to specialize in something you love, like sports."

For more information on the Schlief School of Accountancy, including its forensic accounting course, visit sfasu.edu/acct.

FORMER FACULTY MEMBER HELPS LAUNCH SPEAKER SERIES

Dr. Carolyn Conn, who earned a Bachelor of Business Administration from SFA in 1972 and served as an assistant professor of accounting at the university from 1976 to 1983, continues to support her alma mater by helping launch a new accounting speaker series.

"A speaker series shows students how many different and interesting careers they can choose from with a major in accounting," Conn said. "I tell my students, 'You can do anything — almost — with an accounting degree.'"

Now a clinical associate professor of accounting at Texas State University, Conn pitched the speaker series idea to Schlief School of Accountancy faculty members over the summer. They liked the idea, and the series launched in October with nationally recognized forensic accountant Jesse Silvertown.

"Dr. Conn is a dedicated supporter of SFA and wants to increase the engagement among the Schlief School of Accountancy students and Rusche College of Business students in general," said Dr. Jose (Jay) Vega, director of the school.

Conn and Vega are working to identify sources of funding, including grants, to create an endowment that will ensure permanent funding for the series that will bring nationally recognized speakers from the accounting profession to SFA each fall and spring semester to generate interest in accounting as a major.

Check out the summer 2025 Rusche Review for a recap of the spring speaker presentation.

BAGLEY GIVES DECEMBER COMMENCEMENT ADDRESSES

Chris A. Bagley, SFA alumnus as well as president and chief credit officer of Cadence Bank, gave the commencement addresses during the university's fall graduation ceremonies in December.

Chris A. Bagley, SFA alumnus, president and chief credit officer of Cadence Bank

Bagley received a Bachelor of Business Administration from SFA in 1983 and a Master of Business Administration from the University of Houston in 1986.

With over 40 years of banking experience, Bagley has served in his current role since 2014. Cadence Bank is an approximately $50 billion financial institution with more than 350 branches across nine states in the South and Texas. Prior to joining Cadence, he was an executive officer and chief credit officer of Prosperity Bank in Houston.

Bagley has served in many roles in commercial banking and within the community, including as a member of the board of directors for a publicly traded financial holding company and as chair of the Community Development Foundation for Tupelo/Lee County, Mississippi, the driver of economic development in Northeast Mississippi.

RUSCHE COLLEGE OF BUSINESS EXECUTIVE ADVISORY BOARD

Members of the Rusche College of Business Executive Advisory Board gathered for the fall 2024 EAB meeting in October. Learn more about EAB at gosfa.com/rusche-eab.

BETA GAMMA SIGMA NAMED HIGHEST HONORS CHAPTER

SFA's Beta Gamma Sigma chapter in the Rusche College of Business was named a Highest Honors chapter.

Founded in 1913, BGS is the international business honor society for schools accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, which are the top 6% of business school programs around the world.

"The fact that our BGS chapter consistently receives the Highest Honors designation by AACSB is a testament to the hard work and talent of our students, as well as the exceptional dedication of our faculty," said Dr. Tim Bisping, dean of the Rusche College of Business. "I am proud of this accomplishment as our students and faculty continue to excel and compete at the highest levels of business education."

A BGS chapter earns the "Highest Honors" designation by demonstrating consistent high levels of engagement and activity within the chapter, including strong leadership, member participation and a focus on academic excellence. These are evaluated by the BGS organization based on metrics like member involvement, chapter events and overall impact on the campus business community.

"This recognition, as part of the BGS Honor Roll Program, reflects your chapter's dedication to excellence and the impact you are making within your academic community," said John C. Navin, chair of the BGS Board of Governors, in a letter to Bisping.

RUSCHE ACHIEVEMENTS

Several Rusche College of Business alumni are celebrating professional promotions:

ANDREW ALVARADO, BBA, Finance '18, **Vice President, Weitzman**

TAYLOR CLONTS, BBA '13, **Director, EIKON-X**

RICK LOWRY, BBA '22, **Broker/Owner, Rick Lowry Properties**

MATTHEW MORGAN, BBA, Marketing '24, **Group Sales Account Executive, Houston Dynamo Football Club**

JACKSON PICKARD, MBA '24, **Director of Athletic Communications, Southern Arkansas University**

ISAIAH SCHREIBER, BBA, Sports Business '20, **Account Executive, Houston Astros**

CAMERON SHEPHERD, BBA '23 and Master of Public Administration '25, **Legislative Director, Texas House of Representatives**

KYLE SMITH, BBA '20, **Area Manager II, Amazon Air**

ERIKA TOLAR, BBA, Marketing '02, **Chief of Staff and Senior Director of Government and Commercial Business Development, Shipcom**

CURTIS TRAN, BBA, Finance '23, **Registered Representative, NYLIFE Securities LLC**

JACOB VAN BUSKIRK, BBA '23, **Sales Academy Representative, Orlando City SC**

Submit your professional and personal achievements to Taylor.Alvarez@sfasu.edu to be featured!

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For more information, visit **sfasu.edu/cob.**