

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY FUND (EOF) NEWSLETTER



PUENTES FROM EOF DIRECTOR, LAURA F. RICKARDS

Water is a life force. We are sacks made up of mostly water. We can't live without it. Perhaps it's not necessary to drink the recommended 64 ounces daily, but after about 72 hours, or three days without hydration, death occurs. Conversely, drinking too much water can kill you by diluting the levels of essential sodium and potassium. Water is life.

How do we navigate the waters of life? The threats, troubles, challenges, losses, and disappointments? We can surf, sail, swim, but not walk on water. We can, however, cross a bridge. Deep water, swift running water, lake, or sea waters... Bridges make egress possible - no fins, no gills needed. Bridges provide support, access, and the ability to walk **over** water.

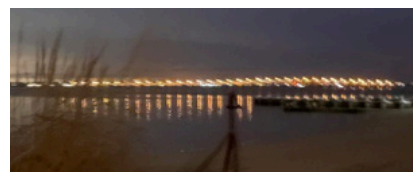
What waters have you traversed? What have you survived or triumphed? Were you alone? Did you have guidance or help? I hope most of us can say that we were not alone, that assistance arrived just in time, that a person or persons, known or unknown, provided what was needed, that someone listened and shared a perspective that buttressed and energized, and poured light into a space in need of a little perspective. And in the end, we survived. We are stronger and wiser for it.

EOF is a bridge, truly a system of bridges that crisscrosses New Jersey. These bridges are walkways toward opportunities, second chances, and dreams, realized. They form a framework that operates through a lens of possibility and potential in others.

While the bridge provides a path and a view, it requires from any scholar crossing **bravery, faith, and courage** — **trust** in another, who is working with and for each scholar's success. And there lies the success of EOF, relationship, and membership. It's belief in the process of becoming, and reconnecting with our innate capacities for greatness, built cable by cable, sustaining the bridge and framework for achievement.

Every day, we have a choice to be a bridge. Perhaps it's simply holding a door open, smiling, tipping the delivery person, or opening our arms or heart, creating linkage and connection, building bridges — and there is always risk. In a heightened stranger-danger, conspiracy-laden world, this may be a tall order, but when we risk nothing and remain closed and guarded, we wither — we are unchanged. A self-actualized life is one abounding with taking chances, just as Miss Frizzle urged, take chances, make mistakes, get messy!

Be a bridge, a bridge over troubled waters.



Scan the QR Code to listen to **Bridge Over Troubled Water** by Simon & Garfunkel:
https://youtu.be/4G-YQA_bsOU?si=okDmNanrh1of0jLB

ACADEMIC COACHING

Our academic coaching is designed to support scholars working toward degree completion. Coaching activities include working with students on time management, motivation, study skills, organization, goal setting, and test-taking. Using a holistic approach, we connect students with other resources as needs present. Our goal is to have scholars use coaching as another tool for success.

MEET OUR COACHES



Christine Cassidy
English



Dr. Jonas Weissbrod
Math & Chemistry

What EOF Scholars Have to Say About Academic Coaching

*Christine gave good feedback when I had sent in a paper (needed desperate last second help). I ended up getting a higher grade than anticipated. - **Xia Garcia***

*Jonas has been an exceptional academic coach. Throughout the school year, he has supported me in successfully navigating my Precalculus I and II courses. He consistently offered new perspectives when approaching challenging problems and was always professional, approachable, and willing to help whenever I needed guidance. - **Kate Ibarra***

*I asked her to look over my college essay. Christine came back in a timely fashion with great corrections and suggestions. - **Connor Nolan***

*Christine was a literal life saver for me last semester while I took the English 2 course! She dedicated an hour every Sunday which definitely attributed to my passing that course! I had the opportunity to work with Jonas recently to help me catch up in my Intro Statistics class and he was so helpful! - **Rivkie Kruman***

*Christine was able to help me with getting the Jersey City slag out of my paper and to get the right words where they needed to be. She pushed me on better grammar, which helped me a lot. - **Teresa Alfonso***

EOF@OCEAN: SUMMER 2025

On Wednesday, July 30, 2025, EOF@OCEAN welcomed 28 of our incoming class of new scholars to experience an unforgettable summer orientation. Combining the overarching theme of *Readiness* with a fun "EOF Love Island" vibe, the day was packed with engaging activities and lively competition guided by EOF Student Leaders Marco Ruiz, Areeba Zulkarnain, and Brooke Colon.

Scholars participated in an English Writing Boot Camp that helped bridge the gap from high school to college-level writing, learned digital communication skills through an email etiquette session, and affirmed their commitment to future success by taking the EOF@OCEAN Pledge.

We were pleased to welcome a diverse and distinguished faculty panel, including professors Dr. Marilyn Kralik, Pamela Bogdan, Lincoln Simmons, Stephen Baglivio, Maryann Birdsall, along with EOF's academic coaches, Dr. Jonas Weissbrod and Christine Cassidy, who provided a platform for open and honest dialogue with students about college expectations. President Monaco also joined after an opening in her calendar allowed her to meet, greet, and inspire our new EOF scholars.

The Love island-inspired atmosphere helped foster new friendships and prepared our students for the academic year ahead.

What EOF Scholars Have to Say About Summer 2025:

The EOF Summer Program helped show me all the help and opportunities that EOF offers to students while also introducing me to other people apart of EOF. I also found the portion about email etiquette really helpful as I had never sent a proper email before. - Kareem McGrath

This was a good experience. It gave me a good idea of college and the professors were very helpful. - Diego Garcia

I thought it was interesting. There are a lot of resources and support for EOF students, which is great. I thought it was engaging and the activities were entertaining. - Catherine Woods



ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Brittany Royce, Class of 2023

Since graduating, I've built a career as a graphic designer specializing in branding, large format print, and visual marketing materials for local businesses. My work includes signage, banners, promotional displays, and custom graphics that help businesses strengthen their visual identity and stand out in their communities.

Alongside my professional work, I am developing my own personal creative brand where I create digital illustrations, journals, and apparel designs centered around creativity, self-expression, and neurodivergent empowerment. As a mom and artist, I often draw inspiration from family life and enjoy exploring mixed media such as digital illustration, sublimation printing, resin, and clay.

Connect with Brittany:

Portfolio: brittanyb516.myportfolio.com

Instagram: @BrittanyB_Designs

Email: brittanyroyce516@gmail.com



Joed Lopez, Class of 2006

Since graduating from Ocean County College, I've built my career in the technology field after 10 years in Higher Ed. I currently work as a product instructor for a cybersecurity company, where I help organizations understand and implement secure remote access solutions.

Along the way I've developed a strong interest in systems thinking, leadership, and operational frameworks — particularly how better systems can help organizations reduce complexity and focus on what matters most.

Outside of my day job, I've also been working on writing and research around leadership and organizational productivity and effectiveness, especially in nonprofit and church environments.

I am married with two kids living in Philadelphia, PA.

Connect with Joed on LinkedIn by scanning the QR code or using the link: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/joedlopez>

Connect on LinkedIn:



Lisa (Bethel) Perez, Class of 2016

I went on to earn a bachelor of arts in psychology from Binghamton University, a dual master's in elementary education and teaching students with disabilities from Montclair State University, and then moved back to Toms River to begin my career. I became a third-grade teacher at Washington Street Elementary in Toms River in 2021 and have been there ever since!

I had my daughter, Luna, last February and love staying active in the community.



ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Annalicia Rojas “Red”, Class of 2016

I graduated from OCC in 2016. During my time there, I had the privilege of being part of the EOF program, which played a huge role in supporting and shaping my college experience. EOF provided me with opportunities that helped me grow far beyond the classroom. Through the program, I was able to stretch my skills, challenge my limitations, and build confidence in myself.

One of the most valuable aspects of EOF was the exposure it gave me to networking opportunities, guest speakers, writers, and cultural events that I likely would not have experienced otherwise. The program created a supportive environment where I always felt encouraged, especially during difficult moments in my studies. I still remember being invited to speak on behalf of the EOF program during an award ceremony. At the time, I never could have imagined being given such a meaningful opportunity, and it remains one of my most memorable experiences.

Since graduating, my life has grown and changed in many ways. For the past eight years, I have been living in Arizona, where I have built a career in manufacturing. I am currently finishing my Bachelor’s degree in Business Administration through the University of the People. Recently, I also accepted a new career opportunity with Nestlé Purina in their Management Development Program, which will allow me to continue developing my leadership skills and apply what I have learned in my studies.

Looking back, I feel incredibly grateful for my experience at OCC. Many professors and staff members had a lasting impact on my life and career, and the support I received there helped shape the path I am on today. I am excited to see where this next chapter of my journey will lead.

Connect with Analicia on LinkedIn by scanning the QR code or using the link: [linkedin.com/in/annalicia-rojas-514b5b153](https://www.linkedin.com/in/annalicia-rojas-514b5b153)



Connect on LinkedIn:



Mario Steriti, Class of 2016

If it weren't for Ocean County College's EOF program, I wouldn't have gone to college, let alone graduate. As a son of Italian immigrants, I was under the idea that the only way I could go to college was if I got an athletic or academic scholarship. It was strong motivation, yet far from the truth. It wasn't until my sister (also an EOF graduate) connected me with the EOF program that I set my path on course.

From OCC, I transferred to Kean University via the Kean Ocean Program, where I graduated summa cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts in Biology. Today I am a science teacher and football coach at Toms River High School East, and a business owner providing AI training. I am also happily married with two kids and still living locally.

Sometimes the path ahead is hard to see clearly, but opportunities, progress, and intentional action have a way of driving you exactly where you need to be. The OCC Educational Opportunity Fund is a starting point and the first step to the future you envision for yourself. Put the work in, trust the process, and enjoy the journey!

Connect with Mario on LinkedIn by scanning the QR code or using the link: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/mario-steriti-992430195>

Connect on LinkedIn:



ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

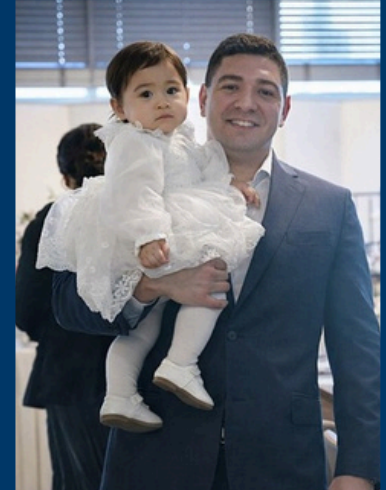
Michael Bucceri, Class of 2014

Over the years since my time at EOF, life has taken me on an incredible journey. I completed my BA at Rutgers and landed my first corporate role in NYC with FDM Group, which eventually led me to a two-year consulting assignment with their client, National Grid. That opportunity brought me up to the Boston area, and after finishing my contract, I decided to join National Grid full-time.

As life unfolded, I made new friends and family and found my home. I married the love of my life, Julia, and chose to remain in Massachusetts. With her unwavering support, I decided to pursue my MBA—and during that journey, we welcomed our daughter, Sia. I am now just one month away from completing my degree at Boston College.

EOF truly laid the foundation for everything I've achieved, for which I am very grateful. I'm also happy to share that I was recently promoted to Lead Project Manager / Program Manager late last year, where I help advance green energy initiatives across the New York and New England regions.

Connect with Michael on LinkedIn by scanning the QR code or using the link: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/michaelabucceri/>



Connect on LinkedIn:



Klever Goracy, Class of 2015

EOF played a pivotal role in helping me build the life I have today. With their guidance and support throughout college, I was able to pursue a career in public accounting, something I once thought was out of reach after dropping out of high school and becoming a teenage father.

Life looks very different now, in the best way, and I am truly grateful for EOF's impact on my journey. I joined EOF in 2012 during a challenging time. I was a high school dropout navigating juvenile probation and trying to find direction. During my second semester, my son Roger was born. Shortly after graduating from Ocean County College, I learned of his autism diagnosis. Despite these challenges, I continued my education at Kean University, where I earned my bachelor's degree. Today, I am a Senior Accountant at a public accounting firm, preparing tax returns for businesses and individuals.

Since starting my career in 2019, I have grown professionally while applying the tools and skills I learned through EOF. Roger, now 13, is thriving and receiving the therapies and support he needs. I am happily married to my wife, Shanelle, and we hope to expand our family soon. I also contribute to the Media and Production team at my church. EOF's dedication changes lives, and I am proud to be one of many success stories.

Connect with Klever on LinkedIn by scanning the QR code or using the link: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/klevergoracy>

Connect on LinkedIn:



FALL WELCOME

In October, we hosted our annual Fall Open House, bringing scholars together to celebrate the season and connect with one another. Inspired by autumn, the event featured apple cider, crafts, and sweet treats in a warm and festive atmosphere.

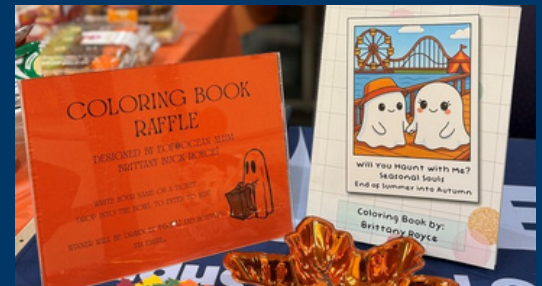
Students enjoyed seasonal craft activities while taking a break from their busy schedules, sharing conversation and laughter. Several EOF@OCEAN alumni stopped by to reconnect with the program and share their experiences with current scholars.

We also raffled off a seasonal coloring book designed by EOF@OCEAN alumnus, Brittany Royce. Read more about her in our Alumni section.

Events like this strengthen EOF's sense of community and membership, reminding students that we support their academic success and also their connection and sense of belonging at OCEAN.



Top: Alexis Bajada, Kaitlyn Giocharis, Marco Ruiz
Bottom: Jennifer Olah, Liz Macchioni, Areeba Zulkarnain, Michele Giocharis, Jonny Giocharis, Laura Rickards



EOF SCHOLARS ON CAMPUS

Meet the exceptional EOF scholars who are making an impact across campus through their involvement in clubs, honor societies, work-study, and more!



Rivkie Kruman

- Neuro Diversity Alliance, Founder
- SGA Senator
- CAB Committee
- Academic Affairs Committee
- Pride/Prism Club
- Psychology Club
- PTK, SKD, AAA, LAE, Psi Beta
- Honors by Contract



Kate Ibarra

- Phi Theta Kappa, Vice President
- SGA Senator
- College Senate
- Voces Unidas Club
- Sigma Kappa Delta
- Alpha Alpha Alpha
- Alpha Beta Gamma
- Psi Beta
- Honors by Contract



Maria Zulkarnain

- Muslims Student Association, Vice President
- Phi Theta Kappa
- Honors by Contract



Tara Covert

- Social Work Club
- VMRC
- Sigma Kappa Delta
- Alpha Alpha Alpha



Kamari Jones

- Social Work Club, President
- Social Work Advisory Committee
- CAB Committee
- Alpha Alpha Alpha
- Phi Theta Kappa



David Tees

- History Club, Treasurer
- SKD, Treasurer
- Phi Theta Kappa
- Alpha Alpha Alpha
- Honors by Contract

PRESIDENT'S LIST - FALL 2025



These students have completed at least 12 credits with a C grade or above and have earned a semester grade point average of 3.5 or higher.

SCHOLAR	GPA
Batool Abdelmalak	4.0
Jeremy Brycs Antonio	4.0
John Attia	3.75
Kayleigh Bagley	3.75
Alicia Bird	4.0
Martha Contreras Martinez	4.0
Tara Covert	3.75
Shania Crump	3.813
Shamiya Gaines	3.71
Xia Garcia	3.656
Kate Ibarra	4.0
Jasmine Jimenez	3.786
Dawasia Jones	3.8
Kareem McGrath	4.0
Connor Nolan	4.0

SCHOLAR	GPA
Tonja Pacheco	3.5
Bridgette Pezza	3.9
Brianna Reid	3.769
Danna Reyes	3.7
Matthew Rose	3.692
Juli Dreiann Sablan	4.0
Julia Sobol	4.0
David Tees	4.0
Raylyn Tupper	3.9
Daniel Valente	3.656
Samantha Van Horn	3.73
Chloe White	3.571
Catherine Woods	4.0
Jesse Zsilavetz	3.75
Maria Zulkarnain	4.0

EOF CANVAS PARTICIPATION CHAMPIONS

We would like to recognize those scholars who have been actively using and participating in our EOF course shell. Our course shell outlines program requirements and helps students meet program goals and stay informed. Our top two scholars are:

1. Eutysha Mears 1,181 Page Views
2. Nancy Sanchez Tochihuitl 976 Page Views

EOF ACADEMIC COACHING CHAMPIONS

We would like to recognize the scholars who have been the most active in utilizing EOF academic coaching this year. Our top two scholars are:

1. Sergio Vargas 7,950 Minutes
2. Daniel Quijano 3,900 Minutes

LEADERSHIP 2026

In January, we hosted our annual Leadership Conference, bringing together 16 EOF scholars for a three-day, two-night leadership experience at the Chauncey Hotel & Conference Center. Designed to strengthen non-verbal communication and conflict resolution skills. It gave students the opportunity to step away from their daily routines and fully engage in a collaborative learning environment.

Inspired by Disney-Pixar's *Elemental*, the conference used the balance of the four elements: fire, water, earth, and air, to illustrate that effective leadership comes from understanding, defining, and mastering these powerful forces within ourselves.

The conference was led by student leaders Daniel Quijano and Jolisa Binoya, who guided participants through interactive discussions and activities exploring three key elements of non-verbal communication: proxemics (personal space), haptics (communication through touch), and body language. Building upon this foundational work, additional discussion highlighted how these languages shape interpersonal interactions and our capacity to navigate conflict constructively.

Throughout the conference, students participated in group activities, reflection, and dialogue that encouraged them to better understand their communication styles and leadership strengths. The experience fostered stronger connections among scholars while equipping them with practical skills they can carry into their academic, professional, and personal lives. Opportunities like the Leadership Conference continue to empower EOF scholars to grow as confident communicators and thoughtful leaders on campus and within their communities.



What EOF Scholars Have to Say About Leadership 2026:

EOF Leadership 2026 was phenomenal! I learned so much about myself and others. I also learnt a lot of social norms, non verbal communication and conflict resolution! It was wonderful to learn about them individually and how they connect! It was a great opportunity to get to know more EOF students especially those who are now in my classes. - Rivkie Kruman

Getting to be a part of EOF Leadership was a great experience. From this I've gained valuable skills I will bring to my future career. - Jesse Zsilavetz

EOF Leadership 2026 gave me a greater connection with my EOF peers by reinforcing old bonds and creating new ones. Conflict Resolution is an issue we will all face in our personal and professional lives and I am grateful to the EOF leadership 2026 for presenting this topic and life skills to us. - Tara Covert



Reflections from Student Leader Daniel Quijano

My experience being a student leader at EOF@OCEAN was nothing short of extraordinary. I was inspired to apply after attending the previous year's conference and my first trip when I joined the program.

That experience was fun and eye-opening. I realized that the type of people I simply walk by on campus actually have a lot of interesting things to say when put in the right environment. I learned a lot of skills and had a blast in the many workshops organized by the previous student leaders. This inspired me to take some of those previous workshop ideas and improve them for the conference I was facilitating.

My partner, Jolisa, was excellent, and she was great not only at communication but also at producing groundbreaking ideas. My favorite workshop to facilitate in the entire conference was one I created and was my first ever idea, even before starting this journey: Middle Ground. I was inspired by a similar concept on a social media show named The Spectrum on the YouTube channel Jubilee.

This workshop opened a platform for everyone, no matter who that person was, to express their perspective on a topic. I hope all future leaders will get inspired by my work and follow in my footsteps in order to pass it forward the gifts of confidence and wisdom because I am very proud of what I was able to be a part of. Working with my co-leaders was an astounding experience that I would love to do again.



Leadership Student Perspective from Alicia Bird

This was my first EOF Leadership Conference, and it was a really beautiful one. I feel extremely lucky to have been able to have gone. Though at the time, I personally was a nervous wreck going in, I was quickly able to build bonds and felt very comfortable and accepted around everyone. The trip gave me a wonderful opportunity; the time I needed to really build these relationships and memories with my peers.

The presentations were also very informative, and one of my favorites was: “The Art of Communication and Connection” which was presented by Laura. One of the major things from that presentation was the point that we are all “Spirits on a human journey”, which truly resonated with me. All the presentations had their own way of proving this. As we reacted to scenarios, used body language to convey a word or idea, or explored haptics, we all were able to show how our journeys have a hand in building who we are. It was an eye-opening experience to be given that chance to learn from and about everyone.

Overall, I am extremely grateful to everyone who made this trip a reality. The EOF advisors and staff, as well as our amazing student leaders, Daniel and Jolisa, made the experience go very smoothly. There was clearly a lot of care and planning put into not only the trip itself, but each of the presentations. The presenters did a wonderful job with relaying the topics in a very informative way, while also integrating fun games and activities for us to do. I am very happy I was able to have this experience and can't wait for next year's conference!



SPRING OPEN HOUSE: LUNAR NEW YEAR

On Thursday, February 19th, students and alumni gathered at EOF@OCEAN to celebrate the Spring Open House and Lunar New Year, honoring the Year of the Fire Horse! The event was a festive celebration bringing creativity to life by hand-crafting beautiful lanterns and enjoying a delicious spread of sweets and treats. It was a wonderful opportunity to welcome in the New Year with good fortune and great company.



JULIA SOBOL: OPPORTUNITY

TOMS RIVER HIGH SCHOOL NORTH

Opportunity. It's a simple word. But the truth is, opportunity can change everything. It can change the direction of a life, the path of a family, and the future someone once thought was out of reach.

EOF is often described as a program that provides financial assistance and academic support. And yes, it does those things. But for many of us, it represents something far greater than that. EOF represents doors opening that may have once felt closed, and people who believe in your potential, even in the moments you are still learning to believe in yourself, because opportunity can truly change the direction of a life.

Sometimes all it takes is one program, one mentor, or one person who looks at you and says, "You've got this."

My own journey with EOF moved very quickly. I finished high school at 17, and now, at 19, I am completing my time at OCC and preparing for the next chapter of my education. From the outside, the transition might look smooth and exciting...but like many students, there were moments where I wondered if I was ready for everything ahead. And I know many of us here today can relate to that feeling. What made the difference was knowing I didn't have to navigate this journey alone, as I had people in my corner.

This program created a community around us, filled with advisors, mentors, and peers who constantly reminded us that growth is not about having everything figured out right away. It's about showing up, continuing to learn, and trusting that the opportunities in front of you exist for a reason. EOF is powerful because it recognizes something very important: talent exists everywhere. Potential exists everywhere. But opportunity does not always reach everyone equally. And that's exactly what EOF does. It closes that gap. It creates a space where

students from many backgrounds can step forward, speak up, and realize that their voices, their stories, and their dreams matter.

As I prepare to move forward to the next stage of my education, I carry something with me that EOF helped build, which is the confidence and gratitude for the people who believed in me along the way. Today, we celebrate achievements, but also the opportunities we gained along with the community.

To the EOF staff and supporters, thank you for investing in students like me. And to my fellow peers: never underestimate how powerful your story and your determination are. The doors that EOF opened for us today are not just doors we walk through; one day, they will be doors we hold open for someone else.

I am Julia Sobol, and I am the face of possibility and honored to represent Ocean County College and its EOF Program.



2026 EOF STATE GRADUATE ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS STUDENT SPEAKER

As part of my role as a **Student Ambassador at the HUB**, I was asked to complete a semester project that reflected the knowledge and experience I gained while working there. I knew immediately I wanted to focus on something connected to my Hispanic community, since I am proud to be part of it.

I organized and presented in Spanish to my former high school classmates from Southern Regional's ESL program about the opportunities available at Ocean County College (OCC). My goal was to show that continuing education locally can be both accessible and affordable, and that OCC can be a strong first step toward achieving their academic and career goals.

I highlighted important factors students should consider when choosing a college. I discussed the affordability of OCC compared to other public institutions in New Jersey, the convenience of its locations, including the campus in Manahawkin, and the financial aid opportunities available to help students meet the expenses of higher education.

This experience was especially meaningful to me because it allowed me not only to represent OCC but also to encourage students from my community to see higher education as an attainable path. This experience was both inspiring and rewarding, and it reinforced my commitment to supporting and uplifting students who are beginning their own academic journeys.

My journey included being part of the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF). It has been one of the greatest blessings of my college experience. I applied without hesitation, hoping to be part of a program that supports students in meaningful ways. When I was accepted, I knew it would make a difference, but I never imagined the impact it would have on my life.

While the financial support is incredibly valuable, what I appreciate most about EOF is the guidance and genuine care they provide. My advisor, Jordan, was an exceptional mentor throughout my year at Ocean County College. He guided me through important steps in my academic journey, especially

during the transfer process, and every meeting with him made me feel more confident and informed about my future.

EOF also gave me a true sense of belonging. Through it, I forged friendships and became part of a student community. During challenging courses like Precalculus, I knew I could count on the support of dedicated mentors like Jonas, an academic coach whose guidance made difficult times seem more manageable, especially during midterms and finals.

EOF is more than a program; it is a community that empowers students to believe in themselves and their potential. The support, encouragement, and knowledge I gained from this experience will stay with me wherever my academic and professional journey takes me. I will always be grateful to have been part of a program that truly invests in its students and their future.



Kate also contributed to the following projects during her time at OCC:

- Student Conduct Review Panel Volunteer
- SGA Hygiene Supplies Project Volunteer
- Arboretum Restoration Project Volunteer
- College 101 Presentation Panelist

MADISON JOHNSON: DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES (DCF) YOUTH COUNCIL

SOUTHERN REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL

The Youth Council's membership is made up of all youth who have lived-experiences with the Department of Children and Families (DCF). Members meet with leadership and offices across the agency to codesign, collaborate, and initiate projects related to emergent priorities. The work creates tangible change within the department, and more importantly, the lives and futures of youth in care.

I received an email promoting the NJ DCF Youth Council that offered an application to join the upcoming cohort. I was unsure if it would be a good fit, but lo and behold, I received further communication from the director with interview dates and times. From there, I made it through the interview where I was very nervous and shaken, but in the end, I was accepted into the 2026-2027 cohort.

The work that we do is opportunity-based, and by that I mean that the Council as a whole is presented with opportunities for things to work on, and it is up to each member whether they want to jump on board or not. The opportunities that we are presented with are typically from offices within DCF, where the Council is asked for insight, or there are opportunities where our voices may be heard directly in front of selected people who have the authority to make change happen. Furthermore, there is always room for Council members to speak up on whatever it is that they wish and the Council director will move forward any thoughts or criticism to whom it concerns.

I joined the Council to implement positive, systematic change within the departments involved. Originally, I wanted nothing to do with DCF, but not only did that change before joining the Council, but the Council has motivated me far more in this line of advocacy. Now being a member of the Council I have been able to make connections with other young adults who have experienced many of the same things as I, and even worse.

However, this is exactly what fuels my fire and keeps me engaged in this work.

My goal is to advance forward into this profession, becoming a lived-experience mentor and then a caseworker. The best relationships I have made with DCF staff are with younger professional women. It made it easier to develop a meaningful relationship, and their influence, support and involvement in my life grew. After a time, mentoring youth, I would like to move up to a caseworker once I am no longer a young professional. On the contrary, if all else fails luckily I find it equally enticing and rewarding to simply clean my hands of everything and pack up, and move out west alone. I have always dreamed of becoming a live-in ranch hand, and I have found animals therapeutic. I am in awe at the way of life on a farm where you must work to live.



BEVERLY WALKER-ANDERSON: DESIGNING A NEW CHAPTER

CARTERET HIGH SCHOOL

I never actually set out to earn a college degree; I really just wanted to make some t-shirts.

Between being a mother, a grandmother, and now a great-grandmother, my hands are full. Whether I'm babysitting, helping the kids with their schoolwork, or staying active and supporting my church family, there is always something going on. I've always loved crafting and putting together custom designs for our family reunions and church gatherings, and I thought it would be a great way to bring in a little extra income. So, I went out, bought a heat press and a cutting machine, and dove right in.

Wanting to get better at my craft, I decided to look into taking a few graphic design classes. What I didn't realize at the time was that I could have just taken a couple of standalone courses to learn the software. Instead, I unwittingly enrolled myself in a full-time Associate of Science in Graphic Arts and Design degree program! I still laugh when I think back to sitting in my very first college English class in 2022, looking around the room, and thinking to myself, "What the hell did I do?"

Going back to the classroom as an older student is no small feat, especially with my busy family life. For me, the biggest hurdle wasn't the creativity—it was the technology. Trying to juggle all the different file formats, navigating unfamiliar software, and figuring out entirely new operating systems made my head spin. There were plenty of times when the frustration felt overwhelming and the thought of just calling it quits crossed my mind. But then I'd finish a project I was truly proud of, like my digital self-portrait, and it would remind me why I kept pushing forward.

I also had a community behind me that wouldn't let me give up: my family, my friends, and EOF@OCEAN. I don't remember the exact day I found my way to the EOF office, but I distinctly remember the warm welcome. I worked closely with my first advisor, Michele, who patiently helped me gather all the

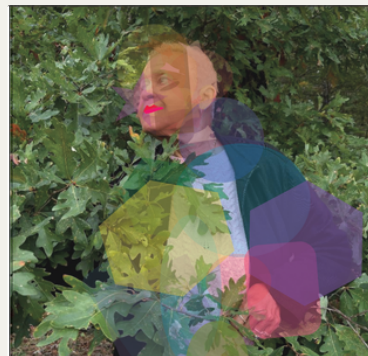
paperwork I needed to officially join the program. From that point on, I was no longer navigating the college landscape alone.

EOF became my anchor. The staff kept me encouraged, helped me navigate those frustrating tech struggles, and gave me real options whenever I hit a roadblock. I honestly don't think I could have done it without them. That constant, unwavering encouragement made all the difference when the journey got tough.

To me, EOF is more than just an advising office, it is a true family. I cherished the activities and seminars, and I especially loved how the summer orientations brought people together from all walks of life. Today, I'm not just a great-grandmother with a heat press and a good eye for design; I am a proud college graduate. It just goes to show that sometimes the best journeys are the ones we never actually intended to take.

View Bev's Portfolio by scanning the QR Code or Using the Link Below:

<https://beverly002484f54.myportfolio.com/>



**Scan to View
Bev's Portfolio:**



My self-portrait is a photo I took outside among the trees in which I did not just want a photo of my face. Vector art was used to make various shapes and shades of color, and I also used color blocking to create defined sections of color to add personality.



GRADUATES



Batool Abdelmalak
Spring 2026
A.A. Liberal Arts
Future Plans: Rutgers University



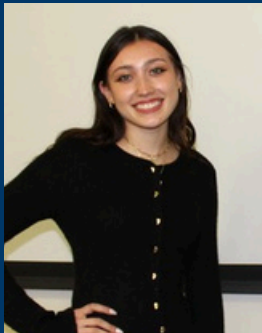
Tara Covert
Spring 2026
A.S. Social Work
Future Plans: Undecided



John Attia
Summer 2026
A.S. General Studies, Mathematics
Future Plans: Rutgers University



Shania Crump
Summer 2026
A.A. Performing Arts, Theatre
Future Plans: Undecided



Jolisa Binoya
Fall 2025
A.S. General Studies, Science
Future Plans: Employment



Xia Garcia
Fall 2025
A.S. Environmental Science
Future Plans: Kean University



Isaac Claudio
Summer 2026
A.A. Performing Arts, Music
Future Plans: Undecided



Silvia Ghaly
Spring 2026
A.A.S. Nursing
Future Plans: Undecided



Martha Contreras Martinez
Spring 2026
A.A. Business Administration
Future Plans: Employment



Adelaide Holden
Fall 2025
A.A. Liberal Arts
Future Plans: Montclair State University

GRADUATES



Kate Ibarra
Summer 2026
A.S. Business Administration
Future Plans: Rutgers University



Connor Nolan
Spring 2026
A.S. Business Administration
Future Plans: Undecided



Kamari Jones
Summer 2026
A.S. Social Work
Future Plans: University of
Texas at Arlington



Bridgette Pezza
Spring 2026
A.S. Business Administration,
Accounting
Future Plans: Kean University



Mariah Kelusak
Spring 2026
A.S. General Studies, Humanities
Future Plans: Stockton University



Daniel Quijano
Spring 2026
A.S. Computer Science
Future Plans: TCNJ



Andrell Mercier
Fall 2025
A.A. Liberal Arts
Future Plans: American Institute



Brianna Reid
Spring 2026
A.A. Liberal Arts, Psychology
Future Plans: Rowan University



Jacqueline Miranda Sanchez
Spring 2026
A.S. General Studies, Humanities
Future Plans: Stockton University



Danna Reyes
Spring 2026
A.S. Business Administration
Future Plans: Kean University

GRADUATES



Matthew Rose
Fall 2025
A.S. General Studies, Health & Phys. Ed.
Future Plans: Kean University



Raylyn Tupper
Spring 2026
A.A. Liberal Arts, Psychology
Future Plans: Kean University



Julia Sobol
Spring 2026
A.A. Liberal Arts, Psychology
Future Plans: Rutgers University



Daniel Valente
Spring 2026
A.S. Business Administration
Future Plans: Kean University



Grace Sotelo
Summer 2026
A.S. Engineering
Future Plans: Rowan University



Sergio Vargas
Spring 2026
A.S. General Studies,
Mathematics
Future Plans: Rutgers University



Yazmine Tancemore
Summer 2026
A.A. Liberal Arts, Psychology
Future Plans: Kean University



Kevin Vargas-Gines
Spring 2026
A.A. Liberal Arts
Future Plans: Montclair State University

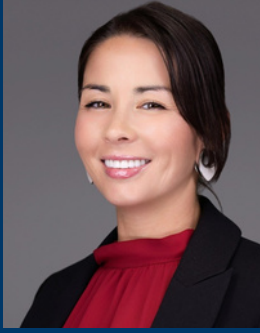


David Tees
Spring 2026
A.A. Liberal Arts, History
Future Plans: Montclair State University



Beverly Walker-Anderson
Fall 2025
A.S. Graphic Arts, Design, and Media
Future Plans: Employment

GRADUATES



Catherine Woods
Fall 2025
A.A. Business
Future Plans: Thomas Edison
State University



Maria Zulkarnain
Spring 2026
A.A. Liberal Arts
Future Plans: Rutgers University

2026 EOF CHAMPION: DR. SHEENAH HARTIGAN

Her boots are made for walking, fittingly describing this high-energy, fast-thinking, fast-talking, brilliant orb of light.

Dr. Hartigan serves as the Assistant Vice President of Enrollment Services, overseeing the HUB, recruitment, retention, early college, academic advising, records and registration, and student-facing communications.

She earned her bachelor's degree in Business Management from The College of New Jersey, a master's degree in Student Service Administration, and a doctorate in Higher Education Administration, both from Fairleigh Dickinson University, where she serves as a graduate school adjunct instructor.

Those boots enjoy hiking, outdoor adventures of all kinds, exploring new food joints, and vibes, and time with family. Sun and fun follow her.

Dr. Sheenah Hartigan is recognized for her outstanding support of EOF@OCEAN and its leadership team, for honoring the contributions of EOF, for supporting EOF recruitment efforts, for never saying no, or that it cannot be done, and for responding with speed, thoughtfulness, respect, and understanding. Dr. Sheenah Hartigan is the 2026 Educational Opportunity Fund Champion.





AWARDING OF THE GRADUATE MEDALLION CEREMONY

The room was filled to capacity on April 9, 2026, as EOF@OCEAN celebrated its graduates at the EOF Graduate Medallion Ceremony, marking the largest cohort recognized to date.

Centered on the theme *Everyday People*, by Sly and the Family Stone, the ceremony honored the strength, resilience, and determination of EOF scholars. For the first time, two student speakers, Teresa Alfonso and Julia Sobol, took the stage to share personal reflections on their journeys and the impact of EOF. Ms. Sobol, after a competitive selection process, was also selected to speak at the state-wide OSHE Graduate Achievement Award Ceremony. She is among the 1,977 EOF scholars who achieved a grade point average of 3.2 or higher.

EOF honored **Dr. Sheenah Hartigan**, Assistant Vice President of Enrollment Services, with the EOF Champion Award in appreciation of her dedication to the EOF program and its students.

Each graduate earned an EOF medallion, representing not only academic achievement but also the perseverance required to reach this milestone. The ceremony concluded with *Everyday People*, reflecting a message of unity, individuality, and the shared experiences that connect us all.



EOF VIKING SPIRIT SCHOLARSHIP WINNER

Kate Ibarra



AS Business Administration
Summer 2026 Graduate

Ocean County College (OCC) is home to many treasures. One of them is Kate Ibarra. As educators, we arrive each day prepared to ignite our students' dreams. Yet I often leave inspired by students like Kate. She is thoughtful, resilient, and deeply committed to her education and community. These qualities, combined with her academic excellence, make her an exceptionally deserving scholarship candidate. My OCC colleagues and I are proud to count Kate among our students, and I am confident you will be proud to count her among yours. -Timothy Landers, Acting Dean, School of Business & Social Sciences

SCHOLARSHIP DONORS

We would like to thank the following contributors for their generous donations to the EOF scholarship fund:

Maryann Birdsall - Bridget Feneis - Dr. Marilyn Kralik

2026 EOF GRADUATE ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

The Office of the Secretary of Higher Education (OSHE) recognizes graduating EOF students who have demonstrated exceptional achievement and exemplify the meaning of the EOF program.

Distinguished Scholar (4.0 GPA)	GPA
Batool Abdelmalak	4.0
Julia Sobol	4.0
Catherine Woods	4.0
Maria Zulkarnain	4.0



Outstanding Academic Achievement (3.5-3.99 GPA)	GPA
Martha Contreras Martinez	3.825
Tara Covert	3.725
Mariah Macias	3.817
Connor Nolan	3.85
Bridgette Pezza	3.877
Brianna Reid	3.861
Danna Reyes	3.676
Matthew Rose	3.816
Grace Sotelo	3.569
David Tees	3.73



Academic Achievement (3.2-3.49 GPA)	GPA
Xia Garcia	3.349
Adelaide Holden	3.25
Jacqueline Miranda Sanchez	3.433
Daniel Quijano	3.453
Raylyn Tupper	3.418
Daniel Valente	3.418



EOF@OCEAN: SUMMER 2026

Are you ready?

Summer at EOF emphasizes preparation for college and academic success. Join us!

July 30, 2026

All materials and meals provided at no cost.

I want to be EOF!

Apply soon and plan to join us for Summer 2026.



Apply Now!



go.ocean.edu/EOF

WHAT SCHOLARS HAVE TO SAY ABOUT EOF

*EOF has helped me in so many ways, I cannot describe how helpful this program has been to me. I felt lost and confused innumerable times and EOF has always provided me the resources and guidance to navigate college. I have to say that EOF has made my college experience feel less stressful and I am immensely grateful to the advisors and everyone in EOF. Thank you for all you do! - **Danna Reyes***

*It took me a grand total of 25 years to go to college after graduating high school, and I have had a lot of success in the semesters I have been at Ocean County College (OCC). The awesome news is that the majority of that success has come thanks to the help of everybody from the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF). The people that work there (Michele, Jennifer, Jordan, Laura) are amazing people who all seemingly have one goal, which is to ensure that every person in the EOF program is successful at OCC. - **David Tees***

*I never forgot the words of wisdom offered to me by EOF the first day I arrived as a new student. EOF has the power to bring people together and instill confidence in one's self to fully realize their true potential. - **Kevin Vargas-Gines***

*My experience at EOF has been positive throughout my time at the college, the entire team, and especially my advisor Jordan, genuinely care about the students that come through their doors and will do whatever they can to ensure students succeed. - **Matt Rose***

*EOF has given me constant aid and guidance throughout my OCC experience. Knowing I can ask my advisor anything has allowed me to be able to try new experiences and given me confidence throughout transitioning into a four-year program. - **Maria Zulkarnain***

*As a non traditional student EOF gave me the support and guidance that was needed for me to achieve my potential. EOF staff work as a team and make you feel like family. - **Tara Covert***

*It's been great, the support to continue to be the best version of yourself and drive to be the best you can be is great to have. - **Daniel Valente***

*EOF has helped me so much during my time here at OCC. Jennifer was always so welcoming, Jordan is so kind, and my monthly advising appointments with Michele have been a crucial point to my success here. Also, thank you Laura for the care you put into this program. The work you guys put in is so appreciated from your students, and I will always remember everything this program has done for me. - **Batool Abdelmalak***

*My time with EOF has been one of the most meaningful parts of my academic journey, and I'm truly grateful for everything this program has given me. As a first generation college student, I was motivated to succeed, but I also faced moments of uncertainty when I wasn't sure if I had the tools, knowledge, or support to handle college on my own. That's when EOF stepped in and became the foundation I didn't know I needed. I'm grateful for the sense of possibility EOF brought into my life. This program opened doors, built my confidence, and helped me see that I can achieve more than I ever thought possible. - **Jacqueline Miranda Sanchez***

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Christine Cassidy
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EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY FUND

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