



INTERVIEW FROM THE  
C-SUITE: MEGAN OWEN OF CLS HEALTH

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INTRODUCTION OF  
RUSCHE READY: INTERVIEW DAY

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RUSCHE LAUNCHES  
FRESHMAN CONSULTING GROUP

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

**RUSCHE REVIEW**

# SPRING 2026 EVENTS



## MAR 26

COLLEGE 2 CAREER  
CONFERENCE



## APR 9

RUSCHE DISTINGUISHED LECTURE  
SERIES: DENNIS QUAID

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS SYSTEM • NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

## Dennis Quaid

ACCLAIMED ACTOR AND  
FILM INDUSTRY ADVOCATE



## APR 23

LUMBERJACK ENTREPRENEURSHIP  
COMPETITION



## APR 23

BUSINESS ALUMNI MIXER  
HOUSTON



## MAY 7-8

SPRING COMMENCEMENT





# CONTENTS

- 
- 04 RUSCHE LAUNCHES FRESHMAN CONSULTING GROUP**
- 
- 06 ACE FACULTY FELLOWS PROGRAM LAUNCHES**
- 
- 18 INTERVIEW FROM THE C-SUITE: MEGAN OWEN**
- 
- 29 INTRODUCTION OF RUSCHE READY: INTERVIEW DAY**
- 
- 32 STUDY ABROAD: ESTONIA AND FINLAND**
- 
- 35 STUDY ABROAD: CANADA**



## DR. JASON REESE

Interim Dean,  
Rusche College of Business

### Learn. Launch. Lead.

In the Rusche College of Business, our mission is to "create a challenging learning environment that will enable our students to launch their careers with the foundation for effective leadership." Throughout the year, our faculty and staff create opportunities where these three strategic foci are embedded in and beyond the classroom. As you read this edition of the *Rusche Review*, you will see how our students are living out our mission to **Learn, Launch, Lead**.

### Learn

When our faculty members design courses, they emphasize engagement activities that create an applied learning environment. This edition highlights examples such as Rusche Ready: Interview Day (Page 29), "Educating the Athlete-Entrepreneur" (Page 12), the Accounting Speaker Series (Page 15), and the Swift-Mas Showcase (Page 38).

### Launch

The college's "Experience Business" tagline reflects the challenging experiences our students encounter. These experiences equip our students to find their place in a highly competitive and global environment. Since our last edition, students have participated in the Freshman Consulting Group (Page 4), Fastenal-sponsored etiquette dinner (Page 17), the Sports Business Society visit to the Texas Rangers (Page 13), and two faculty-led study abroad trips to Estonia and Finland, and to Canada (Page 32).

### Lead

We want our students to leave Rusche ready to make a difference in the world around them. To help them do this, we create engaging experiences that challenge and equip them to be leaders. You will see this in the Future Financial Leaders story (Page 16). Our premier biennial event, the Nelson Rusche Distinguished Lecture Series, will feature acclaimed actor and Texas native **Dennis Quaid** (Page 9). I hope you will join us in Nacogdoches on April 9 to hear how his work in the Texas film industry is inspiring entrepreneurial leadership opportunities in East Texas and beyond.

### Your Involvement Matters

As always, we invite our alumni to stay connected and engaged with the Rusche College of Business — whether through giving, guest speaking or simply sharing this *Rusche Review*. We're building something remarkable here, and we'd love for you to be a part of it. Here's to a strong and exciting spring semester ahead!



# RUSCHE REVIEW

RUSCHE REVIEW IS THE PUBLICATION OF THE RUSCHE COLLEGE OF BUSINESS AT STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY INTENDED FOR ALUMNI, STUDENTS AND FRIENDS.

## RUSCHE COLLEGE OF BUSINESS EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

### DR. JASON REESE

Interim Dean

### DR. JUSTIN BLOUNT

Interim Associate Dean for Faculty and Administration

## RUSCHE REVIEW

### TAYLOR K. ALVAREZ

Editor, Design

### CONNOR BRONSON

Photography

### JOHN CHAMBERS

Associate Editor, Photography

### LIZETH GARCIA

Photography

### SYDNEY GRIMES

Photography

### DR. RYAN PHELPS

Photography

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## STAY IN TOUCH!

### Rusche College of Business

McGee Business Building  
P.O. BOX 13004, SFA Station  
Nacogdoches, TX 75962  
936.468.3101 | [sfasu.edu/cob](http://sfasu.edu/cob)  
[cob@sfasu.edu](mailto:cob@sfasu.edu)



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# RUSCHE TENURE AND PROMOTIONS



## TENURED AND PROMOTED TO ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR

**Dr. Beverly Mendoza** | Economics and Finance



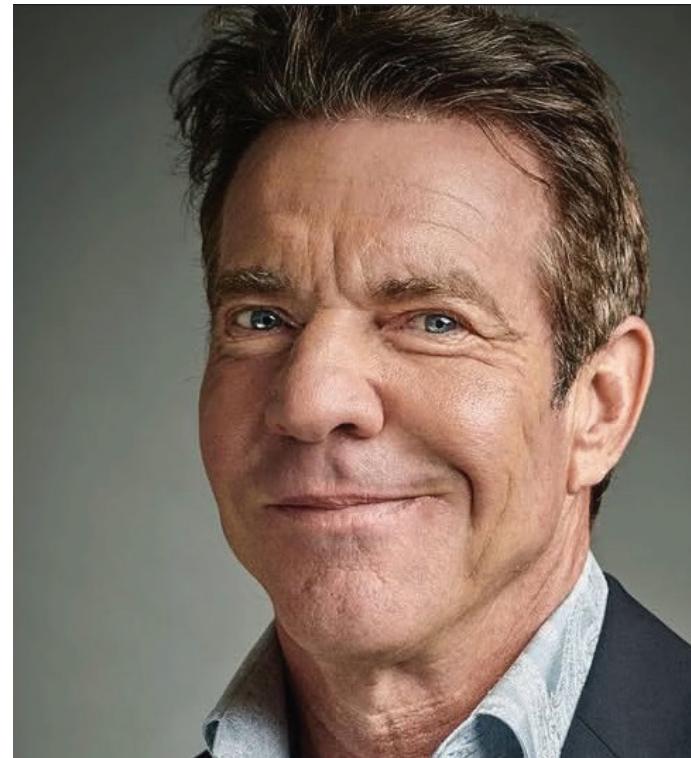
## PROMOTED TO PROFESSOR

**Dr. Jason Reese** | Management and Marketing



## APPOINTED TO MBA DIRECTOR

**Dr. Robert McDermand** | Management and Marketing



## Dennis Quaid Joins Elite Lineup of Distinguished Lecture Speakers

Learn more on page 9

**Thursday, April 9, 2026 - 7:30 p.m.  
Baker Pattillo Student Center, Grand Ballroom**

Acclaimed actor and Texas native **Dennis Quaid**, best known for iconic film roles in "The Rookie," "The Parent Trap" remake and "A Dog's Purpose," will bring star power and business policy insight as SFA's upcoming Nelson Rusche Distinguished Lecture Series speaker.

Quaid will discuss his advocacy for Texas film and television industry incentives, offering firsthand insights into the intersection of entertainment and economic development. As part of the "True to Texas: Let's Bring Productions Home" campaign, Quaid joined fellow Texas stars **Matthew McConaughey, Woody Harrelson, Billy Bob Thornton** and **Renée Zellweger** in championing Senate Bill 22 during the 89th Texas Legislature in spring 2025. The landmark bill, which took effect Sept. 1, dramatically increased funding for the Texas Moving Image Industry Incentive Program, allocating \$300 million every two years to attract major film and television productions to the Lone Star State.

To learn more,  
visit [sfasu.edu/rusche](http://sfasu.edu/rusche).





# Freshman Consulting Group



# an ing

Under the leadership of **Dr. Marcus Cox**, the Nelson Rusche College of Business launched the Freshman Consulting Group as a new student organization designed to engage first-year students during their transition to campus life.

The program introduced students to foundational business concepts while providing hands-on consulting experience through partnerships with local businesses. During its inaugural semester, students collaborated with Timber & Tweed Outfitters in historic downtown Nacogdoches, where they met with owner **Stephanie Malott** to learn about entrepreneurship, product sourcing, customer engagement and retail operations. Students concluded the semester by presenting strategic recommendations focused on increasing sales. Following the site visit, participants also took part in a team-building activity at Aperitivo, a local gelato shop. The Freshman Consulting Group is expected to expand this spring, offering additional students the opportunity to apply while continuing to support small businesses and nonprofit organizations in the region.

To inquire about services, contact Dr. Marcus Cox at [mcox@sfasu.edu](mailto:mcox@sfasu.edu) or (936) 468-3830.

# Arnold Center for Entrepreneurship Launches Faculty Fellows Program



The Arnold Center for Entrepreneurship selected 16 faculty members to participate in the inaugural Entrepreneurship Faculty Fellows Program, an initiative designed to integrate entrepreneurial education across all academic disciplines.

The new program equips faculty members from diverse fields with specialized training to embed entrepreneurial principles directly into their coursework. The long-term vision confirms entrepreneurship education is available in majors across the university, ensuring all students can benefit from the opportunities offered through ACE.

"This initiative ensures that a culture of entrepreneurship becomes part of the SFA experience for every student," said **Dr. Raymond Jones**, director of SFA's academic entrepreneurship program. "By embedding innovation across campus, we are preparing all of our graduates, regardless of major, to be leaders and problem-solvers in the modern economy."

At the same time, a specific entrepreneurship major and minor continue to be housed in the Nelson Rusche College of Business, where students from any discipline can enroll and deepen their understanding of entrepreneurship through the college's robust curriculum and academic support.

Throughout the fall semester, fellows underwent intensive, specialized training led by Jones. The fellows are teaching the entrepreneurship courses this spring.

The 16 inaugural fellows were chosen from each of SFA's six colleges, reflecting SFA's commitment to cross-disciplinary collaboration and innovation. Faculty members are:

## Nelson Rusche College of Business

- **Todd Barrios**, chef instructor, School of Human Sciences and Professional Studies
- **Dr. Robert McDemand**, senior lecturer, Department of Management and Marketing
- **Dr. Amy Mehaffey**, lecturer, Department of Management and Marketing

## James I. Perkins College of Education

- **Dr. Darla O'Dwyer**, professor, Department of Allied Health Studies
- **Jennifer Luque**, clinical instructor, School of Human Sciences and Professional Studies

## Micky Elliott College of Fine Arts

- **Derek Johnson**, assistant professor, School of Art
- **Zachary Howell**, assistant professor, School of Art

## Arthur Temple College of Forestry and Agriculture

- **Dr. John Michael Mehaffey**, associate professor, Department of Agriculture
- **Dr. Anusha Shrestha**, assistant professor, Department of Forestry

## College of Liberal and Applied Arts

- **Dr. Bridget Adams**, assistant professor, Department of English and Creative Writing
- **Dr. Mario Morera Jimenez**, associate professor, Department of Language and Cultural Studies
- **Dr. Bailey Thompson**, associate professor, Department of Media and Communication

## College of Sciences and Mathematics

- **Dr. Kevin Langford**, associate professor, Department of Biology
- **Dr. Brent Burt**, professor, Department of Biology
- **Dr. Christopher Aul**, associate professor, Department of Physics, Engineering and Astronomy
- **Dr. Eddie Ironsmith**, assistant professor, Department of Computer Science



**STEPHEN F. AUSTIN  
STATE UNIVERSITY**

Arnold Center for  
Entrepreneurship



# LUMBERJACK ENTREPRENEURSHIP COMPETITION



- Pitch your side hustle, business or just an idea
- Open to all SFA students in any major
- Teams of two or more

For more information, contact [ACE@sfasu.edu](mailto:ACE@sfasu.edu).



Submissions due by  
**Feb. 18**

Semifinals event  
**March 4**

Final event and reception  
**April 23**

**First Place:**

**\$10,000**

**Second Place:**

**\$5,000**

**Third Place:**

**\$2,500**

PLUS ADDITIONAL SCHOLARSHIPS FOR FOURTH AND FIFTH PLACE

# NELSON RUSCHE

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## DISTINGUISHED LECTURE SERIES

FEATURING

# Dennis Quaid

ACCLAIMED ACTOR AND  
FILM INDUSTRY ADVOCATE

**April 9  
7:30 p.m.**

Grand Ballroom  
Baker Pattillo Student Center  
Stephen F. Austin State University

FREE event passes are available at  
SFA's student center information  
desk and at the Charles Bright  
Visitor Center, 200 East Main St.

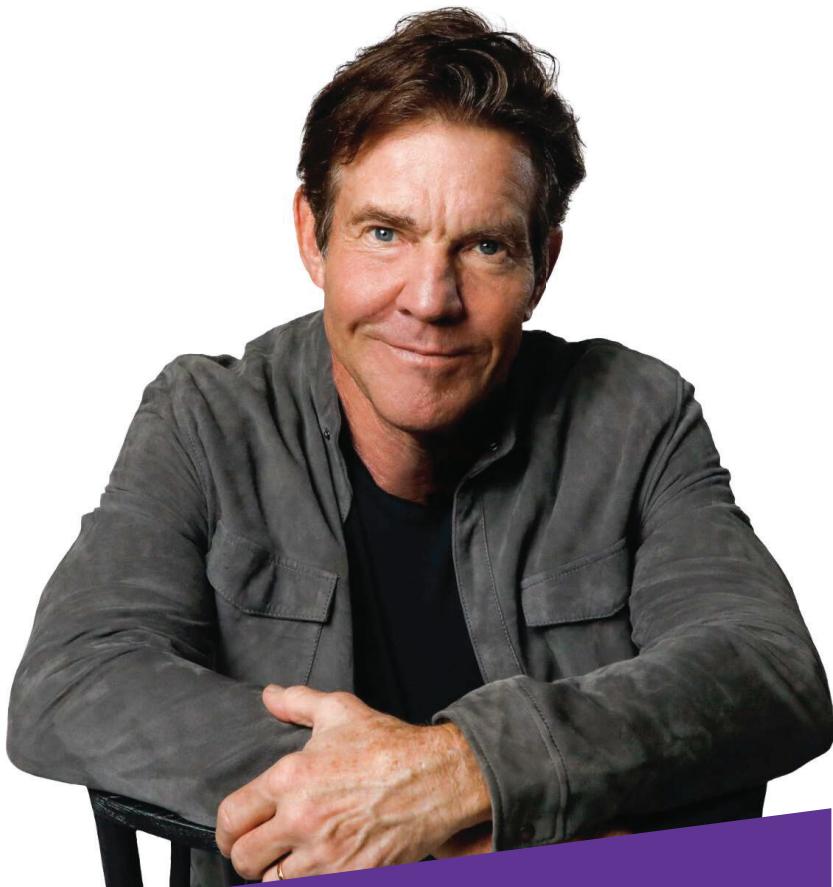
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Visit [sfasu.edu/rusche](http://sfasu.edu/rusche)  
to learn more.

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**STEPHEN F. AUSTIN  
STATE UNIVERSITY**  
NELSON RUSCHE  
COLLEGE OF BUSINESS



# Dennis Quaid Joins Elite Lineup of Rusche Distinguished Lecture Speakers

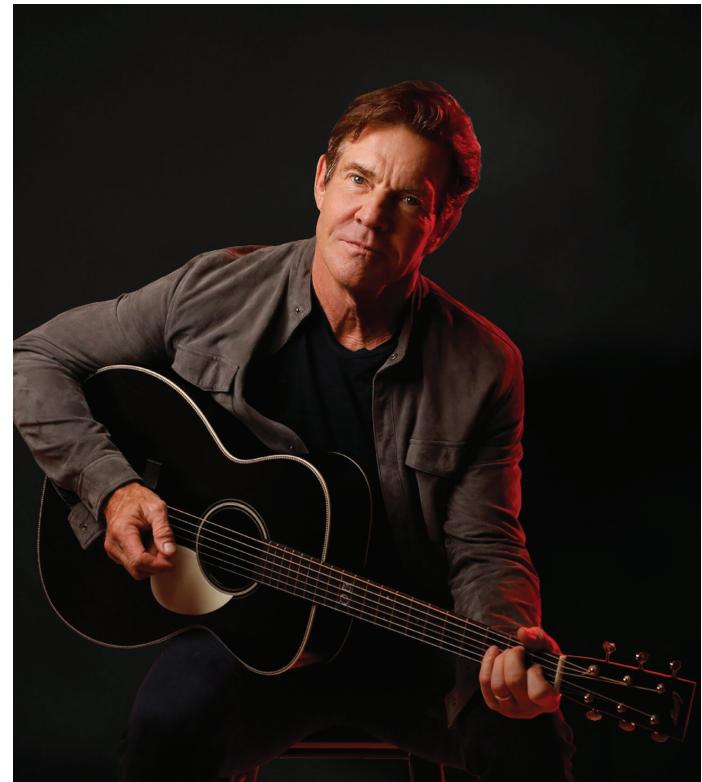
Acclaimed actor and Texas native **Dennis Quaid** will bring star power and business policy insight to Stephen F. Austin State University this spring as the speaker for the fifth installment of the Nelson Rusche Distinguished Lecture Series. Best known for iconic film roles in "The Rookie," "The Parent Trap" 1998 remake and "A Dog's Purpose," Quaid will speak at 7:30 p.m. April 9, 2026, in the Baker Pattillo Student Center Grand Ballroom.

Quaid will discuss his advocacy for Texas film and television industry incentives, offering firsthand insights into the intersection of entertainment and economic development. As part of the "True to Texas: Let's Bring Productions Home" campaign, Quaid joined fellow Texas stars **Matthew McConaughey, Woody Harrelson, Billy Bob Thornton** and **Renée Zellweger** in championing Senate Bill 22 during the 89th Texas Legislature in spring 2025. The landmark bill, which took effect Sept. 1, dramatically increased funding for the Texas Moving Image Industry Incentive Program, allocating \$300 million every two years to attract major film and television productions to the Lone Star State.

"The film and television business generates significant revenue, and thanks to SB 22, Texas has a real opportunity to become the next Hollywood," said **Dr. Jason Reese**, interim dean of SFA's Nelson Rusche College of Business. "Dennis Quaid is the perfect Texan to discuss how our students can build successful careers in entrepreneurship, business and leadership in the film industry right here in East Texas."

The bill also provides additional incentives to projects that partner with higher education institutions. This will be particularly important as SFA launches the LED volume production studio in its new entrepreneurship building. Featuring technology to create realistic and immersive virtual environments for film, television and video production, the studio will be available for collaborative projects and entrepreneurial ventures across SFA's areas of study as well as East Texas communities.

"SFA's new LED volume studio will be a game-changer for East Texas, opening the door to cutting-edge virtual production capabilities that were once only available in major film hubs," Reese said. "This facility will not only enhance hands-on learning across disciplines — from media and STEM to agriculture and aviation — but also create new opportunities for local businesses, entrepreneurs and creatives to collaborate, innovate and



attract film and television projects to our region."

Established in 2016 to honor the legacy of **A. Nelson Rusche**, who gifted \$5 million to the Rusche College of Business, the Nelson Rusche Distinguished Lecture Series brings high-profile figures to SFA to inspire and inform. Past speakers include **Candace Nelson**, guest Shark for ABC's "Shark Tank" and founder of Sprinkles Cupcakes and Pizzana, in 2024; **Daymond John**, "Shark Tank" star and FUBU founder, in 2021; **Tony Hawk**, skateboarding champ, in 2019; and **Jeb Bush**, former Florida governor and presidential candidate, in 2016.

Free tickets for the event are available at the Charles Bright Visitor Center downtown, and on campus at the Baker Pattillo Student Center Information Desk and the McGee Business Building, Room 137.

**For more information about the lecture series, visit [sfasu.edu/rusche](http://sfasu.edu/rusche).**





# You're Invited





Join fellow Rusche College of Business  
alumni for a Rusche Alumni Social

**Social Beer Garden HTX**  
3101 San Jacinto St.  
Houston, Texas 77004

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**Thursday, April 23**  
**5:30 to 8:30 p.m.**

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Enjoy a laid-back evening of networking and  
connection. Register to receive a complimentary  
Rusche College of Business pint glass.

**RSVP  
HERE**



# THE BUSINESS OF BEING AN ATHLETE



**READ MORE**



## Educating the Athlete-Entrepreneur

Through Stephen F. Austin State University's "Sports and Entertainment Entrepreneurship and NIL" course and the Arnold Center for Entrepreneurship, students and student-athletes are gaining hands-on experience building personal brands, pitching partnerships and managing real client relationships before graduation. The course reflects the rapidly evolving landscape shaped by the NCAA's name, image and likeness policy that took effect in 2021.

**Dr. Rob McDermand**, course instructor and senior lecturer of sports business and management in the Nelson Rusche College of Business, said the curriculum adapts in real time to new NCAA rulings, state legislation and emerging brand-strategy trends. "We want students to graduate understanding that NIL is not just a rule change — it's a business revolution," McDermand said.

According to Opendorse, a technology

company that helps athletes build personal brands, the NIL market expanded from \$917 million in 2021-22 to a projected \$1.6 billion in 2024-25. **Dr. Raymond Jones**, associate professor of entrepreneurship and strategy and director of SFA's entrepreneurship program, works with Arnold Center faculty and staff to ensure the course aligns with program goals. He said the objective is to give students real, hands-on experience in personal selling and brand development through an entrepreneurial lens.

Throughout the semester, students collaborated with Athletepreneur, a company that connects student-athletes with professional branding and business development opportunities. The class collectively engaged with more than 80 businesses through in-person outreach, social media campaigns and brand ambassador programs, resulting in introductory partnerships such as in-kind sponsorships and marketing collaborations that allowed students

to practice content creation, contract discussions and campaign execution.

Students also participated in virtual sessions with industry professionals and were divided into teams to support eight SFA student-athlete clients representing football, baseball, tennis and volleyball. Many students said the experience revealed the importance of authenticity and persistence when building partnerships, as well as the time and communication required to establish trust with brands.

Additional guest speakers included SFA Athletics leadership, national brand representatives, legal experts and entrepreneurs, while students networked at local Rotary Club and Nacogdoches Chamber of Commerce events to connect classroom learning with the East Texas business community. The semester will conclude with student NIL pitches to brand and entrepreneurship leaders, offering a culminating opportunity to apply their skills in a real-world setting.



## Sports Business Society at Texas Rangers

On Sept. 19, members of the Sports Business Society visited Globe Life Field for an immersive learning experience with the Texas Rangers. Central to the visit was a speaker panel featuring four SFA alumni working in professional sports: **Isaiah Yates** '18, **Lawton Rikel** '22 and '24, **Brady Deese** '23 and '25, and **Aaron Rangel** '20. The panel created a meaningful bridge between academic preparation and professional application, allowing students to hear firsthand how careers in sports business take shape.

Panelists shared candid insights about their career paths, industry challenges and lessons learned since graduating from SFA. Students actively participated by asking questions and engaging in one-on-one conversations with the alumni, gaining practical advice on networking, career development and navigating the competitive sports industry. The interaction emphasized the value of alumni mentorship and the importance of building professional relationships early. The visit concluded with SBS members attending the Texas Rangers' game against the Miami Marlins, offering students the opportunity to experience the game-day environment from a fan perspective. The trip highlighted SBS's commitment to experiential learning and alumni engagement, reinforcing how classroom concepts are strengthened through real-world exposure and meaningful professional connections.

## Game Day Giving: SBS Hosts First Silent Auction

On Nov. 15, the Sports Business Society held its first-ever Silent Auction at the Alumni Corner Tailgate before the SFA football team's regular season championship win. The Silent Auction featured a collection of sports memorabilia ranging from SFA Athletics to professional sports teams: an SFA autographed football helmet, professional jerseys, game tickets, and more. This event proved to be a resounding success, raising over \$3,000. The auction brought students, alumni and supporters together to show support for sports business. Proceeds from this event go directly to supporting student-focused initiatives, including professional development and future site visits that allow members to gain real-world exposure to careers in sports business.

SBS is a student-led organization that is about connecting students with professionals through guest speakers, workshops, networking, site visit events and case competitions. Its goal is to build a community of future sports business leaders while fostering professional and personal growth. According to SBS members, the Silent Auction not only strengthens their organization's connection but also their bonds with the broader campus and alumni community.

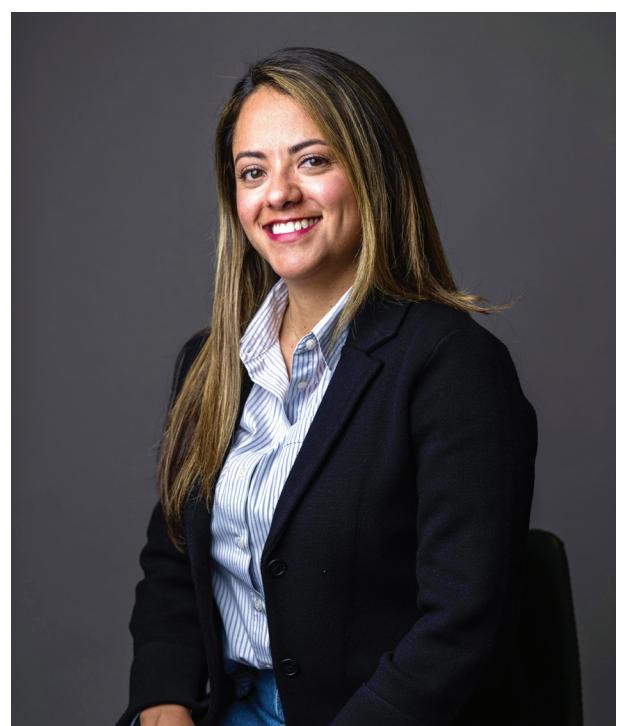
# ACCOUNTING CAREER FAIR



The Schlierf School of Accountancy hosted its annual Accounting Career Fair, providing students with the opportunity to connect directly with employers from public accounting, industry and government sectors. The event allowed students to explore internships and full-time career opportunities while practicing professional networking skills and gaining insight into employer expectations. By engaging with recruiters and alumni, students were able to better understand career pathways within the accounting profession and strengthen their readiness for the job market. The career fair reflects the school's ongoing commitment to experiential learning and career preparation.

## ACCOUNTING SPEAKER MICHELLE GRAY

As part of its professional speaker programming, the Schlierf School of Accountancy welcomed **Michelle Gray** '01, corporate controller, for a lecture focused on real-world accounting case studies. Gray shared insights from "Fall of Wood Group", examining how revenue recognition issues contributed to the company's dramatic decline and eventual sale. She also discussed the significant impact of lease accounting changes, including the transition from ASC 840 to ASC 842, and how these standards reshaped balance sheets, financing decisions and compliance practices. The lecture emphasized the importance of contract review, planning and negotiation in today's evolving accounting environment.





## Alumni Spotlight Dr. Jennifer Weske

Jennifer Weske '90, a Rusche College of Business accounting alumna, was recently recognized on *Forbes'* 2025 America's Top CPAs list, earning distinction as the sole representative from Tennessee. This national recognition highlights Weske's professional excellence and leadership within the accounting field and reflects the continued impact of Rusche alumni across the country.

## Dr. Charles Oberweiser Receives AARC Bravo Award

### A Note from Citori Helveston, Program Director of AARC:

I am proud to recognize a faculty member whose dedication to student success goes far beyond what is required or expected.

**Dr. Oberweiser** consistently showed up for our students—not because it was on his schedule, not because he was asked, but because he genuinely cares. Using his own time, he volunteered and came to the AARC to work the tables answering questions and tutoring students. His presence made a real difference for the students who needed that extra support.

But he didn't stop there. Dr. Oberweiser actively advocated for expanding tutoring resources and pushed for the hiring of additional tutors in his classes so that even more students could receive the help they deserve. His dedication is an example to strive for. For his generosity, his passion for teaching, and his unwavering commitment to student success, I am honored to present this award to Dr. Oberweiser.



## INSIDE FORENSIC ACCOUNTING AND LITIGATION CONSULTING

The Accounting Speaker Series by **Dr. Carolyn Conn**, also featured **Helga A. Zauner**, CFE, CVA, MAFF who led an in-depth discussion on forensic accounting and litigation consulting.

Using high-profile cases to illustrate key concepts, Zauner explored the role of economic and accounting experts in large-scale litigation, including personal injury claims and complex financial investigations. She addressed how economic damages are calculated, how cases move through the legal system and the critical role forensic professionals play in uncovering financial misconduct.

The session provided students with valuable exposure to alternative career paths within accounting and economics.

# Future Financial Leaders: Rusche Students Engage With National Finance Leaders



David Kaiser, Evan McDaniel,  
Noemy Perez, Micah Collins  
and Jonathan V. Gould, U.S.  
comptroller of the currency

**Micah Collins, Noemy Perez** and **Evan McDaniel** represented the Nelson Rusche College of Business on the national stage during a recent visit to Fort Worth, at the Independent Bankers Association of Texas annual convention, where they engaged with senior leaders shaping the future of the U.S. financial system. The students were on the main stage alongside key policy and industry figures, highlighting Rusche's growing presence in high-level conversations around banking, regulation and economic leadership.

The group also had the opportunity to meet with **Jonathan V. Gould**, the recently confirmed U.S. comptroller of the currency, whose office oversees the safety, soundness and fairness of the nation's banking system. Their meeting offered students a rare firsthand look at how financial policy is developed and implemented at the federal level, reinforcing Rusche's commitment to experiential learning and real-world access that prepares students to lead in complex, highly regulated business environments.



## Fastenal-Sponsored Etiquette Dinner Enhances Professional Skills

Students and faculty in the Nelson Rusche College of Business, along with business professionals from corporate partner Fastenal, participated in a professional etiquette dinner sponsored by **Fastenal** as part of the personal selling course taught by **Kathryn Blevins**, lecturer of marketing. The event was designed to help students build confidence in professional dining and networking situations commonly encountered in business settings.

The **Fastenal**-sponsored evening began with a happy hour focused on practicing professional mingling, followed by a two-hour seated dinner. Students were assigned to tables of eight that included a business professional or faculty member, creating opportunities for guided conversation and mentorship. Throughout the dinner, students alternated between dining, networking, and listening to instruction on formal dining etiquette, gaining practical skills applicable to interviews, client meetings, and professional engagements.

Interested in becoming a corporate partner?  
To learn more, visit [sfasu.edu/cob/corporate-partnerships](http://sfasu.edu/cob/corporate-partnerships).



## Dr. Wenjing Li Talks Halloween Candy to Regional Media

**Wenjing Li**, associate professor of marketing in the Nelson Rusche College of Business, was recently featured on KTRE News to discuss consumer behavior related to Halloween candy purchases. Li explained that Halloween traditions play a significant role in sustaining consumer demand, as many families consider candy an essential component of the holiday experience. Despite rising prices, households often prioritize maintaining these traditions, which contributes to continued spending during the Halloween season.

Li also noted that while overall demand remains strong, some consumers respond to higher costs by adjusting their purchasing behavior, such as buying smaller quantities or selecting more affordable options. These shifts can influence market dynamics by increasing competition among brands and creating opportunities for smaller or local candy producers. Li's insights highlight how seasonal traditions and consumer preferences interact with broader economic pressures to shape purchasing decisions.

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MORE



# INTERVIEW FROM THE C-SUITE



Megan Owen '99, CEO of CLS Health in Houston, credits her leadership style to the mentors and hands-on learning experiences she received at Stephen F. Austin State University. From agribusiness classrooms to executive communications courses, she learned that great leadership is rooted not just in financial acumen but in understanding the why behind every decision. Today, she leads one of the fastest-growing physician-led health care organizations in Texas with a focus on community, physician autonomy and patient-centered care. In this Interview from the C-Suite, Owen shares how her SFA experience continues to shape the way she builds teams, serves communities and leads with purpose.

## MEGAN OWEN

CEO, CLS HEALTH

### **What experiences during your education most influenced the way you lead today?**

**Owen:** I was fortunate to have professors who cared just as much about who we were becoming as what we were learning. One of the most influential was Dr. Thompson, an agribusiness professor who took the time to teach us that business isn't just about balance sheets and cash flow. It's about understanding why decisions are made and what they ultimately affect. I took several classes with him, and his approach shaped the way I think about leadership to this day. Stephen F. Austin felt like a small, tight-knit family. The professors genuinely cared about their students, and that environment made a lasting impression on me. I also had an executive communications professor who



**"Sometimes what you're trying to fix isn't the problem at all — people just need someone to listen."** Owen says learning to truly listen was the most important leadership lesson of her career and one that now defines how she leads her organization.

challenged us in very practical ways including recording ourselves and counting how many times we said "um." It sounds simple, but it teaches awareness, clarity and confidence, especially when communication becomes a major part of your role. Even before college, I was involved in FFA, where we participated extensively in parliamentary procedure and speaking competitions. When I look back, those early experiences combined with my education at SFA prepared me for exactly what I do now: communicating clearly, leading thoughtfully and understanding the purpose behind every decision.

### **How do you see the health care industry evolving over the next decade, particularly in Texas and the broader southern region?**

**Owen:** The industry has been changing rapidly over the last several years, largely due to the growth of private equity. We're seeing it across health care, particularly in anesthesiology and dentistry and expanding quickly into other specialties. At CLS Health, we've been very intentional about remaining provider-led. Our goal is to grow to 1,000 providers by 2030 so we can serve not only Houston but the surrounding communities as well. When private equity enters the picture, physicians can lose the autonomy to practice medicine the way they believe is best. We work hard to protect that autonomy and give doctors the freedom to care for patients their way. We're also seeing increased pressure from Medicare cuts and growing complexity in insurance billing. Ideally, physicians should be able to focus on patient care without worrying about which insurance card a patient carries.

At the same time, solo practices are finding it increasingly difficult to operate independently. Many physicians need the support of a larger organization, but they don't want to lose their identity or become part of a large academic system. We strive to offer an alternative one that allows physicians to remain rooted in their communities. When doctors shop at the same grocery store, send their children to the same schools and interact with patients in everyday life, trust is built naturally. Health care works best when it's personal, and that sense of connection is something we're intentionally working to preserve.

### **You've led initiatives that have impacted patients, providers and communities at scale. Which accomplishment are you most proud of and why?**

**Owen:** There are many accomplishments I'm proud of over the past several years, but one that stands out most is the growth and evolution of CLS Health working with the founders, Dr. Mohammad Baba and Dr. Mahmoud Dweik. Their decision to expand beyond the Clear Lake market marked a pivotal moment for the organization. Our first expansion into the Heights also prompted a rebrand from Clear Lake Specialties to CLS Health, signaling a broader vision for serving communities across

the region. Since then, CLS Health has continued to grow in both scale and impact. As we've expanded into new markets and invested in significant clinics, we've also become more widely recognized as a trusted provider in the community. That recognition matters. You can have 100 clinics, but if the quality of care isn't there, it doesn't resonate. What's been especially meaningful is seeing patients seek us out because they associate our name with high-quality, comprehensive care.

Today, we offer more than 40 specialties within a multispecialty model that allows patients to receive comprehensive care across the continuum. That growth is meaningful not simply because of the number of locations or services we provide, but because it

**S**ince 2023, Megan Owen has served as CEO of CLS Health, where she has distinguished herself as a transformative leader in the health care sector. She is responsible for advancing the organization's mission to empower physicians and deliver exceptional patient care. Her work includes collaborating closely with her administrative team, streamlining operations, conducting site visits and ensuring that both patients and employees remain top priorities. Her leadership promotes a culture of growth, fairness and simplicity, attracting providers who seek to practice free from the bureaucracy commonly found in larger health systems. She takes pride in positive feedback from patients who value personalized, attentive care, as well as from providers who thrive in an environment focused on achieving the best outcomes.

Prior to joining CLS Health, Owen served for five years as chief operating officer of Houston Eye Associates, the largest physician-owned ophthalmology group in Texas. Her leadership contributed to the organization's reputation for high-quality care and continued innovation. Before her time at HEA, she was the COO at Bay Area Regional Medical Center, where her emphasis on operational excellence and patient satisfaction resulted in measurable organizational improvements.

Earlier in her career with HCA Houston Healthcare, Owen advanced through multiple leadership roles. She began in business development before becoming administrator of Bay Area Surgicare Center, later rising to assistant vice president for the division. In this capacity, she oversaw 13 surgery centers across Houston and San Antonio, further strengthening her expertise in operations, business development, marketing and data management.

reflects trust from patients seeking coordinated, high-quality care and from physicians who want to practice medicine with autonomy in a physician-led organization. Being recognized as a true player in the community reflects that trust and reinforces the model we've worked hard to build.

Another accomplishment I'm particularly proud of is building a strong administrative leadership team to support that growth. We focus on creating an environment where physicians and staff feel supported and patients receive compassionate, personalized care. This could not occur without our team trusting each other to do their part and encouraging each other as we grow. Seeing our team succeed ensures the model succeeds and witnessing its positive impact across the communities we serve has been incredibly rewarding.

### **What tends to surprise people most when they learn how health care organizations actually operate?**

**Owen:** I think our situation is a little different than everyone else's. We have the ability to take a patient down the hall to another provider of ours to be seen for another reason, and we were able to get her right in to see another specialist. Normally, it would've been a six-week wait to see another professional, but we were able to help that patient the same day. The comprehensive care within our system gives us the ability to get our patients taken care of quickly. We still take it back to our

hashtag, #HealthcareHowItShouldBe. I think what's surprising to new patients is they expect the same outcome that they've gotten from someone else, but they don't get that from us. The true comprehensive care is a little surprising.

### **How do you foster a culture of innovation at the executive level?**

**Owen:** That is a full-time job. Dr. Baba and I meet every Monday morning, and we talked about it this Monday. We have to allow our executive team to try things and fail, and help them through their pivots. We delegate with support. When we see that someone may have a special gift or trait, we try to put them on a project for them to be able to see that, too. Maybe trying something new. We don't like to lose anyone on our team because we invest so much time and energy in growing them. I meet with every single one of our executive team members every week, one-on-one, about everything we're working on and need to do. It is a lot of communication and accountability. We have to foster that whole mentality, that communication is truly key. If we aren't talking about what's going on, if we're not figuring out who's doing what and ensuring that three different people aren't working on the same thing and not realizing it and wasting their time, then it does no good for us. We really try to foster innovation and invest a lot in our employees. We celebrate success stories. "Fail fast and pivot" is something we say all the time. That's



life. You learn more from your failures than you do from your successes. No one's scared to come forward when they fail. When you allow everyone to "fail fast and pivot," you aren't holding any strings attached. We learn from it, we move on and we complete the task in a different way.

### **What advice would you give business students who are interested in health care but don't come from clinical or medical backgrounds?**

**Owen:** Pursue internships. We've started an internship program. We're going to try to bring on six students a year and put them through two and a half months during the summer, spending time in every department within CLS. They would spend time with IT, data, coders, revenue cycle, operations and HR. It gives students the opportunity to see the entire organization. Sometimes you are the right person in the wrong role. I had a degree in ag business. I just happened to get a job in sales in a hospital, and the CEO walked up to me one day and said come to my office. He said, "You are the right person in the wrong role, you need to be in administration." He started putting me into financial meetings and all of the meetings about the surgery center. I ended up running that surgery center and then the Gulf Coast region, which is 13 surgery centers. If it weren't for him seeing something in me that I didn't even know existed, I would've never been where I am now. Mentorship is so unbelievably important. Reach out to people who are in health care. Spend time in health care and look at all aspects. Health care is so broad. Do a lot of digging and see what excites them. Health care is really exciting.

### **What lesson took the longest for you to learn as an executive?**

**Owen:** There's one word and I know exactly what it is: listening. When a physician calls and starts listing everything that's wrong, they usually aren't calling about the actual problem. Most of the time, they just need someone to listen and help them find the root of what's really going on. I walk the clinics and administrative offices and talk to people every morning. You can see it on their faces, whether they're having a good day or a hard one. I'll invite them into my office and say, "Let's have a chat." At first, that can be intimidating, but it creates space to understand what they're carrying and what they need. Early in my career, I wanted to fix everything. What I've learned is that sometimes what you're trying to fix isn't the problem at all. Listening is often the leadership.

### **What legacy do you hope your leadership leaves within the organization and the communities you serve?**

**Owen:** I've been through a lot within my life, both professionally and personally. I love where I work now, even before. It's very simple. I want my legacy to be that it's so easy to be a good human. When you have the right mindset to do so, everything else

should fall into place. Kindness is free. I feel like I'm just getting started. I feel like there's so much more to do for this community and this world to bring that to fruition. Each time we get some sort of accomplishment for CLS, I want it to feel like the whole company has won, and that we as good humans accomplished that because of being good people.

### **What is your fondest memory during your time at SFA?**

**Owen:** I had a really good time at SFA. I loved the campus. I loved that you could walk everywhere and everyone knew everyone. It was small enough, and it felt like home even though I wasn't at home. I wanted to be a game warden. That's why I went to SFA and my dad said absolutely not, figure something else out. So I went into ag business. Sports Shack was a lot of fun too.





## Rusche Expertise, Nationwide Impact: Professor Jaramillo Featured on WalletHub

The Credit Card Benefits Guide on WalletHub outlines the many advantages that credit cards can offer consumers, ranging from fundamental features like convenience, interest-free financing and robust fraud protections to secondary perks such as price protection, rental car insurance and extended warranties that many cardholders overlook. Credit cards also provide opportunities to build credit and can deliver significant value through rewards programs when used responsibly, helping individuals maximize benefits while minimizing costs.

Notably, **Dr. Matthew Jaramillo** served as an expert contributor to this comprehensive WalletHub guide, lending his academic insight to help clarify how credit card benefits work and what consumers should consider when choosing and using credit cards. His expert input underscores Stephen F. Austin State University's role in shaping financial literacy and thought leadership beyond the classroom, demonstrating the real-world impact of faculty expertise on national consumer resources.



Dr. Matthew Jaramillo, Mir Tayamen, Alex Soto and Micah Collins.

## Students Gain National Exposure at the 2025 FPA Annual Conference

**Dr. Matthew Jaramillo**, senior lecturer in the Department of Economics and Finance, accompanied three student financial advisors to the 2025 Financial Planning Association Annual Conference held in Las Vegas, Nevada. The students, Micah Collins, Alex Soto and Mir Tayamen serve as Marleta Chadwick Student Financial Advisors, providing no-cost financial advising services to fellow students.

Micah Collins said "the experience was both educational and inspiring, allowing us to learn from experts and expand our professional perspectives."

The conference offered a valuable opportunity for the student advisors to engage with more than 800 financial planning professionals during the three-day event. In addition to extensive professional networking, the students observed finalists from universities across the United States competing in the FPA Financial Planning Challenge Competition. This national competition includes both a financial planning quiz bowl and a comprehensive financial plan presentation. According to the Financial Planning Association's official website, "This distinctive three-phased competition is designed exclusively for undergraduate degree programs registered with the CFP® Board." The Marleta Chadwick Student Financial Advisors plan to compete in the challenge during the upcoming academic year.

# CENTER FOR BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC RESEARCH



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MORE**



## October 2025 Issue East Texas and Beyond

The October 2025 issue of *East Texas and Beyond* from the Center for Business and Economic Research opens with a discussion on the pervasive debate about artificial intelligence and its impact on jobs. Rather than accepting alarmist claims, CBER frames the question by exploring what AI actually is, its current limitations and the uncertainty of its future economic effects, noting that predictions of widespread job loss are speculative and likely overstated.

Following the introduction to AI, the report examines how technological change could influence economic productivity without necessarily leading to massive unemployment. Drawing on economic theory, the authors explain that while AI might boost efficiency in specific sectors, it may not dramatically expand overall GDP, because technological advances often reduce the proportion of total output in an industry

even as they make it more productive. The analysis also highlights the importance of human traits and roles that are less susceptible to automation, such as skilled labor and interpersonal tasks.

The report then presents findings on Stephen F. Austin State University's economic impact in its home region. CBER's research shows that SFA contributes nearly \$350 million to the Nacogdoches economy and supports approximately 5,000 local jobs, meaning that around \$1 in every \$10 of local economic activity is attributable to the university's presence. These figures underscore SFA's role as a major economic engine in East Texas.

In reviewing current economic conditions, the newsletter notes that recent data reflect robust growth in certain sectors, though some indicators point to a modest slowing trend. For example, revisions to job-creation statistics and a slight uptick in unemployment suggest mixed signals

for the broader national and regional economy. Despite these nuances, consumer spending and retail activity remain resilient, helping sustain demand even amid rising inflation.

The document also outlines CBER's mission and team, introducing faculty and researchers affiliated with the center and highlighting their contributions to economic discourse through media and publications. These details position CBER as a key source of economic analysis for both academic and public audiences in East Texas and beyond.

Finally, the report lists additional studies and research outputs by CBER colleagues, illustrating the breadth of economic topics the center engages with — from environmental economics to financial literacy and industry-specific analyses. This reinforces CBER's commitment to informing local stakeholders, entrepreneurs and policymakers with data-driven insights.



## Dr. Drew Thornley Cited in U.S. Court of Appeals

Dr. Drew Thornley's article, "America's 'Kia Boys': The Problem, Responses, and Recommendations", published in the Seattle University Law Review, was recently cited in a judicial opinion by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit in the consolidated cases Qualitee Moshi v. Kia America Inc. and Donald Strench v. Hyundai Motor America Corporation Service Company. In his concurring and dissenting opinion, Judge Eric E. Murphy referenced Thornley's analysis of the widespread phenomenon involving vehicular thefts of certain Kia and Hyundai models and the societal and legal challenges these "Kia Boys" cases present, underscoring the academic relevance of Thornley's research to ongoing legal debates.

The Sixth Circuit's reference to Thornley's work highlights how scholarly legal writing can inform and intersect with appellate jurisprudence, particularly in complex product liability and foreseeability discussions. The Moshi and Strench cases involve allegations that design choices made by vehicle manufacturers contributed to unsafe conditions exploited by thieves, leading to serious injury and loss of life, and the court's decision to engage with academic commentary reflects the value of interdisciplinary perspectives in judicial reasoning.



## Business Communication Students Deliver Virtual Interview Training for Community Nonprofit

Students enrolled in Dr. Kristen Waddell's "Business Communication Technologies" course in the Nelson Rusche College of Business completed an applied learning project in partnership with Christian Women's Job Corps of Nacogdoches. As part of the assignment, student teams developed comprehensive training materials, including instructional slide decks, an infographic and a communication strategy designed to help CWJC participants conduct effective virtual interviews using platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

The project emphasized professional communication, digital presentation skills and audience-centered messaging to support workforce readiness. The CWJC director and assistant director attended class presentations, evaluated the student submissions and selected the top project for implementation. This collaboration provided students with real-world consulting experience while supporting CWJC's mission to equip women with the skills needed for successful employment.

# 3 PEOPLE - 3 QUESTIONS

Ever wonder what the Rusche crew is cooking, thinking of or reminiscing on?

We asked three Rusche faculty and staff members the same three questions to get a glimpse into their interests beyond the office.

## 1. What are your favorite things to cook?



**DR. RAYMOND JONES**

Associate Professor, Department of Management and Marketing

One of my favorite things to cook is steak on the grill or open fire. I really enjoy the process of getting a good sear and pairing it with classic sides like garlic mashed potatoes, roasted vegetables and a fresh salad. There's something relaxing and satisfying about putting it all together, especially when cooking outdoors.

## 2. What place would you most like to visit?

I've always wanted to visit Alaska for its incredible scenery and wildlife. Hiking in the Alps is also high on my list. Being in nature, especially in the mountains, is my happy place.

## 3. What advice would you give your college-aged self?

I'd tell my college-aged self to get involved in as much as possible, both on campus and in the community. Join clubs, volunteer, try new things and don't be afraid to step out of your comfort zone. Just as important, make the effort to meet people and build relationships. Networking and learning from others can open doors and shape your path in ways you might not expect.



**JAMES TONNES**

Technology Coordinator,  
Rusche College of Business

Some of my favorite things to cook include hamburgers, chicken quesadillas or a buffalo chicken pasta. But my absolute favorite thing to cook would be smoked pork belly burnt ends. Using an apple cherry habanero rib candy gives the burnt ends a sweet taste but also has just the right amount of heat to it. One thing that I have not tried to cook yet but will be trying is fresh smoked salsa. That will be my next recipe to perfect.

The place I would most like to go visit would be St. Andrews, Scotland. I would love to play a round of golf at the Old Course, Castle Course and The New Course. The idea of playing at the original home of golf has been very fascinating to me. I would love to go with my grandpa who got me into golf. One of these years I will win the ticket draw for tickets to the Open when played at St. Andrews.

The advice that I would give my college self would be to get more certifications while in college rather than waiting until getting out to start getting them. I always knew how much certifications could help me in the future, but I didn't realize how much weight certifications carried when searching for jobs after college.



**DR. BECKY DAVIS**

Associate Professor,  
Department of  
Economics and Finance

This past year we purchased a Blackstone grill. I have really enjoyed exploring all the types of foods I can cook on it. I think my favorite thing I've cooked on the grill is smash burgers, though fajitas are a close second. Aside from grilling, I make a Japanese chicken curry that Dr. Mendoza taught me how to cook. It's delicious.

My husband and I are planning a trip to Ireland and Scotland, which are at the top of the list of places we want to visit. If we are talking about places in the U.S., I want to wander around Yellowstone National Park and Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming at some point. Montana, Utah and New Mexico are other states we want to visit.

If there was a way to give past me advice, I would tell her to do a couple of things. First, she really should take more math classes before graduate school. Second, she should explore a double major in pre-med or athletic training. It's okay to have multiple interests. People can be more than one thing. Third, while it is nice to graduate early, maybe don't. Maybe stay for that last semester and enjoy the college experience. If she takes the other advice, she probably wouldn't be able to graduate early anymore anyways.

# GRADUATION

FALL 2025

## CONGRATULATIONS, CLASS OF 2025!

Nelson Rusche College of Business recently recognized its newest alumni as students crossed the commencement stage and officially joined the Rusche alumni community. This achievement represents the culmination of years of academic dedication, professional development and experiential learning. As graduates move into the next phase of their careers, they carry forward the knowledge, skills and values cultivated during their time at Rusche. The college looks forward to staying connected with these alumni and witnessing the meaningful contributions they will make to their professions and communities.



**139**

TOTAL COLLEGE OF BUSINESS DEGREES CONFERRED  
104 UNDERGRADUATE, 35 GRADUATE

**25%**

PERCENTAGE OF COLLEGE OF BUSINESS GRADUATES  
WHO ARE FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

Richard Johnson and Jadon Jackson,  
sports business majors, at graduation.





Class  
of  
2025



BBA  
Sports  
Business



**Monica M. Piña**

International Business major  
Owner, A.E. Cruz Construction



**Michael McElroy**

Marketing major  
Owner, A Purpose Real Estate &  
Insurance Services



**Micah Love**

International  
Senior Therapist,  
Specialist,

# Where Careers Begin: Inside Rusche Ready Interview Day

In the Rusche College of Business, students don't wait until their senior year to start thinking about their careers. From their first semester on campus, they're learning how to make strong first impressions, build professional networks and confidently step into the workforce thanks to events like "Rusche Ready: Interview Day," hosted by the Department of Business Communication and Legal Studies.

Designed for students of all classifications, the event featured seven interactive sessions that helped participants sharpen essential interview and networking skills. According to **Dr. Carol Wright**, professor and department chair, alumni engagement was at the heart of the day's success. "Our Rusche alumni have so much advice and experience to share," Wright said. "Students really listen because these alumni were once in their shoes. Now, as professionals — many of them hiring managers — our alumni presenters today can offer firsthand insight into what employers are looking for."

The first session, "From Freshman to First Interview," began with **Monica Piña '01**, a member of the Business Communication and Legal Studies Executive Advisory Board and co-owner and managing partner of AE Cruz Construction in Houston, emphasizing the importance of first impressions to an audience of first-year students.

"You only have seven to 10 seconds to show how professional and trustworthy you are," she said. Piña guided students through crafting a concise "elevator pitch" — a 30- to 60- second summary highlighting their studies, accomplishments and strengths. She encouraged students to practice their pitch in front of a mirror or camera, focusing on eye contact, voice tone and confident body language.



Alumni, employers and faculty came together to help students master interviews, networking and professional communication.



Logan Pantoja, a marketing major, participates in a "Rusche Ready" mock interview panel.

Continued from page 29.



**Amber Kirkland** '23, general manager at Fastenal's Tyler location, built on that advice by urging students to expand their social and professional networks. "Find a group of people who will push you to be better," she said. "Join organizations, attend career fairs and practice talking to recruiters — they're there to help." Kirkland also offered practical tips for writing professional emails to professors and potential employers. "Treat your professors like future colleagues," she said. "They can become great references once you graduate."

**Chelsea Vallilee**, Fastenal's regional recruiter for Texas and Louisiana, emphasized flexibility and adaptability as well as communicating confidently during the job interviewing process. "Use your voice," Vallilee said. "Employers want candidates who can communicate clearly, take feedback and advocate for themselves." Vallilee also recommended that students create LinkedIn profiles early and start engaging with professional content. "Your LinkedIn activity shows employers what you care about — it's a reflection of your curiosity, initiative and community engagement."

Piña, Kirkland and Vallilee all emphasized the importance of research before an interview. Students can search websites like O\*NET OnLine and CareerOneStop to explore occupations, job responsibilities and salaries throughout the country using data from the U.S. Department of Labor. Students should thoroughly research the organization and people they're interviewing with and prepare questions to ask during the interview to show their interest in the position.

The final session, "Practice to Perfect: Interview Role Play," brought all the day's lessons together as Vallilee demonstrated different types of interviews — from phone and Zoom to in-person meetings. Phone interviews help potential employers determine whether job seekers are honest on their applications and are truly excited about a position by listening to the applicant's tone of voice, Vallilee said. During these interviews, students may be asked to describe challenges they've faced in previous jobs or during school assignments, "but you can't be critical of a person or company," she added. Zoom interviews often focus on an organization's missions and values and whether applicants are a good fit for a position. Students should be mindful of their Zoom backgrounds and potential interruptions during these interviews.



"SFA has interview rooms with nice backgrounds where you won't be interrupted," Vallilee said. "Use them and wear earbuds instead of giant headphones during your interviews." In face-to-face interviews, students need to be even more

Michael McElroy visits with students after the event.

*"If we can help students walk into career fairs feeling confident and prepared, they'll already be one step closer to landing their dream job." -Dr. Carol Wright*



Amber Kirkland speaks on interview skills.

mindful of their facial expressions, voice tone and mannerisms than they were in Zoom interviews.

"You need to be careful about loud jewelry and perfume or cologne," Vallilee said. "If you fidget with your hair, pull it back." Students should be prepared to answer questions like, "How have your studies prepared you for this position?" "What are your goals in the next three to six months?" "What is your biggest strength and biggest weakness?" When discussing their weakness, students should note how they're overcoming it, Vallilee said. To prepare for behavioral questions such as "Describe one of your most challenging customers and how you found a solution for them," students can review their own experiences at past jobs. When listing the qualities of a good teammate, students can share experiences they've had with classmates while working on group projects or as members of organizations while volunteering in the community.

Whether in a human resources phone screen or a five-hour marathon interview with four different committees, Vallilee stressed that the students stay genuine. "You're an expert on yourself, and hiring managers want to meet the real you." The Department of Business Communication and Legal Studies plans to make "Rusche Ready" an annual event to help students prepare for SFA's All Majors Career Fair.

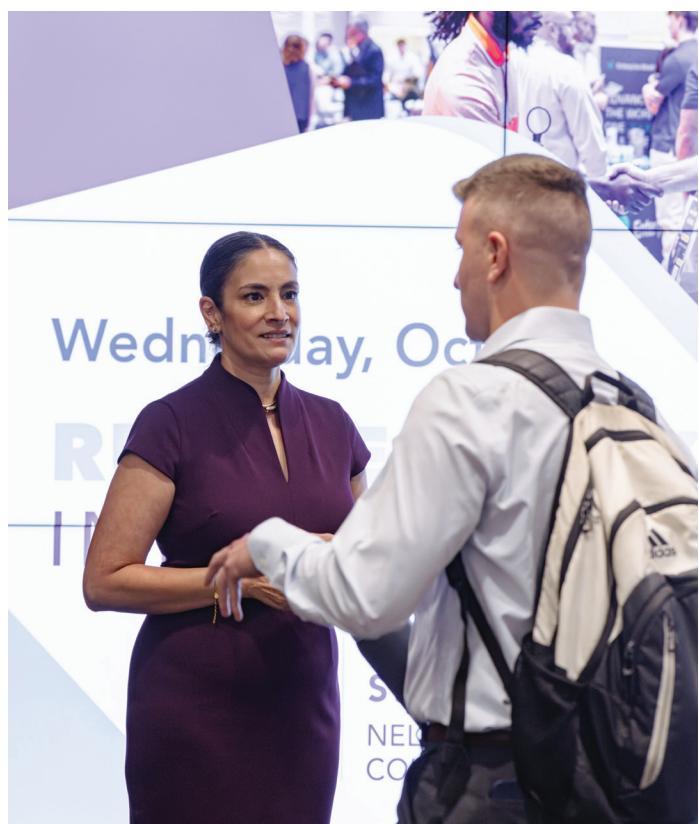
"If we can help students walk into career fairs feeling confident and prepared, they'll already be one step closer to landing their dream job," Wright said. Other Rusche College of Business alumni participating in this event, which also included business ethics sessions as well as a workshop designed for accounting majors, were **Michael McElroy** '01, owner of A Purpose Real Estate and Insurance Services in Houston; **Micah Love** '01, a member of the Business Communication and Legal Studies Executive Advisory Board and a senior therapeutic area specialist, immuno-oncology, at Bristol-Myers Squibb based in Houston; and **Amber Sonmor** '24, compensation specialist in Human Resources at SFA.



Chelsea Vallilee demonstrates interview do's and don'ts.



Students practice hand-shaking skills.



Monica Piña answers students' interviewing questions between sessions.



Estonia Maritime Museum in Tallinn, Estonia.

# Study Abroad: Estonia and Finland

Fifteen Stephen F. Austin State University students capped off their summer I term "Discovering Business" course in the Nelson Rusche College of Business with a trip to Estonia and Finland at the end of July.

The study abroad course, now in its third year, is designed to introduce incoming first-year and current students of all majors to business concepts and principles while helping them meet fellow Lumberjacks and faculty members before the fall semester starts.

"Studying abroad in Estonia and Finland was such a wonderful opportunity to prepare me for success in my first year at SFA," said **Kenzie Hodges**, business first-year student from Fort Worth. "I was able to meet other Lumberjacks prior to school even starting, so making friends and becoming integrated as a beginning college student was easy. I also was able to get used to professors on a more relaxed basis, so I was comfortable enough to ask questions and build



Eesti Vabaohumuuseum, an open air museum in Tallinn, Estonia.



Students posing with the Tallinn sign at the cruise harbor in Tallinn, Estonia.



Viru Gates, a World Heritage Site in Tallinn, Estonia.



Katrin Veegen, an amber jeweler, demonstrates how to identify real amber to students at her Old Town Studio.

relationships."

The trip began in Tallinn, Estonia's capital on the Baltic Sea. Students toured Old Town, the Estonian Open Air Museum in Rocca al Mare, Lahemaa National Park, the Vabamu Museum of Occupations and Freedom, and Kadriorg Park, the 18th-century summer retreat that Tsar Peter I gave Empress Catherine. Between entrepreneurial visits, the students also squeezed in a day trip to Helsinki, Finland; a tour of Tartu, the second largest city in Estonia; and some Nordic walking complete with skiing poles.

Activities ranging from touring Pohjala Brewery to marzipan making helped students learn more about small businesses in the region. During visits to a fishing port venture, Harmet's modular house production facilities and Amber Distribution Estonia, students heard different perspectives on trade, both locally and abroad, and gained inspiration for their own future businesses.

"I got to see how a person's passion grew into a successful business, which was



Students exploring Lahemaa National Park in Kuusalu Vald, Estonia.



Kendall Reese viewing a piano in Palmse Manor in Tallinn, Estonia.

honestly inspiring for my own goals," said **Karina Tergerson**, entrepreneurship and finance first-year student from Clifton.

Faculty members who teach the "Discovering Business" course hope 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," said **Dr. Drew Thornley**, associate professor of legal studies, who co-teaches the course and led the trip with **Dr. Ryan Phelps**, associate professor of economics. "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."

Phelps said he, Thornley and the students also received support throughout the trip from two SFA alumni, **Monica Piña '01**, a member of the Business Communication and Legal Studies



Dinasty Nicole Roach and Monica Piña in Helsinki, Finland.

Executive Advisory Board in the Rusche College of Business, and **Meaghan Morton '19 & '22**, customer relationship management coordinator in SFA's Office of Admissions.

"Monica, who's co-owner and managing partner of AE Cruz Construction in Houston, brought a wealth of industry expertise and international business experience," Phelps said. "And Meaghan offered students practical advice for success at SFA and beyond. She also used her marketing skills to keep everyone updated on our journey. It was clear that our students valued their reliable and relatable adult perspectives."

Tergerson agreed.

"Attending this trip increased my confidence for travel abroad through the safety of the trip and the knowledge and support of our guide and advisors," she said.

Thornley said he's already packing for the next "Discovering Business" adventure.

"I could not have enjoyed this trip more. The location and the programming were a 10 out of 10. Our local guide was absolutely phenomenal, the weather and food were wonderful, and the business visits and cultural activities were outstanding. I cannot wait to return to the Baltics next summer."

Next year's "Discovering Business" cohort will explore businesses in Latvia from July 22 to Aug. 2. For more information on this study abroad opportunity, email [Thornleyam@sfasu.edu](mailto:Thornleyam@sfasu.edu).



Rogers Centre in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.



Notre-Dame Basilica in Montreal, Quebec, Canada.



Pizzeria Jacques-Cartier in Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

# Study Abroad: Canada

**A** dozen business students from Stephen F. Austin State University's Nelson Rusche College of Business wrapped up their management course by exploring sports business, entrepreneurship on various levels and innovation in Canada Aug. 11-19.

"During this study abroad trip, students experienced not only Canadian culture but also how Canadians innovate, launch businesses and celebrate sport," said **Dr. Jason Reese**, interim dean of the Rusche College of Business, who led the trip with **Dr. Robert McDemand**, senior lecturer of sports business and management at SFA.

"Canada's traditions are so beloved — from hockey to maple syrup to Niagara Falls — that the students immediately embraced them," Reese said.

"But they also learned important lessons like how to navigate the streets of Toronto and Montreal through public transit. Experiences like these build their confidence for future adventures abroad."

In Toronto, students visited the waterfront, the Hockey Hall of Fame and the Royal Ontario Museum before heading up the CN Tower for a bird's-eye view of the city and Lake Ontario. They also took the famous Maid of the Mist boat tour to see Niagara Falls up close.

"Niagara Falls is one of the highlights of the trip because it was something that I probably would have never done or had the opportunity to do without the study abroad trip," said **Erin Banks**, sports business senior from Georgetown. "As we got closer to the falls, I had to close my eyes from all the water spraying on my face, and all I could do was laugh because I couldn't believe that I was in this place with these people experiencing such a



Journey Behind The Falls at Niagara Falls in Ontario, Canada.

special adventure."

Next, students mastered the "OK Blue Jays" dance with help from passionate baseball fans during the seventh-inning stretch of a Toronto Blue Jays game at Rogers Centre.

"Seeing Xander [Bogaerts] celebrating with strangers and everyone being united by their love for their Blue Jays was unforgettable," said **Dayanira Flores**, sports business sophomore from Mission. "That moment made me realize that sports are powerful connectors, bringing people together in shared joy. I remember thinking this was the highlight of my trip because it made me feel alive — part of something bigger than myself."

In Montreal, students learned about the 2020 launch of SportsAi, a sports analytics startup that uses artificial intelligence to automate data collection and analysis for soccer players and coaches to help them improve players' performance. **Tarik Agday**, co-founder and CEO of SportsAi, shared his story of combining his experience as a former MLS prospect for CF Montreal with his AI specialization at Polytechnique Montreal to provide real-time analysis for soccer teams.

"Tarik also told us how he overcame the challenges

of introducing new technologies in an industry full of traditionalists," McDermand said. "This showed our students how innovation, perseverance and the entrepreneurial spirit can lead to a successful business supporting a sport they love."

The CF Montreal theme continued with a soccer match between the team and DC United, which offered some students a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

"I'm a huge soccer fan, so getting to watch CF Montreal play against DC United was amazing," said **Modesto Martinez**, kinesiology first-year student from Mission. "For me, going to a live soccer game and seeing the action in person was a dream come true, and I hope one day I can do it again."

Despite their packed agenda, the students had time to enjoy some delicious meals. They returned home with a few new favorite foods.

"Trying poutine for the first time was messy but delicious, and BeaverTail pastries instantly became the best thing I've ever eaten," said **Madison Zaccardo**, Master of Business Administration student from Lubbock.

**Helena Easey**, entrepreneurship senior from Cypress, said the traveling group's small size



allowed her to bond with every student on the trip.

"I learned to expand my interests into areas I never thought I would," she said. "I'm so grateful to the Rusche College of Business for supporting its students in academic ventures such as this one."

**Reed O'Grady**, management senior from Weatherford, also saw benefits to traveling with his business classmates.

"One of the convenient things about doing a study abroad with the Rusche College of Business is that you are traveling with your peers the entire trip," he said. "I was able to not only talk with my classmates but relate on a deeper level because we were all in the same season of life, going through the same classes, and a few of us will be in the same classes in the fall."

**Ella Hollis**, marketing senior from Tyler, said learning outside the classroom helped her learn more about herself.

"After coming home from this trip, I feel that I have more confidence as an individual to go out and do more in unfamiliar places with unfamiliar people, whether it is for personal or business matters," she said. "This trip created many opportunities to learn and better myself as an individual in moments that made learning more fun and enjoyable than what it could have been in just a regular classroom experience."

For more information on SFA's Rusche College of Business and its study abroad opportunities, visit [sfasu.edu/cob](http://sfasu.edu/cob).



Dallas Fort-Worth Airport.



Ice skating at the Atrium Le 1000 in Montreal, Canada.

# SWIFT-MAS SHOWCASE



## Branding Meets Bold Ideas

Students in Stephen F. Austin State University's Nelson Rusche College of Business stepped into the spotlight during finals week for the Swift-Mas Showcase, an event supported by SFA's Arnold Center for Entrepreneurship that highlighted student innovation and creative problem-solving throughout the fall semester.

Held outdoors near SFA's iconic Surfin' Steve fountain, the showcase served as the final presentation day for "Swiftonomics: The Business of Music and Entrepreneurship," a course taught by **Dr. Amy Mehaffey**, lecturer in the Department of Management and Marketing and member of SFA's Entrepreneurship Faculty Fellows Program.

According to Mehaffey, the course examines Swift not as a celebrity but as an entrepreneur whose mastery of storytelling, values-based branding, market segmentation and audience connection makes her one of the most influential marketers of her generation. Students spent the semester analyzing these strategies and developing their own fully realized product launches inspired by Swift's approach.



"The best part of this course was watching students realize how capable they are when they're given creative space," Mehaffey said. "Taylor Swift was simply an entry point, but what they're really learning is how to think like marketers, problem-solve and explore life as entrepreneurs."

During the showcase, attendees explored individual student business concepts featuring prototypes, mockups and visuals that demonstrated how students applied entrepreneurial frameworks to develop innovative solutions for their own brands. Participants described the experience as both energizing and confidence-building.

"This class taught me the most out of all my classes," said **Logan Pantoja**, senior marketing major from Weatherford. "I have a whole new understanding and perspective on marketing, and my love for the discipline has only grown stronger. The class strengthened my creative skills and understanding of branding strategy."

A festive "Swift-Mas" atmosphere elevated the event even further, blending academic rigor with creativity and seasonal celebration. The course's 43 students representing nine different majors transformed business concepts into practical, audience-ready displays to showcase not only their knowledge but also

their ability to think entrepreneurially in a real-world context, according to Mehaffey.

"In addition to developing and pitching their own product launches, students engaged in a theory-driven analysis of how public figures navigate brand challenges and scrutiny," she said. "That assignment pushed them to think critically about reputation management and the strategic decisions behind the headlines. I'm proud to say many students reported leaving the course with strengthened creative problem-solving abilities and a deeper understanding of marketing, branding and entrepreneurship."

**Autumn Nielsen**, junior entrepreneurship major from Kingwood, echoed this sentiment.

"We learned how marketing works in the real world and how people respond to different marketing tools," Nielsen said. "This was so effective because we were talking about a real person and not reading about some concept in a textbook."

For more information on SFA's marketing and entrepreneurship academic programs, visit [sfasu.edu/mgtmkt](http://sfasu.edu/mgtmkt). To learn more about the Arnold Center for Entrepreneurship, visit [sfasu.edu/ace](http://sfasu.edu/ace).



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**Trey Turner**

Associate VP for  
University Advancement  
[turnertrey@sfasu.edu](mailto:turnertrey@sfasu.edu)  
(936) 468-5406



**Will Chancey**

Director of Development  
Rusche College of Business  
[will.chancey@sfasu.edu](mailto:will.chancey@sfasu.edu)  
(936) 468-2842

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