



University of South Dakota Class of 2024



UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA

30 UNDER 30

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Alex Connor '18

Dean of Students | North Middle School

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

I am currently in my first year as the dean of students at North Middle School in Rapid City. Prior to taking this position, I taught math at North Middle School for six years. I now work closely with the building principals to help create a quality education program that adheres to state and district requirements. On a day-to-day basis I spend time managing student behavior issues. In order to effectively manage these, I need to be able to process information to make quick and informed decisions, as well as be able to communicate clearly with students, parents and staff. I also strive to be fair, consistent, and just when dealing with students. The most rewarding part of being the dean of students has been being able to work with students, parents, and teachers to create strategies that allow the student to become successful in the classroom. I am hoping to use this role as dean of students as a steppingstone towards my ultimate goal of becoming a school principal. I have recently started working on my master's degree in educational administration through USD. My goal has always been to become the principal at North Middle School in Rapid City. That has been my goal because I grew up in north Rapid City and the students on this side of town don't always have an advocate. I want to be their principal so they know that there will always be someone in their corner who believes in them. Thanks to USD, I have the education and knowledge to know how to do so.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

I would not be where I am now without the wonderful professors and programs offered by USD. USD's student-teaching program gave me valuable experience and allowed me to enter the teaching profession with full confidence in my abilities. In addition to the experience, the network of support I was able to develop at USD was incredible. I am still in contact with several of my classmates and use them as resources to find new strategies when needed. I went to Vermillion knowing almost no one and left with what has turned out to be several of my best friends.

The relationships I developed at USD have connected me with so many great people that have been a part of so many wonderful life experiences. In fact, when I got married last summer, five members of my wedding party were people I had met while on the campus of USD. Whether it's returning to Vermillion for DDays, going to Sioux Falls for the Summit League tournament, or hosting a watch party in Rapid City when we play the school from up north, USD will always be apart of me. I can't express how thankful I am for all USD has done for me in terms of preparing me to succeed professionally as well as providing me with valuable personal relationships.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

As a dedicated educator and active community member, I have demonstrated success and influence through both my profession and extracurricular involvement. I am part of North Middle School's Building Leadership team where I collaborate with colleagues to implement innovative strategies. The work that I have put in has allowed the proficiency rate of my students to increase in each of my six years as a classroom teacher before becoming the dean of students. This commitment to student improvement in the classroom reflects my passion for student growth and learning. I coach multiple sports where I emphasize skills such as teamwork, resilience and work ethic. Coaching has allowed me to develop relationships with students outside of the classroom and has allowed me to help build their confidence as well as offer some life skills.

Outside of school, I enjoy volunteering at the Rapid City Club for Boys where I help plan and run special events, coach and referee their in-house sports leagues, or assist with whatever else they may need. I have also worked with Black Hills Badges for Hope, a local philanthropic organization in Rapid City. I have volunteered at their events as well as organized an event in which they provided several North Middle School football players with cleats because they were unable to afford them themselves. My hope in all the work I do, both voluntary and professional, is to address important community issues and promote positive change for the youth. Through my diverse roles, I strive to create an environment where students feel empowered and inspired to succeed.



Alexander Zephier III '17

Field Advisor / Residential Program Director |
University of South Dakota - Upward Bound

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

I currently work for USD's Upward Bound program as the field advisor and residential program director. Our program provides low-income, first-generation high school students with the opportunity to experience college life and develop good habits that ultimately lead to success in their pursuit of a higher education.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

USD connected me with great mentors, faculty, and friends that impacted my life for the better. My experiences during my time at USD helped me grow personally and professionally. My current career with USD gives me an opportunity to give back and serve the communities I grew up in.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

In my educational and professional journey with USD, I've always tried to put my best foot forward and lead by example. In backgrounds like mine, there are many obstacles and adversity to overcome. I found education to be the great equalizer. If you are resilient in your journey, no matter your background or the adversity you face, you can persevere. I wanted to set the example for my family, my community, and anyone else who was wondering if they can do the same. I've been fortunate enough to be involved in some great programs throughout my life and I'm proud to be able to continue that work for the next generations.



Alexis Evans '20

Operations Director | Pathways Shelter
for the Homeless

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

I am currently the operations director at Pathways Shelter for the Homeless in Yankton, South Dakota. We are a nonprofit that provides emergency shelter, financial assistance and case management to those experiencing or at risk of homelessness in a 60-mile radius around Yankton. I oversee all operations and finances of our programs and federal grants. I also choreograph, teach and oversee the Yankton High School color guard, which performs at local events and travels to marching band competitions in the area to compete against other high schools. I recently applied to go back to school at USD! I plan to further my education and continue to make a difference in the nonprofit sector.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

I continue to work closely with the USD social work department by overseeing interns, many of whom have become full-time staff at Pathways following graduation. We have an office full of Yotes! I also sit on the board of directors for The Sound of USD Alumni Band. I developed the current newsletter format we use to communicate with our members, as well as continue to help organize alumni events. The networking connections I have made through the social work program and Alumni Band have contributed to my success in my current roles. Anywhere I go, I can always find a Yote to help share ideas to better services in our community.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

I developed, implemented and continue to oversee the case management program here at Pathways. I have also been part of the shelter's expansion, adding four new programs during my time here. We are currently working to implement life-skills focused programming to prevent recidivism and teach our guests how to maintain independent housing long-term. I have overseen tremendous growth in the Yankton color guard program at both the high school and middle school levels. I brought back the high school winter guard program, and coach it on a volunteer basis, along with fellow USD alumni Kimberly Slagerman, BFA. The friendships I made at USD have created opportunities to collaborate in my professional career and my passion projects!



Anshu Chandra '16

Director of Philanthropic Counsel | BWF

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

As director of philanthropic counsel, I work with Bentz, Whaley, Flessner & Associate's (BFW) national and international nonprofit clients to raise philanthropic support to fulfill their missions. My focus areas include acquiring data, synthesizing and analyzing data, crafting recommendations, creating action-oriented plans and providing any additional support clients may need - the perfect marriage of both sides of my brain! I hope to continue using my education to contribute to the greater good for all.

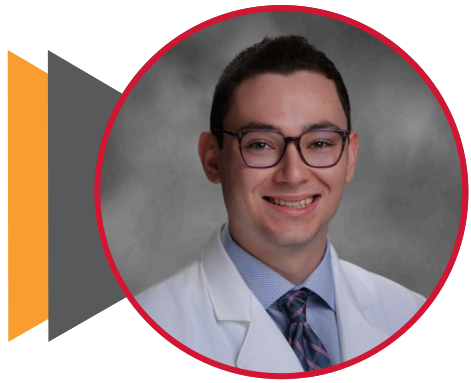
How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

My time at USD has profoundly impacted my personal and professional journey after graduation. The diverse courses and opportunities allowed me to explore my interests and gain a deeper understanding of marketing. The support and guidance from professors helped me develop essential skills and knowledge that have been invaluable. Additionally, the university's emphasis on practical learning through internships and industry connections provided me with real-world experiences that have significantly shaped my career path and prepared me for the challenges and opportunities in the real world.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

I believe that success and influence are not just about personal achievements but also about how I can contribute to the growth and well-being of others. I demonstrate success by consistently delivering high-quality work and being a team player for my colleagues. I actively seek out opportunities for professional development and growth, and I strive to be a positive influence on those around me. I also make a point of building strong professional relationships and networking within my industry, which helps me to stay informed about the latest trends and best practices.

I currently serve as the chief volunteer officer/board chair for the Sioux Falls Family YMCA, vice president of the board for the Museum of Visual Materials, and a board member for Journey of Hope. By being an involved and supportive member of my community, I aim to inspire others to do the same and help create a more inclusive and supportive environment for everyone.



Benjamin Jacobs '20

OBGYN Resident Physician | Duke University
Medical Center

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

I am a resident physician in obstetrics and gynecology at Duke University. Throughout my week, you can find me delivering babies on labor and delivery, performing surgeries in the operating room, and seeing patients in my busy clinic. Although technical skills are surely essential to being a good physician, I personally feel that communication is the most important skill I use daily. Being able to communicate complex treatment plans and disease processes - especially at different levels based on patient understanding - is critical to ensuring everyone is on the same page. My career goals are simple: to be the best doctor I can be! More specifically, I aspire to be a role model for future physicians, serve as a patient advocate and help advance the field of OBGYN with my many research interests.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

USD gave me a strong foundation to grow both professionally and personally. Professionally, USD provided me an excellent biology and physiology background that helped me be successful throughout medical school and now in my medical practice. Personally, the USD community exposed me to a diverse group of individuals with the same common mission: to serve. My mentors at USD not only inspired me to care for the community in which I was living but also gave me the confidence I needed to take those skills and apply them to new places.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

I am a firm believer that to make an impact on a community, you must not only lead by example but share your knowledge with others. In my current role, I serve as the primary educator for all premedical and medical students at Duke University as students rotate through our OBGYN service. I strive to lead by example by listening to my patients and centering my practice around compassion and empathy. On a larger scale, I actively participate in clinical research.

Since graduating from USD in 2020, I have published nine peer-reviewed journal articles. I believe that participating in research is just one way you can share your knowledge and expertise to help improve policies and clinical outcomes. The USD honors program helped me strengthen my research skills and gave me a platform for growth.





Blake Warner '14, '22, '24

Postdoctoral Fellow (Clinical Psychology) |
University of California, Los Angeles

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

I am a postdoctoral fellow in clinical psychology at UCLA in the PEERS (Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills) clinic. I lead social skills training interventions designed to help neurodivergent teens and adults learn and practice skills related to finding and keeping friends. I also conduct intervention research on programs tailored for neurodivergent adults. Another key aspect of my position is providing clinical supervision for graduate-level trainees, supporting them in refining their therapy and assessment skills.

The foundation of my work is built on the clinical skills I developed during my graduate training at the University of South Dakota (USD), particularly through my experience as a Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (LEND) trainee at the South Dakota Center for Disabilities. These experiences not only shaped my approach to clinical care but also prepared me to take on leadership roles. I regularly lead certified trainings for professionals, including psychologists, educators and other providers, to expand access to the PEERS intervention, equipping them with the tools to teach social skills to neurodivergent individuals.

I am also passionate about advocacy work. Part of my role includes developing and testing a program for self-advocates with disabilities. The program is focused on teaching advocacy skills, including how to effectively engage with legislators.

Looking ahead, my goal is to increase access to interventions such as PEERS to make it more accessible to a broader audience. I am committed to continuing my work in training professionals to deliver this intervention and ensuring that more neurodivergent individuals can access services. After my fellowship, I plan to pursue faculty status at UCLA.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

USD significantly influenced my personal and professional experiences following graduation. I gained essential clinical skills during my graduate studies at USD, and one of the most impactful experiences was my training as a LEND trainee at the South Dakota Center for Disabilities. This opportunity allowed me to specialize in providing services to individuals with disabilities and their families, which has directly informed my work as a postdoctoral fellow at UCLA.

Through my time at USD, I also developed valuable leadership and advocacy skills that I apply in my current role. My experience as a competitive speaker on the speech and debate team while I was an undergraduate student at USD further shaped my communication abilities, boosting my confidence to speak to diverse audiences and train clinicians.

Moreover, my education instilled in me the importance of collaboration. The liberal arts curriculum in my undergraduate studies and the interdisciplinary training in graduate school fostered my critical thinking and problem-solving skills, allowing me to work effectively with others in both academic and clinical settings.

USD provided me with the tools and experiences that have shaped my career trajectory and personal growth, reinforcing my commitment to advocating for and supporting individuals with disabilities and their families.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

I have demonstrated success and influence in my profession and community through my active involvement in research, training, and advocacy. Currently, I am part of the research team examining the effectiveness of the PEERS for Dating intervention, which focuses on teaching neurodivergent young adults the skills necessary for finding and maintaining romantic relationships. Notably, content from this intervention has been featured in the show *Love on the Spectrum*, highlighting its real-world relevance and impact.

As a PEERS-certified trainer, I am qualified to teach other mental health professionals and educators how to effectively lead the PEERS intervention. I have conducted trainings for up to 250 providers at a time, significantly increasing the accessibility of this vital intervention for neurodivergent individuals and their families.

In addition to my training efforts, I have been invited to speak at various universities and organizations on disability and advocacy-related topics, allowing me to share my insights and experiences with a broader audience. My recent completion of the Emerging Leader Fellowship with the Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD) enabled me to collaborate with interdisciplinary trainees from across the country, further amplifying my influence in the field.

I also present research nationally and internationally, including a recent presentation at the International Society for Autism Research in Melbourne, Australia. I am deeply committed to providing clinical services and disseminating important research findings, which not only contribute to the academic community but also improve the lives of those I serve.



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Bre Schmidt '20

Associate Director of State Government Affairs |
American Osteopathic Association

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

I play an active role in shaping healthcare policies that impact osteopathic physicians and their patients. My daily work involves monitoring state legislation, developing strategies to advance our priorities and collaborating with state osteopathic medical associations.

I rely heavily on skills like policy analysis, strategic communication and relationship-building. Navigating the ever-changing landscape of healthcare policy means I need to stay up to date on emerging issues, craft persuasive arguments, and effectively communicate our positions to lawmakers and regulatory bodies.

My education in health service administration from USD has been a game-changer. It provided me with a solid foundation in understanding healthcare systems and how policies are developed. In addition to my coursework, my internship at Avera Health truly brought my education to life. Working under CEO Ashli Danilko and shadowing Deb Fisher-Clemens, the vice president of public policy, was an incredible experience.

This experience ignited my passion for bridging the gap between healthcare providers and policymakers. I'm dedicated to advocating for laws and regulations that enhance patient care and support the osteopathic profession. My goal is to continue influencing policy to improve healthcare delivery by helping draft policies and monitoring new programs and initiatives being implemented at both the state and international levels.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

Graduating from USD in 2020 was both exciting and challenging, especially with the world in upheaval due to the pandemic. Moving to Washington, D.C., during such uncertain times was daunting, but the solid foundation and valuable connections I made at USD gave me the confidence to take that leap. The mentorship and support from my professors and healthcare executives opened doors I hadn't imagined.

Thanks to these relationships, I had the opportunity to work on Capitol Hill with Senator Thune, where I witnessed firsthand how healthcare policy is shaped at the national level. This experience was instrumental in shaping my professional path. The skills and knowledge I gained from USD were directly applicable, allowing me to contribute meaningfully despite the challenges of the pandemic.

Although my participation in the field program in Cuba occurred during my time at USD, its impact extended well beyond graduation. Researching Cuba's socialized education and healthcare system sparked a passion for global health policy that continued to grow. This experience influenced my decision to delve deeper into global health after graduation. Motivated by this passion and my experiences in D.C., I decided to further my education. I returned to school and graduated with a Master of Public Health in global health policy in August 2023. USD had ignited this passion in me, and the strong foundation I received there made it possible to adapt and thrive even in uncertain times.

USD didn't just educate me academically; it prepared me to navigate a complex world, adapt to unexpected challenges, and pursue my goals with determination. The emphasis on practical application and critical thinking in the Health Service Administration program equipped me to seize post-graduation opportunities. The support and mentorship I received were instrumental in shaping both my personal growth and professional journey, enabling me to make a meaningful impact in the field of healthcare policy.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

In my role at the American Osteopathic Association, I've been deeply committed to advocating for policies that make a real difference for osteopathic physicians and their patients, ensuring that both patients and their physician care teams remain at the forefront of healthcare. Working alongside state medical associations, I've tackled legislative challenges by engaging directly with policymakers. One of the most fulfilling aspects of my job is translating complex policy issues into understandable language for legislators and stakeholders. Whether it's drafting policy briefs, providing testimony, or participating in strategic discussions, I've had the opportunity to help shape state healthcare legislation in ways that truly matter.

Outside of work, giving back to my community is incredibly important to me. I volunteer with a local organization teaching English as a second language mentoring individuals eager to improve their language skills.

Being active in the public health community in Washington, D.C., I have helped organize networking events that bring together professionals at all levels. Staying involved with various professional organizations keeps me up to date with industry developments and allows me to connect with both experienced leaders and newcomers. These connections have enriched my understanding of healthcare policy and helped build a more collaborative community.

Mentoring students and young professionals interested in healthcare policy and administration is something I find especially meaningful. Drawing from my own experiences, I enjoy guiding them as they navigate their career paths. I believe that supporting the next generation of healthcare leaders is essential for the future of the field.

By combining my professional efforts with community involvement, I strive to make a positive impact both within my profession and beyond. These experiences keep me connected to the real-world implications of healthcare policies and reinforce my commitment to making a meaningful difference.





Caitlyn Lint '18, '21

Assistant Professor of Practice | USD
Department of Dental Hygiene

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

I graduated from USD with my bachelor's degree in dental hygiene in 2018 and again in 2021 with a master's in public health. In my own clinical practice, I primarily work in Sioux Falls where I have worked in a variety of settings. I am currently in my third year of teaching in the dental hygiene program at USD. I serve as senior clinic coordinator, where I get to work closely with our students as they continue their clinical journey, prepare for their national board exams and explore the beginning stages of their careers. One of my favorite aspects of this job is seeing my students blossom not only as clinicians, but as human beings. The growth that occurs over the two years I get to spend with them is substantial and I feel fortunate to have been a part of their journey. My professional goals include a deeper exploration of my research in childhood caries, rural health and social determinants of health. Additionally, I hope to continue to bring about new ideas and perspective to allow for growth within our department and profession at large.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

My passion for public health was fostered through the mentorship I was able to receive from faculty during my time in the dental hygiene program. Those same faculty, through their guidance and dedication to the field, were able to inspire an interest in my own pursuit of teaching. I am so fortunate to be an alumna of USD's dental hygiene program as my experiences shaped who I am as a clinician, mentor, and educator.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

I am currently in my fourth year of serving on the executive board for the South Dakota Dental Hygienists' Association (SDDHA), as president elect and Membership Chair. My work for SDDHA has included attending the South Dakota legislative session, conducting research to address workforce shortage issues in the state and serving as a state delegate at the national level. Dental Hygiene is undergoing large-scale changes that could affect our scope of practice. As an educator, I feel it is extremely important to lead by example for my students. I want to show them that through advocacy and involvement, they too can be part of the ongoing efforts to affect positive change in our profession.



Cash Anderson '18, '21

Lawyer | May, Adam, Gerdes & Thompson, LLP

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

I am an attorney in Pierre, South Dakota. Most of my work revolves around criminal and civil defense, including government liability and insurance defense. I also lobby during the legislative session. I think having strong communication skills and building real relationships has allowed me whatever success I've encountered so far; I certainly learned how to build genuine relationships during my time in Vermillion.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

I made many great friends and met some of the most important people in my life during my years at USD. USD equips you with an incredible skill set if you utilize your time inside (and outside) of the classroom. I grew personally, learned a lot about myself and the world, and got a top-tier education at USD. Wherever you go in South Dakota, you experience the positive effects of USD and its graduates. I earned a couple of degrees at USD but was encouraged to stay curious about the world and care about people. I think there is a lot of rigidity in higher education, and I think oftentimes that people who think or act different get cast aside, but that was not my experience at USD. It was a welcoming melting pot of ideas and people who forced you to utilize perspectives that you would not have normally. My parents, the friends I made at USD, and the education I received are basically responsible for nearly everything in my life that is positive.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

Building genuine relationships and trying to solve (instead of create) problems has led me to success professionally and personally, and the skill sets I use to do so were learned during my time in Vermillion. Practicing law is inherently adversarial, however most attorneys do not try to make it painful. I see a lot of that in my classmates, who are fierce advocates for their clients, but are civil, respectful and try to make the process run smoothly. I've been lucky to be part of a law firm with other attorneys who are dedicated to their profession, advocate for their clients, teach, but treat people the right way. We also bear responsibility to get into the community and contribute our time and resources.



Collette Bowman '17, '24

Clinical Psychology Trainee | Lewis and Clark
Behavioral Health Services - Ebel Recovery Center

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

I am deeply engaged in community mental health and provide peer mentoring services to Native American undergraduate students at USD. As a Native American woman pursuing a doctorate in clinical psychology, I leverage my unique positionality to build representation and support for students navigating higher education. My position entails developing and facilitating programs that promote mental health awareness and resilience among Native American youth, fostering an inclusive environment where they can thrive academically and personally.

Among the programs I have implemented are Talking Circles, rooted in traditional Lakota practices, which I facilitate with colleagues to create safe spaces for students to share their experiences and support one another. Additionally, I serve as the program coordinator for the Iwacinyechi Peer Mentoring program, where I help connect students with mentors who can guide them through their academic journeys and personal challenges. In this capacity, I utilize a range of skills, including active listening, cultural competence and effective communication, to connect with students and understand their individual experiences. I also draw upon my training in psychological principles to create supportive spaces that encourage open dialogue about mental health and identity. My role emphasizes the importance of empathy and insight, allowing me to approach each student's narrative with care and understanding.

Through my educational pursuits, I aim to accomplish several goals. Primarily, I hope to encourage more Native American youth to attend college by providing mentorship and resources that empower them to succeed in their academic journeys. I am planning a conference that will bring tribal schools to USD, offering students the opportunity to explore the university and learn about the field of mental health through interactions with other Native scholars and clinical psychology students. Ultimately, I aspire to contribute to a broader movement that elevates Native voices in academia and mental health, fostering a more inclusive and supportive educational landscape.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

The University of South Dakota profoundly influenced both my personal and professional experiences following graduation. The support I received during my undergraduate years laid a strong foundation for my journey in higher education and beyond. Through leadership opportunities within the Tiospaye Student Council, the President's Board, and the American Indians in Science and Engineering Society (AISES), I developed essential skills in advocacy, collaboration and cultural understanding. These experiences taught me the importance of using my voice to effect change, not only for myself but also for my community.

After graduation, the values and skills I gained at USD continued to shape my trajectory as I navigated the complexities of the professional world. The faculty's encouragement and resources motivated me to pursue a doctorate in clinical psychology, as I recognized the critical need for representation of Native American voices in mental health. My time at USD instilled in me a deep commitment to serving my community and advocating for Native American youth, leading me to dedicate my career to creating supportive environments for students navigating higher education.

Moreover, the relationships I built with mentors and peers at USD have been invaluable. They provided guidance and inspiration, helping me navigate the challenges of graduate school and my professional endeavors with confidence. The sense of belonging I felt as a student at USD has propelled me to work diligently in community mental health.

Ultimately, my experiences at USD have not only shaped my identity but have also fueled my passion for promoting equity and inclusion in academia and mental health. I am immensely grateful for the profound influence USD has had on my personal and professional development, and I remain dedicated to giving back to my community and supporting future generations of Native American students as they navigate their own paths.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

I have demonstrated success and influence in my profession and community through my dedicated efforts in community mental health and educational advocacy for Native American students. As a program coordinator for the Iwacinyechi Peer Mentoring program, I have worked to create a supportive network for Native American undergraduate students at USD. This program connects students with mentors who guide them through their academic journeys, helping to empower them.

In addition to mentorship, I have presented posters and panels discussing the importance of cultural knowledge within mental health. My presentations illustrate how Talking Circle were developed using a community participatory approach and explore their potential implementation on other campuses. These discussions emphasize the need for culturally relevant mental health practices that resonate with Native American experiences and values, promoting holistic well-being.

Within my department, I actively advocate for the recruitment of Native students through inclusive practices. I served on the clinical training committee where I championed the importance of integrating cultural competency into our curriculum. As a direct result of these advocacy efforts, a dedicated course on cultural competency is now offered, enriching the training of future mental health professionals and ensuring they are better equipped to serve diverse populations.

Furthermore, I advocate for fairness and transparency from faculty regarding departmental changes, ensuring that all students are informed and have a voice in these processes. I believe that open communication fosters trust and collaboration within our academic community. At my clinical sites, I am recognized for providing strong therapeutic support, enabling clients to receive the comprehensive care and resources they need. My commitment to cultural understanding and advocacy for Native American students has significantly influenced my peers and the broader communities, fostering an inclusive environment that values diverse perspectives. By actively engaging in these various roles, I strive to promote a culture of equity and respect, ultimately paving the way for future generations of Native American leaders.

The logo features the number '30' in a large, light pink, serif font at the top. Below it, the word 'UNDER' is written in a smaller, light pink, sans-serif font, centered between two horizontal lines. At the bottom, the number '30' is repeated in the same large, light pink, serif font as the top one, creating a symmetrical design.



Epiphany Knedler '17

Co-Founder & Curator | Midwest Nice Art

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

I am the curator and co-founder of Midwest Nice Art, an arts organization based in Aberdeen, South Dakota. Grounded in traditional Midwestern values, the collective integrates virtual and physical practices to support emerging and underrepresented artists. The name reflects Midwestern cultural stereotypes of polite passive-aggressiveness, which we have reclaimed to foster a community based on respect, collaboration and inclusion. Beginning in 2022, my husband, Tim Rickett, and I found a lack of access and opportunities for emerging artists. With our background in education and being artists ourselves, we provided a space for artists to share their work. I believe that we are closely aligned with acts of service in the arts. Many artists in the rural Midwest lack access to contemporary art in their local communities. We work to provide artists with the resources to not only share their work but feel confident in doing so. We provide free professional practice resources, studio visits and exhibition opportunities. Rather than supporting the “brain drain” the Midwest often struggles against, we want to reverse the trend and bring creatives to our communities. In Spring 2024, we collaborated with treat gallery to curate a booth for the Affordable Art Fair in New York City. Over half of the artists included were from the Midwest.

Curation requires skills in organization, design, aesthetic awareness, marketing and communication, research and management. We recently hosted our second annual exhibition, nice;02, an exhibition hosted in Aberdeen featuring the work of over 50 artists. For many organizations, this is a substantial task, but deploying the leadership, management and professional practices I learned at USD, I can bring these experiences to life.

I also serve as a Lecturer of Art at Northern State University, an online instructor at USD, and the Content Editor for *Lenscratch*, a contemporary photography magazine. Each of these positions require a strong dedication to supporting others. I believe that, as a Midwesterner, commitment and enthusiasm were instilled in me at a young age. I continue to dedicate my professional practices to providing education and opportunities for others.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

USD transformed my passions and professional practice. Before attending USD, I was solely going to major in political science, imagining myself working in the government. After taking an art history class with Dr. Sarah Sik and an art class with professor Michael Hill, I decided to double-major in political science and art. The art and political science departments taught me how to use my voice to create change and advocate for others.

After graduating with a BFA in studio art and a BA in political science, a truly unconventional combination, I wanted to dedicate my time to supporting others in their creative careers. I pursued my MFA in studio art at East Carolina University. The MFA is the terminal degree for anyone in the arts, giving me the ability to teach in higher education, review and provide grant opportunities, expand research skills and grow my professional career. USD prepared me to take on new responsibilities, teaching undergraduates and completing my thesis.

While at USD, I was the College of Fine Arts representative in the Student Government Association and on the finance committee, the president of the Student Art Alliance, in the honors program, student career ambassador, Amnesty International and Pi Sigma Alpha, the National Political Science Honors Society. I presented my research at two IDEAfest competitions and received a CURCS Grant, which allowed me to win the ECU Research and Creative Achievement Award in the first year of my MFA. These experiences allowed me to take on leadership roles like public relations coordinator at the Oscar Howe Summer Art Institute, graduate liaison for the School of Art + Design at ECU and president of the Graduate Arts Forum. My experience at USD provided the necessary leadership and management opportunities to start an organization in the arts.

I'd like to thank the art department, Student Government Association, the honors program, and the political science department for instilling these skills within me and supporting my efforts into the future.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

My creative and professional practices have flourished since my time at USD. I co-founded Midwest Nice Art in 2022; our community has grown to include over two-thousand artists from around the world, exhibited over 500 artworks, collaborated with 12 professionals in jurying exhibitions and curated one art fair booth.

In 2025, we will be providing two \$500 grants and hosting five virtual exhibitions and two in-person exhibitions. Midwest Nice Art has been selected as a guest curator for an exhibition at StoveWorks in Chattanooga, TN, in 2025, which will feature many USD alumni.

I also work as a lecturer of art at Northern State University and Cramer Center for Design & Innovation Fellow. I have been teaching in higher education for six years. I serve on the College Art Association Student and Emerging Professionals Committee, a national committee that provides resources for emerging professionals in the arts who are interested in higher education. Recently, Midwest Nice Art's resources have been adopted as the national standard. This work allows me to continue to share my love of art and instill exceptional creative practices in my students.

Within my personal practice, my work has been published in the *New York Times* and featured in the *ARTNews Daily Review*. My work was awarded an Honorable Mention for the Lucie Fine Art Professional Scholarship and a Photolucida Critical Mass Finalist. I recently exhibited "Wish You Were Here" at the Vermont Center for Photography and a collaborative exhibition "Here in the Mysterious Elsewhere" with Tim Rickett in the John A. Day Gallery at USD. I have exhibited in over 150 group exhibitions and been awarded over ten grants. My professional career thus far has been very fulfilling, and I am excited to continue my work supporting others and sharing my impressions with them in the future.

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Garrett Keegan '20

Associate Attorney | Costello, Porter,
Hill, Heisterkamp, Bushnell & Carpenter, LLP

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

I am in my third year as an associate attorney for Costello Porter. My practice area is quite broad and includes general civil litigation, criminal defense, and I am a special prosecutor for the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe. Myself, along with another attorney in our firm, also serve as defense attorneys for the Pennington County Veterans Court program. No two days are ever the same, and it is something I have come to enjoy. My job requires me to have great communication skills; I am either writing briefs to the court, advocating for my client's position, or I am speaking with clients and explaining what I believe are the best options for them.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

The USD Knudson School of Law taught me the importance of community and how building strong relationships with your colleagues and professors can be incredibly beneficial. South Dakota has a relatively small legal community, so continuing to speak with my former classmates and my professors about different developments in the law or practice areas that I'm not as well versed in has been very helpful. Furthermore, cases can oftentimes be contentious and your client may have a very adverse position compared to the opposing party. Knowing the attorney on the other side and remaining civil with them while advocating for your client's position throughout the case not only makes the case go smoother, it can greatly benefit the client as well.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

I have demonstrated success and influence in the profession by continuing to grow as an attorney after law school. As mentioned, I am one of the defense attorneys for the Pennington County Veterans Court program, which has been an amazing way to help Veterans protect their rights while working through an intensive probation program as opposed to going to prison. Seeing their progress firsthand has been very rewarding.

I have demonstrated success and influence in the profession by continuing to grow as an attorney after law school. As mentioned, I am one of the defense attorneys for the Pennington County Veterans Court program, which has been an amazing way to help Veterans protect their rights while working through an intensive probation program as opposed to going to prison. Seeing their progress firsthand has been very rewarding. Furthermore, taking on the special prosecutor position for the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe has been challenging, but has helped me give back to the area where I grew up. I am a member of the Indian law, alternative dispute resolution, and evidence committees for the State Bar as well and have attended the Ask-a-Lawyer program in Rapid City the last two years, providing legal advice to anonymous callers. I have also assisted with the law school's Veterans Legal Aid clinic in past years when they are in the Rapid City area.

In the Rapid City community, I have been a Big Brother in the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program for three years. I have enjoyed watching my little brother grow into a respectful and kind young adult while we break up the monotony of his school work and my work by doing fun activities in the Black Hills.

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Jacob Selgestad '19

Senior Analyst | Government
Accountability Office

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

I currently serve as a senior analyst with the Science, Technology Assessment, and Analytics (STAA) team within the Government Accountability Office (GAO). My role involves conducting research and reporting on government programs and other key issues on behalf of Congress. My research is currently focused on intellectual property issues and the United States Patent and Trademark Office.

Serving as a policy analyst requires a number of different skills. I get plenty of opportunities to conduct different kinds of data analyses, which allows me to use my quantitative skills I developed while studying economics at USD. But other key tasks an analyst must carry out, like expert interviews, report writing and giving presentations allow me to use the more qualitative skills I developed while studying political science at USD.

I find meaning in my current role due to my strong belief that government agencies and Congress need factual information to make informed decisions. At a time when many information sources can be accused of holding some sort of bias, I find a lot of value in working with a nonpartisan agency that prides itself in providing “facts” that can be used to support informed decision making throughout Congress and other government agencies.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

USD had an incredible impact on the professional opportunities available to me following graduation. Programs like the Farber Fund allowed me to work in a diverse array of internships during my time at USD. These internships helped me figure out what I would be interested in doing for a career, while also helping me develop a robust resume and set of skills that set me apart during the application process for graduate school and the workforce.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

In my profession, I have demonstrated success by obtaining employment with the GAO, which is one of the premier government agencies to work for. The work is interesting and impactful, and GAO employees regularly report some of the highest levels of happiness of any government agency. In my time with GAO, I have quickly proven to be a valuable member of the agency, reflected by my promotion to the position of senior analyst within three years of joining the agency, despite the fact that I had no professional experience outside of fellowships and internships prior to joining the agency. I consider turning my experiences in South Dakota into a position in Washington D.C..

I have tried to use my opportunities to give back to the USD community as well. For example, there is a group of political science students that come to Washington, D.C. every summer, and the last few years I have had the opportunity to meet with this group. I share my experiences to hopefully give them a roadmap of how to turn a USD education into a career and answer any questions they have about working in D.C. or what the graduate school experience is like. I always enjoy this opportunity to give back.





Jeremy Coss '18, '19

Clinic Director | HRMC Clinic

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

I am the director of the internal medicine, family medicine, pediatric medicine, wound care, urology, podiatric surgery, general surgery, orthopedic surgery and OB/GYN women's wellness clinics as well as a senior hospital administrator for Huron Regional Medical Center (HRMC). This role includes oversight of operations, finances and strategy within the clinics and is a member of a team that sets the strategic vision of the organization. The skills that I use most often are critical thinking, strategic planning, interpersonal relationship building and financial knowledge. With my education, I plan to have a greater impact on access to quality healthcare in the Midwest.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

I discovered my passion for healthcare through my coursework as well as through my graduate healthcare research alongside Dr. Carole South-Winter. USD gave me a unique business approach toward healthcare, which is becoming increasingly vital in finding sustainable solutions in a complex industry. USD also provided me with a strong network of professionals in both business and healthcare that aided me in furthering my development as a professional after graduation.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

To me, being a successful professional in rural communities is a life of service. Service to the community means using my skills and interests to volunteer with local organizations such as coaching Special Olympics, working with students, or serving on boards such as the advisory board for a medical program at a local community college. The most impactful way that I have found to influence my community is to conduct my work with the highest level of my ability. It is increasingly difficult to sustainably provide high quality healthcare to rural communities. Healthcare organizations have a significant ability to either help or harm the communities they serve. Shortly after being hired as a clinic manager with Avera Holy Family in Estherville, I was asked to join the senior administration team of the hospital. These roles allowed me the influence to help set the strategic vision of each of those organizations and broaden the positive influence that they have on the communities they serve.



Jessica Brady '19, '22

Guest Experience & Operations Manager |
Las Vegas Raiders

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

I am currently the guest experience and operations manager for the Las Vegas Raiders, where my primary responsibility is to ensure that both employees and guests have memorable, world-class experiences at Allegiant Stadium. I oversee the stadium staff orientation and training programs in an effort to maintain high service standards, as well as manage an in-house secret shop program that evaluates guest interactions and lead multiple guest experience initiatives for all major events.

My position requires diverse skills, including strong leadership, effective communication and problem-solving abilities. I work closely with various departments to ensure a seamless guest experience, leveraging my organizational skills to manage gameday programming, gameday staff and overall guest satisfaction. Attention to detail is crucial, as I aim to anticipate and address potential issues before they affect the guest experience.

I have had the pleasure of assisting with major events like Super Bowl LVII, the 2024 NCAA Men's Final Four and NFL Sao Paulo 2024. I was part of the team that executed a comprehensive teammate program for Super Bowl LVIII, which involved training staff to deliver exceptional service during one of the biggest sporting events in the world. I am constantly learning and continually growing in my career. I aim to enhance my expertise in guest experience and operations within the sports industry. Las Vegas is home to a rapidly growing sports market, and my goal is to be a key part of its groundbreaking events.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

My connection to USD began long before I started my education, influencing many milestones that have shaped who I am today. Growing up in Vermillion, I cheered for the Coyotes every Saturday, inspired by my father, who played football for USD from 1993 to 1995. These early memories ignited my passion for football. In high school, I participated in the Ambassadors of Excellence program at USD during the summer, an experience that taught me invaluable lessons in leadership, empathy and creativity.

The journey took an unexpected turn during COVID-19, but I recognized an opportunity to further my education. I returned to USD to earn my master's in sports management. This decision proved transformative, exposing me to various parts of the sports industry I now engage with daily. The program expanded my knowledge and connected me with a network of like-minded professionals who shared my ambitions.

I gained a deep understanding of the sports landscape, which has been instrumental in my career development. USD has been a cornerstone of my personal and professional growth. It shaped my aspirations and provided the tools necessary to turn my dreams into reality.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

I was recently elected as the vice president of the Women's Resource Group for the Las Vegas Raiders, where I work to create a supportive environment for women in sports. Recognizing the unique challenges we face, I focus on fostering connections, mentoring opportunities and professional development.

Two years ago, I initiated an end-of-year celebration for over 3,000 event day teammates. This event not only allowed us to honor the hard work and dedication of our staff but also cultivated a sense of community between our stadium partners. Spearheading this project earned me the distinction of being the first Employee of the Month for the Las Vegas Raiders, an acknowledgment that motivates me to continue driving positive change.

Beyond my professional pursuits, my passion for animals has led me to actively engage in my community. I volunteer with several animal rescues and shelters throughout the Las Vegas valley, where I help care for animals and advocate for adoption.

I believe that success is defined not just by personal achievements but by the positive influence we have on others- something I first learned in Ambassadors of Excellence at USD. I am very proud of my past and greatly look forward to the future.



Kasey Elder '22

CEO | Jensen Kennels

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

I am the owner and operator of Jensen Kennels, a doggy daycare and boarding facility in Vermillion, South Dakota. I manage over 25 employees, overseeing their everyday work and also training any new employees we hire. Our facility has seen over 750 dogs in the 18 months we have been opened. We average 25-30 dogs a day for daycare and over 15 boarding on the weekends. I personally organize payroll and make flexible schedules that work for my college students and high schoolers. I hope to keep growing my business as we expand our building and our services.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

Growing up in Vermillion I had a very strong tie to the community and was determined to help. I saw a need for this business from both a community and college standpoint. Knowing so many of both members had dogs and were taking them to different towns and spending money elsewhere upset me a little. My family has owned a small business since I was born and I knew the importance of keeping business in our town and community.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

I have brought a very needed business to a community we all call home. We have made over half a million dollars in gross revenue in our first 18 months of business and hope to keep growing. We are expanding our building by adding more play rooms and overnight rooms. We are also adding grooming which is another needed business in our community.



Katie Anderson '16, '18

Clinical Social Worker / Behavioral Health Practitioner | State of Nebraska

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

As a USD graduate with my master's in social work (MSW), I have dedicated my career to promoting the well-being of at-risk youth in South Dakota and Nebraska. One of the ways I do this is by conducting behavioral health assessments to identify the individualized needs of youth in foster care. I also work as an outpatient mental health practitioner, and I teach SOCW 712: Advanced Child Welfare as an online adjunct instructor. I aspire to be regarded as trusted resource and a leader in the field of social work.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

While pursuing my bachelor's in psychology, I discovered the value of a graduate education in social work. Since obtaining my MSW, I've built a strong network of fellow social workers, with former classmates becoming colleagues and lifelong friends. If I hadn't begun my undergraduate journey at USD, I might not have uncovered my true passion for this field. As a proud alumnus, I feel honored that my career path has led me back to USD as an adjunct instructor.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

I have been involved with the establishment and ongoing development of the first outpatient mental health program within a rural health clinic serving a small Nebraska community of 600. This experience also provided me the opportunity to give an educational presentation on Ethical Considerations in Rural Social Work Practice at the NASW-SD Conference in 2023.



Kristen Quigley '22

PhD Student (Neuroscience) |
University of Nevada, Reno

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

As a PhD student in integrative neuroscience and MS student in kinesiology at the University of Nevada, Reno, I am pursuing a multidisciplinary approach to understanding sports performance and the effects of sports on brain function. My role as the assistant director of operations in the Neuromechanics Lab allows me to blend my passion for sports with cutting-edge neuroscience research. My position involves conducting innovative studies on mild traumatic brain injuries (mTBIs) and their long-term effects, particularly in athletic contexts. I utilize advanced technologies such as instrumented mouthguards and customized neurocognitive assessments to examine head impact kinematics and track mTBI recovery. My research on Guardian Caps has recently been featured in multiple newspapers, online journals and podcasts, most notably on CNN.

In my role as a researcher, I employ a diverse skill set including experimental design, statistical analysis and scientific writing. I've contributed to multiple publications examining concussion assessment tools and the effectiveness of protective equipment in reducing head impacts. These studies require meticulous attention to detail, critical thinking and interdisciplinary collaboration.

My work has been recognized with several prestigious awards, including the Nevada Outstanding Graduate Researcher Award and the UNR Graduate Dean's Merit Scholarship. These accolades reflect the impact and innovation of my research in the field of sports neuroscience.

Complementing my research, I serve as an assistant coach for the Division I swim team at the University of Nevada, Reno. This position allows me to apply my research findings directly to athlete performance and safety, bridging the gap between theory and practice. This role also ties into my time as a two-time captain of the USD's swimming and diving team. Looking ahead, I aspire to contribute significantly by developing innovative approaches to concussion management and rehabilitation, potentially revolutionizing how we understand and treat sports-related brain injuries.

I'm also committed to mentoring the next generation of researchers and athletes, whether that be through mentorship programs or coaching roles. My unique combination of academic expertise and practical coaching experience positions me to drive meaningful advancements in the intersection of neuroscience and athletics.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

My experience at USD profoundly shaped my personal and professional trajectory. As a student-athlete on USD's swim team, I developed crucial leadership skills and learned to balance rigorous academic pursuits with athletic commitments. Serving as women's team captain for two consecutive years (2020-2022) honed my ability to motivate and guide others, skills that continue to serve me well in my current roles as an assistant coach at the University of Nevada.

Academically, USD provided me with a strong foundation in cognitive neuroscience. Maintaining a 3.75 GPA while consistently making the dean's list from 2018-2022 demonstrated my dedication to academic excellence. The recognition I received, including Academic All-Summit League honors and the Summit League Commissioner's List of Academic Excellence, reinforced the importance of balancing athletics with academics, a principle I now instill in the athletes I coach.

My research experiences in two labs at USD were particularly influential in shaping my professional path. In the Peterson Lab, I worked on projects including the development of a self-contained wearable EEG and neurofeedback training for athletic performance. This experience sparked my interest in the intersection of neuroscience and athletics, which is now central to my graduate research. As an undergraduate research assistant in the Memory and Attention Laboratory, I contributed to projects on visual working memory and physiological measurement of time and interference effects in working memory. These experiences provided me with valuable skills in experimental design and data analysis, preparing me for my current graduate studies. The mentorship and opportunities I received at USD, such as being selected for the President's Senior Leadership Institute and receiving the UDiscover Summer Scholar award, were instrumental in shaping my path toward becoming a researcher and leader in the field of sports neuroscience.

USD provided me with a unique blend of athletic, academic, and research experiences that have directly influenced my current pursuits in integrative neuroscience and kinesiology, setting the stage for my ongoing contributions to the field of sports-related brain research.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

Since graduating from USD, I've demonstrated success and influence in both my profession and community through groundbreaking research, media recognition and academic achievements. My research on Guardian Caps and head impact kinematics has gained significant attention in the scientific community and beyond. This work, which examines the effectiveness of protective equipment in reducing head impact, has been featured in multiple newspapers, online journals, and podcasts. These media appearances have allowed me to share important findings about athlete safety with a broad audience, influencing public awareness and potentially impacting sports safety protocols.

Academically, my success is evident through several prestigious awards. I was honored with the Nevada Outstanding Graduate Researcher Award, recognizing me as one of 13 graduate students performing outstanding research at the University of Nevada. Additionally, I received the UNR Graduate Dean's Merit Scholarship, a competitive one-year \$10,000 award for which I was nominated by the Integrative Neuroscience Program Directors. These accolades reflect the quality and impact of my research in the field of sports neuroscience.

My influence extends to the classroom and athletic arena as well. As an assistant coach for the Division I swim team at Nevada, I directly apply my research findings on the postural dysfunctions seen in collegiate swimmers to enhance athlete performance and safety.

In the research community, I've contributed to multiple publications examining concussion assessment tools and the effectiveness of protective equipment. My work on the minimal detectable change for the ImPACT test and the preliminary examination of Guardian Cap head impact data using instrumented mouthguards has been published in respected journals like the *Journal of Athletic Training* and the *Archives of Clinical Neuropsychology*.

Furthermore, I've taken on leadership roles within the academic community. As a co-founder of the Integrative Neuroscience Doctoral Program Colloquium, I've worked to create opportunities for knowledge sharing and collaboration among PhD students. I am also a mentor to Indigenous undergraduate students at Nevada.

Through these achievements and roles, I've demonstrated a commitment to advancing knowledge in sports neuroscience, improving athlete safety, and sharing valuable insights with both academic and public audiences.



Lauren Paul '23

Opera Singer

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

I am an emerging artist in the opera world. Since 2022 during my time at USD, I have been applying for young artist programs (YAPs) and have been invited to audition for some of the nation's top YAPs, while having been invited to participate in high caliber programs such as the Gerdine Young Artist apprenticeship program at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis (summer 2024) and the Sarasota Opera studio artist program (winter 2025). My almost 10 years of vocal training, acting training, and performance experience have prepared me to continue to audition for high-profile YAPs this fall during the 2024 audition season and have garnered me an exciting opera season in 2025, as I will be making two mainstage debuts with nationally-recognized opera companies in the spring.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

My time at USD was deeply integral to my emergence as a young opera singer. Going into my masters, the professional world of singing was a mystery to me. My teacher, Dr. Tracelyn Gesteland, was paramount to my development as a young artist. I never thought that a performance career would be feasible or possible. Following Dr. Gesteland's advice, I learned as much about performing, healthy vocal technique and the young artist track as I could. Dr. Gesteland also introduced me to the vocal competition circuit, where I've found a great deal of success.

In 2021, I won the South Dakota Music Teachers National Association (MTNA) state level competition and progressed to the regional level. I was also encouraged to participate in the National Student Auditions for the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) all three years that I attended USD. My final year (2023), I was selected to sing in the final round of the competition live in San Diego, California, where I placed third overall in my category. Without Dr. Gesteland's support and guidance, I would never have been able to participate in competitions like these which have greatly helped me to establish my footing in the opera world post-graduation. Frankly, I would not be the singer that I am today without USD or Dr. Gesteland.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

Since graduating from USD, I have found a great deal of success in the opera world. In January 2024, I was selected as a winner of the Nebraska District of the Metropolitan Opera Laffont Competition, an annual competition for North American singers hosted by the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Following my win in the Nebraska district, I advanced to the Upper Midwest Regional competition in Minneapolis where I received an encouragement award. From late April to the end of June this year, I was in St. Louis at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis (OTSL) as a Gerdine Young Artist (GYA). This apprenticeship is highly competitive--of an applicant pool of 1,100 singers, I was one of 28 selected to participate in the program. While at OTSL, I sang in the chorus for productions of Puccini's *La Boheme* and Handel's *Julius Caesar*, covered the roles of Cornelia in *Julius Caesar* and Scribe/Maria Maddalena/Ensemble in Philip Glass's *Galileo Galilei*, performed in the GYA Center Stage concert with the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, and participated in coaching and industry audition days with accomplished professionals in the opera industry.

Following singing on an industry audition day, I was offered a contract to be a studio artist with Sarasota Opera in Sarasota, Florida in early 2025. In addition to duties as a studio artist, such as outreach events and singing in the chorus for Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*, I will also be making my mainstage debut with the company as Marcellina in Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* in March 2025. In June of 2025, I will be making my debut a little closer to home as Rita the Rat in Tobias Picker's *Fantastic Mr. Fox* with Opera Omaha.





Lyzz Leise '17

Attorney | Rembolt Ludtke LLP

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

As a transactional attorney at Rembolt Ludtke LLP, my role involves advising clients on a wide range of matters including corporate governance, general business, mergers and acquisitions, tax planning, nonprofits, intellectual property and technology transactions. My day-to-day work requires a blend of legal expertise and strategic thinking, as I help businesses navigate complex legal landscapes and mitigate risks while pursuing growth opportunities. I regularly draft and negotiate contracts, ensuring they are both legally sound and aligned with my clients' business objectives.

The skills I use daily include contract negotiation, legal analysis, problem-solving, strategic thinking and communication. My dual background in law and accounting gives me a unique, well-rounded perspective, particularly when addressing the intricate tax implications involved in corporate transactions. I also rely heavily on my ability to build strong relationships with clients and colleagues, fostering trust and open communication to ensure effective collaboration.

Looking ahead, I hope to further expand my expertise in transactional law and deepen my understanding of emerging areas like technology and artificial intelligence. I am committed to staying at the forefront of legal developments and hope to continue providing my clients with innovative solutions that help them achieve long-term success.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

My time at USD had a profound influence on both my personal and professional development. Academically, USD provided a strong foundation in accounting, equipping me with the analytical and problem-solving skills necessary to succeed in complex financial and legal environments. The rigorous curriculum and supportive faculty pushed me to achieve my best, ultimately leading me to graduate summa cum laude and secure a competitive internship at Deloitte Tax, LLP and admission into the University of Nebraska College of Law joint degree program. That early exposure to the corporate tax world shaped my decision to pursue a dual degree in law and accounting, which has been pivotal in my career.

USD cultivated a strong culture of collaboration and teamwork that has significantly shaped my professional approach. The emphasis on working closely with peers, both in and out of the classroom, taught me the value of diverse perspectives and collective problem-solving. This collaborative mindset has been instrumental in my legal career, where I regularly work with cross-disciplinary teams to develop comprehensive solutions for clients. The connections I made with classmates and professors also fostered a sense of shared purpose, and many of those relationships have grown into a valuable professional network that continues to support my career development and success.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

I graduated summa cum laude from the University of South Dakota with a degree in Accounting, followed by an internship in the tax department at Deloitte Tax, LLP. I then attended the University of Nebraska College of Law and graduated with distinction with my Juris Doctor and master of professional accountancy.

During law school, I served as research editor of the *Nebraska Law Review* and received various honors, including the Silver Quill Award, the McGrath North Excellence in Legal Writing Award, and multiple scholarships such as the Marvin & Virginia Schmid Honor Law Scholarship and the Platte County Bar Association Foundation Scholarship. I was also honored with the CALI Excellence for the Future Awards in both state and local tax and corporate tax.

For the more than four years, I've practiced at Rembolt Ludtke LLP, one of Nebraska's top law firms. My legal practice focuses on corporate law, business transactions, tax planning, nonprofits, mergers and acquisitions, and intellectual property and technology. I've demonstrated success through advising clients in high-stakes transactions, delivering innovative legal solutions that support business growth while mitigating risks. My contributions have directly influenced the success of my clients by ensuring smooth corporate restructuring, tax compliance and intellectual property protection in rapidly evolving industries. Beyond my client work, I've played an influential role within the firm by mentoring new associates and law clerks. I also strive to give back to the legal and broader community. I've provided pro bono services to local nonprofits, assisting with governance and compliance matters as well as volunteering at various nonprofit organizations.



Macie Harris '16, '20

Doctor of Physical Therapy, Clinic
Director | Pain & Movement Solutions

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

I am a highly skilled physical therapist and clinic director of a thriving outpatient, privately-owned physical therapy business. With extensive experience as a primary care provider for musculoskeletal injuries, I specialize in diagnosing, treating and preventing a wide range of physical ailments. My practice encompasses the care of patients across the lifespan, from pediatric to geriatric populations, ensuring that individuals of all ages receive personalized, evidence-based treatment plans tailored to their specific needs. As a clinic director, I lead a team of skilled healthcare professionals. My leadership ensures the smooth operation of the clinic, with a strong emphasis on quality outcomes, patient satisfaction and the integration of innovative therapeutic techniques. My hands-on approach and commitment to continuing education keeps our organization at the forefront of the field, allowing us to offer cutting-edge treatment interventions such as manual therapy, therapeutic activities and advanced rehabilitation protocols.

In my role, I excel in creating comprehensive treatment plans aimed at restoring function, improving mobility and alleviating pain. My deep understanding of the musculoskeletal and neuromuscular systems enable me to address complex conditions, from acute injuries to chronic pain syndromes, and my holistic approach often includes injury prevention strategies to support long-term health and wellness. By empowering patients through education and active participation in their recovery process, I cultivate lasting relationships built on trust and mutual respect. My expertise as a clinician, combined with leadership and business acumen, has made my practice a trusted resource in the community for physical therapy services, known for delivering exceptional patient care and measurable, positive outcomes.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

My positive undergraduate and graduate experiences at USD have had a lasting impact on both personal and professional decisions. USD's supportive and challenging academic environment helped cultivate my passion for healthcare and physical therapy, while also shaping my leadership style and patient-centered approach.

As an undergraduate, the diverse curriculum and experiential learning opportunities provided a solid foundation in the health sciences, reinforcing my commitment to a career in physical therapy. Being an aide in the anatomy lab was instrumental in providing a base knowledge for my future career. Also, the emphasis on community service and ethical responsibility at USD encouraged me to view healthcare as more than a profession - it became a way to actively contribute to the wellbeing of others. This mindset is a cornerstone of my approach as a clinic director, where I prioritize high-quality care and strive to make a positive impact in the community.

Physical therapy school at USD was instrumental in preparing me for the complexities of modern physical therapy practice. The program's focus on evidence-based care and clinical application equipped me with the knowledge and confidence needed to manage musculoskeletal injuries across the lifespan. The collaborative nature of our studies fostered teamwork and communication skills, which now serve me well as I lead a team of healthcare professionals and guide student PTs as a clinical instructor. USD's commitment to lifelong learning and professional excellence continues to influence my decisions as you stay current with the latest therapeutic interventions and management strategies. The values instilled during your time at USD - integrity, service, and leadership - remain central to my work, guiding me as I navigate patient care, clinic management, and student engagement.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

In a short amount of time since graduation, I have demonstrated significant success and influence in my profession and community through active engagement in leadership and service initiatives. By participating in leadership events, I continually enhance my skills and knowledge, ensuring that my clinic remains a leader in the field of physical therapy. Involvement in these events not only strengthens my own leadership but also inspires my team, fostering a culture of growth and excellence within the clinic.

Participation in local health and wellness fairs, where I table to engage with the community, reflects my commitment to accessible healthcare. By offering free consultations to potential patients, I provide valuable guidance to individuals who may otherwise delay care. This proactive approach demonstrates my dedication to community health, and these events help raise awareness about the importance of physical therapy in maintaining overall wellness.

Through my participation in a manager panel for USD PT students, I was able to contribute to shaping future leaders in healthcare firsthand. Sharing my experiences as a clinic director, clinical instructor, and practitioner provides students and peers alike with practical insights, helping them navigate the complexities of the profession. This engagement also reinforces my role as a thought leader in the field.

Furthermore, I actively participate in healthcare professional events, elevating the practice of physical therapy by staying updated on the latest industry trends and best practices. I thoroughly enjoy collaborating with other healthcare professions to provide a holistic approach to patient care. These events not only enhance my own clinical expertise but also allow me to share innovative approaches with my team, ensuring that your clinic remains at the forefront of physical therapy care.

Through these efforts, I have built a reputation as a trusted healthcare provider and leader in my community, positively impacting both my profession and the individuals I serve.





Marcus Destin '22

Assistant Director of Student Activities and
Multicultural Affairs | USD

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

I have a passion for creating inclusive spaces, cultural competency, organizational leadership, cultivating purposeful and impactful leaders, culture-building, recruitment and retention, and creating a strong internal culture that reflects externally. In my current role, I assist in the development of student leaders and organizations and help our students find their place here at USD.

The motto for both of offices is “There is a place for you,” with our three pillars being to help educate, celebrate and support our students. Every day, I work with students, faculty and staff to help create a space of belonging and community that can be embedded into the foundation of what we call The Yote Life.

I utilize leadership and management skills for strategic planning and goal setting, supervising staff, advising organizations, and managing budgets and resources. I also employ communication skills when interacting with students, faculty and staff, as well as for public speaking and presentations at meetings, events and orientations.

Additionally, I apply cultural competency to address and support the needs of our underrepresented communities on campus and encourage spaces of belonging. I utilize event planning, coordination, problem-solving and critical thinking to bring student ideas to life by managing scheduling, marketing, risk management and various logistics.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

I have been at USD for eight years, evolving from an involved student leader on campus to working full-time as the social media and brand engagement coordinator for USD’s marketing and communications department, and now to my current role. It has been an amazing journey filled with opportunities and blessings. USD is where I completed my degree, found my voice as a Black man, and gained the courage to be myself while encouraging others to do the same, all while operating with love and grace.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

I'm honestly not sure what success looks like for me outside of trying my best to do the best I can, as best as I can, because I can. If I can help one person, motivate one person, and make one person believe in themselves, then to me, that's success. No matter what arena I am in - physically or figuratively - I hope to have a positive influence on those around me. I hope to continue being a lifelong learner, gaining insights from those around me and using that knowledge to change the worlds of those I encounter. There is always room for improvement, and no one person has the answer but I do believe that Vermillion and USD are great places to see the immediate impact of your influence.





Nick Fey '17, '23

Assistant Personal Training Leader | Life Time

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

I began my career as a personal trainer at the USD Wellness Center in 2015, driven by a passion for helping others improve their health and fitness. I chose personal training because it allows me to proactively support people in achieving a wide range of goals including weight loss, strength development, injury rehabilitation and more.

In my current role at Life Time Des Moines, a facility with over 7,000 members, I serve as the go-to resource for all health and fitness needs. I meet with members to connect them with the specific gym services that align with their goals surrounding equipment orientations, goal-setting sessions, movement pattern correction and nutrition consultations. In addition, I contribute to personal trainer education, enhance membership experiences and support gym events.

Recently, I've expanded my efforts to share health and fitness knowledge with the public by collaborating with various media outlets. I've worked with ABC5 in Des Moines on news segments related to men's health month and youth athletic performance. On the print side, I've been publishing articles on LinkedIn and have written for three magazines, with my work awaiting publication.

I believe everyone deserves access to reliable and helpful fitness and health information. My goal is to make a positive impact on as many people as possible through the gym, digital media and online publishing.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

USD provided me with everything I needed to learn and grow as a young professional, paving the way for the career success I enjoy today. My journey began in 2014 as a lifeguard at the Dakota Dome, which led to various training and management roles at the Wellness Center. Through the connections I made there, I was able to secure an internship with USD Strength and Conditioning, where I gained over 400 hours of hands-on experience.

Life came full circle when I had the opportunity to teach the ACE personal training course to 30 USD students, the very course I took in 2015 to earn my certification. I have immense gratitude for the staff at the USD Wellness Center for continually giving me opportunities and allowing me to gain such diverse professional experiences.

Thanks to this foundation, I was able to accelerate my career at Life Time, earning a promotion within my first year. In 2022, I pursued my graduate degree in sport management through USD online, which significantly influenced my passion for media and education. The program was a fantastic experience and inspired me with new ideas on how to spread health and fitness information more effectively.

Recently, I had the privilege of participating in a mentorship program through USD, where I worked with a student interested in personal training. I truly enjoyed the process, as it gave me insight into what younger professionals in the industry are seeking. USD is doing a remarkable job connecting students with alumni and expanding their network. This is a program I would love to continue developing, as it allows me to give back to the school that has given me so much.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

I strive every day to make an impact on as many people as possible, and this effort has evolved and adapted over the years. One of the most significant shifts in the health and fitness industry came with the COVID-19 pandemic. With gyms closed and people in greater need of support, I took the initiative to start my own personal training business, offering digital personal training and exercise programming. I made it affordable so that many could access it while ensuring it was high-value, providing education and assistance. During this period, I worked with over 300 clients from eight different states.

Since then, I've become deeply invested in finding creative yet informative ways to reach broader audiences and serve as a voice of education. Through Life Time, USD, and other platforms, I've supported dozens of trainers in building their businesses and achieving personal success, enabling them to better serve their clients.

The next chapter of my career (pun intended) is to complete my book on personal trainer education, with the hope of inspiring and educating the next generation of fitness professionals.



Nicole Bell '22, '23

Director of Asset Management | Lloyd Companies

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

I am the director of asset management at Lloyd Companies and am pursuing a career in corporate finance. Lloyd is a multifaceted development and real estate company. I have worked at Lloyd for three years - starting as an intern while completing my bachelor's degree at USD. I then accepted a position full-time while completing my master's degree at USD. While at Lloyd, I have been promoted several times and now oversee a multimillion-dollar portfolio - including the Steel District in Downtown Sioux Falls. The work ethic and educational skillset I developed at USD have allowed me to progress at this rapid professional trajectory.

My role entails the management of various asset classes - including multifamily and commercial properties, restaurants and hotels. My responsibilities include creating budgets, assessing properties regularly to ensure financial performance, facilitating investor distributions and refinancing property loans when they mature. I also approve commercial leases and capital expenditures. These actions require analytic skills, a thorough understanding of finance and accounting, communication skills and attention to detail. It is imperative that I have strong relationships with bankers and investors, as I am the primary contact for many of these individuals. The USD alumni network has been critical to my success with these relationships.

My role also includes the sale of new investments to investors. This required me to pass several rigorous exams - including the SIE, Series 63 and Series 7. Aside from having a thorough understanding of the investment details, I must also rely on strong sales skills to ensure investors feel comfortable and trust Lloyd Companies with their funds.

With my USD education, I aspire to continue to progress in my career as a leader at Lloyd. I will set an example for other women in the finance industry and make a difference in the communities Lloyd serves. By providing housing in areas that need it, offering investment opportunities to investors to further enhance their wealth, and enhancing our community through novel development projects, I truly feel I am making a difference in our community through the work I do with Lloyd.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

The relationships I developed throughout undergraduate and graduate school at USD have continuously inspired me to become involved in my community, to remain committed to lifelong education, and to stay connected with influential organizations and people. My USD experience has empowered me with the confidence and knowledge to tackle any challenge.

I transferred to USD during COVID-19 as a non-traditional student. I always knew I wanted to work in business, but I never anticipated a lack of business opportunities due to the pandemic. Fortunately, I was selected for the Beacom School Mentorship Program. Through this program, I was grateful to be matched with Christie Ernst, the president of property management at Lloyd Companies. Despite the pandemic, Christie dedicated time to expose me to various career pathways. Christie's guidance and support gave me the confidence to pursue a career in finance at a time when internship opportunities and job shadowing were very limited. My relationship with Christie solidified the importance of a mentor. It has also shown me how influential USD programs and initiatives have been on my career and success.

Professors and instructors at the university instilled the importance of teamwork, collaboration and curiosity. Attending USD has given me the self-assurance to ask clarifying questions, to construct an educated opinion and support it, and to seek help from others when I may not know an answer. I still reach out to professors and former classmates for support and guidance.

Additionally, the relationships I developed with fellow students, professors, and alumni while attending USD demonstrated the importance of having a strong community - no matter where that community may be geographically located. The loyalty and camaraderie that has resulted from relationships with fellow Coyotes has resulted in numerous connections that positively influence my daily life. I still greatly enjoy connecting with fellow alumni at USD sports events and fundraisers, and I will always proudly support my alma mater. Go Yotes!

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

I demonstrate success and influence by being involved with organizations that enhance our community. This is my second year serving on the Board of Directors for SculptureWalk - an iconic and integral part of the Sioux Falls landscape. SculptureWalk brings countless visitors to the streets of Downtown each year.

I also volunteered to co-chair SculptureWalk's exclusive fundraiser this year - The Taste of Sioux Falls. This responsibility involved coordinating eleven local restaurants, obtaining sponsors and procuring raffle items. Over 250 people attended the event, which raised \$70,000 to help SculptureWalk with costs including insurance, maintenance and further program growth.

I have also demonstrated positive influence over the past three years by volunteering with Junior Achievement - an organization which allows students to connect educational topics with real-world scenarios. In this capacity, I have shared my diverse professional experiences with many students and have demonstrated that there are many different avenues to success.

I have demonstrated professional success by obtaining increasing levels of responsibility throughout various promotions at Lloyd Companies. My recent promotion to director of asset management is a testament to the work ethic and dedication to excellence I was taught throughout my time at USD. Similarly, Lloyd Companies supported my selection to class 38 of Leadership Sioux Falls; this was an amazing opportunity to connect with other like-minded leaders. It was an honor to be accepted into this prestigious nine-month program, and each session highlighted the importance of being involved in our great community.

Additionally, I further demonstrate success and influence through my involvement with Dance Gallery of South Dakota. With a seven-year career as a ballet dancer, I have significant experience to offer the students. I am involved as a ballet instructor, choreographer, and I serve as the treasurer on the Youth Ballet Board of Directors. It is very meaningful to me to mentor high school-aged ballet students as they explore the different career and education paths that are available in the dance industry.





Nikolas Wilson '20

Morning News Anchor | KCAU 9 News

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

As a morning news anchor, my job is to deliver the news to our viewers in the Siouxland area. Our viewing area includes northwest Iowa, northeast Nebraska and southeast South Dakota. I anchor a two-hour morning show as well as a half-hour midday show each day. I previously worked as a multi-media journalist for about a year and a half.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

USD gave me the skills I need to succeed in my job today. My duties as a multi-media journalist at KCAU 9 are quite similar to duties that I performed as a member of USD's student media while I was in college. I felt prepared to be a professional journalist because of the great education and remarkable learning opportunities available to me at USD. The editing software and video cameras we use at KCAU 9 are even the same as the ones that I used at USD, which helped me tremendously.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

Earlier this year, I launched a series called "Serving Siouxland." The goal of this series is to highlight local non-profit organizations and all the good work they do to make a difference in the community. I felt motivated to create this series after flooding devastated many parts of Siouxland this summer. In this series, I've had the chance to talk to volunteers who helped clean up flood damage. I've also covered non-profits that fight food insecurity, promote leadership opportunities for women, help veterans, assist victims of human trafficking and so many other notable causes. It's been a privilege to share these stories and volunteer opportunities with our viewers on a regular basis.



Paige Wright '18

Teacher | Harrisburg School District

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

As a 6-8 grade advanced social studies teacher in Harrisburg, South Dakota, my current professional pursuits are deeply rooted in fostering a love for history and civic engagement among my students. My position entails developing and delivering engaging lesson plans that challenge students to think critically about historical events and their relevance to contemporary society. I utilize a variety of skills in my role, including curriculum development, classroom management, and effective communication to inspire my students and encourage their active participation in discussions.

In addition to my teaching responsibilities, I serve as the Veterans Day coordinator at my school. This role allows me to honor and celebrate the contributions of our military service members, creating a meaningful connection between students and veterans in our community.

I also lead an after-school program called the Veterans Club, where we focus on learning from both active and retired service members. This club provides students with unique opportunities to hear personal stories and gain insight into the experiences of those who have served our country. We pack care packages for local National Guard units deployed in combat zones, which fosters a sense of community and service among students.

Through my educational pursuits, I hope to instill a strong sense of civic responsibility and empathy in my students. I aim to empower them to appreciate diverse perspectives and to understand the significance of service, both in their own lives and in the broader context of our society. Ultimately, I aspire to create a classroom environment where students feel inspired to become informed and active citizens.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

USD has had a profound influence on my personal and professional development following graduation. The education I received provided me with a strong foundation in teaching methodologies and educational theory, which has been invaluable in my role as a social studies teacher.

One of the most significant ways USD has shaped my journey is through the ongoing connections I've maintained with the School of Education. I have been honored to serve as an invited speaker multiple times, including participating in an impact interview for Unite for USD back in 2019. This opportunity allowed me to reflect on the transformative experiences I had during my time at USD and share those insights with current students and faculty.

Additionally, I've had the privilege of guest speaking in Dr. Jing Williams' Social Studies Methods course, where I was able to discuss practical applications of the theories we studied. Most recently, I participated in the Difficult History Interview Research course, also led by Dr. Williams. This experience reinforced the importance of engaging with complex historical narratives, which I aim to incorporate into my teaching to foster critical thinking in my students.

These experiences at USD have not only enriched my professional growth but have also strengthened my commitment to lifelong learning and community engagement. I feel a deep sense of responsibility to inspire the next generation of educators, just as I was inspired during my time at USD.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

I have demonstrated success and influence in my profession and community through various leadership roles and initiatives that foster collaboration, inclusivity, and educational innovation. Within my middle school, I lead the Culture Club, which brings together a group of teachers dedicated to fostering teacher retention. We organize various outings and activities both inside and outside of school, creating a supportive environment that values collaboration and camaraderie among staff.

Additionally, I coordinate our Veterans Day celebrations, inviting community members to join us in honoring those who have served. This initiative not only educates students about the significance of military service but also strengthens ties between our school and the local community.

In my commitment to integrating the arts into education, I created a lesson plan that incorporates music into social studies. This project, developed in collaboration with Dr. Jing Williams, an assistant professor at USD, enhances student engagement and enriches their understanding of historical contexts.

My contributions have been recognized through my nomination for Teacher of the Year in my district, reflecting my dedication to excellence in teaching. Furthermore, my acceptance into the TransAtlantic Outreach Program allowed me to travel to Germany, where I studied their history and education system in depth, gaining insights that I bring back to my classroom.

I am also active in the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota & the Dakotas, participating in various committees that promote dialogue and understanding. My involvement with the South Dakota Department of Education enables me to contribute to educational policy and practice on a broader scale.

Overall, I strive to inspire my students and colleagues while fostering a sense of community and a commitment to lifelong learning.





Rachel Orton '19

Psychotherapist | Synergy Family Services

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

I am a psychotherapist just outside of Washington, D.C. I work primarily with Hispanic families to reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, improve interpersonal relationships, build stress management skills and cope with trauma. I currently have my LMSW and in early 2025 will be eligible to test for my LCSW, which is independent licensure and will expand my employment options. Once I am independently licensed, I hope to work primarily with young adults and exploring a university setting, as my own therapist on the USD campus was so helpful in helping me manage my anxiety and inspired me to pursue this path.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

When I graduated I was determined I would not go to graduate school. Through the experiences I had from my counseling internship, skills I learned through the psychology lab and memories I had from a healthcare focused study abroad trip, I concluded that I wanted to expand my opportunities to be able to help others. Thanks to these experiences I had with USD and having time to reflect on them, I went on to obtain my MSW from LSU and graduated in 2022. The previously mentioned experiences and skills I had developed greatly assisted me to excel in the MSW program, graduating with a 4.26 GPA and then passing my licensure exam on my first try. USD is also important to me because it is so close to home and helps me to remember where I came from.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

I have been grateful to have successfully discharged several dedicated clients. While I hope I had an impact, the individuals deserve all the credit for doing the hard work. I have been able to provide education to my clients and community to increase mental health awareness. I have made suggestions to my agency for changes which have been implemented, collaborate closely with additional mental health providers both internal and external, and have received multiple perfect scores on performance evaluations. Outside of my career, my education at USD guided me to be a better person, through building my awareness of the human mind, service to others, and direct interventions.



Reece Weber '19

Attorney | Costello Porter Law Firm

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

As our firm's senior associate attorney, I not only represent clients in a wide variety of legal fields, but I also help oversee our firm's other associates, interns and staff. As a transactional attorney, I often represent businesses and individuals in commercial transactions, property sales and/or disputes, as well as estate planning. I also aid our firm's partners with legal research and writing, client meetings, court hearings and document drafting/review. I serve on multiple committees and boards in Rapid City and have volunteered to conduct seminars for organizations on various estate planning strategies.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

Growing up in a small eastern South Dakota town, my parents and surrounding community members raised me to value ethics, integrity, discipline and compassion. My father and grandfather both attended USD, so I grew up idolizing USD athletes, and vividly remember walking into the Dakota Dome for the first time during a class trip. Once I had decided to attend law school, I always hoped I would end up at USD Law. In fact, I remember visiting USD Law many times beforehand in order to sit in on some classes and meet professors in hopes that it would increase my chances of being admitted. In my time at USD Law, it became clear that the University, its faculty and staff valued the same traits that were instilled in me. I felt at home immediately.

The professors at the university taught with a passion to produce the best attorneys they could, and with a genuine interest in seeing their students succeed. I always knew I was in great hands at USD, and I am reassured of that everyday as a practicing attorney. It has now been five years since I decided to stay in South Dakota to practice, and I am extremely grateful for the growth and opportunity that USD provided me in order to allow me to have a career in my home state. There's not a day that goes by when I am not using the values and skillset that USD provided me.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

I have been fortunate to volunteer/serve as a board of director for a large non-profit organization in Rapid City that focuses on aiding those who struggle with mental health and substance abuse disorders. I am currently in my fourth year and serve as the secretary and treasurer of the board. I have also previously served as an executive committee member for the West River Finance & Estate Planning Council, an organization that conducts seminars for attorneys, accountants, insurance agents, financial planners, trust officers and more. In 2023, I was one of 24 individuals selected to attend (and graduate from) Elevate Rapid City's Leadership Institute, which is a nine month course focused on instilling leadership perspectives and qualities in the Black Hills Region. I also serve on the South Dakota Bar Association Business Law Committee.

In my short career I have already had the opportunity to work with some fantastic attorneys (many of which are fellow USD Law grads), clients and members of the community, and I cannot thank USD Law enough for providing me that foundation.





Shelbi Conover '17

CEO / Gemologist & Jewelry Designer |
Aro Jewelers

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

I am the founder and CEO of Aro Jewelers, a brand I launched in April 2023 after years of honing my expertise as a graduate gemologist and jewelry designer. My education at the Gemological Institute of America (GIA), where I earned certifications in CAD/CAM and jewelry design, as well as my certification as a certified gemologist appraiser with the American Gem Society (AGS), laid the foundation for my work today. I oversee every aspect of the business - from creative design and customer relationships to managing production and quality control - while applying my skills in diamond grading, gemstone identification, jewelry repair and appraisals to ensure that every piece meets the highest standards of craftsmanship. Additionally, my bachelor of science in media & journalism - strategic communications from the USD has been invaluable in leading the company. This degree equips me with the tools to effectively market our brand, communicate with clients, and manage public relations, helping Aro maintain a strong and authentic presence in a competitive industry.

At Aro Jewelers, we started with permanent jewelry services and appraisals and have since expanded to offer a full line of jewelry that balances everyday style with high-end luxury. Our focus is on creating meaningful pieces for special occasions while also offering versatile items that can be worn daily. I draw on my expertise in jewelry design to develop collections that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also deeply personal.

I aim to create a trusted brand that celebrates both modern elegance and the rich cultural history of jewelry making. The name "Aro" is inspired by my Native American heritage, with the arrow symbolizing forward movement and progress. My goal is to establish Aro as a place people return to for each of life's significant moments, knowing they will receive a piece of art that reflects their journey.

In the long term, I hope to continue refining my craft by becoming a master goldsmith and expanding the business, creating a legacy where jewelry serves as a lasting symbol of personal milestones and cultural appreciation.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

USD was a game-changer for both my personal and professional path. Earning my degree, along with minors in communication studies and business, armed me with a diverse skill set that I use every day to run Aro Jewelers. The blend of strategic communication and business know-how I gained at USD has been a major asset in shaping my approach to marketing, brand development, and building authentic customer relationships. USD didn't just prepare me for the real world - it gave me the tools to thrive as a business owner by emphasizing the power of communication, adaptability and making genuine connections.

Just as impactful were the relationships I built with fellow students, alumni and professors. This network has been a constant source of support, collaboration and inspiration. Whether it's seeking advice, sharing ideas or exploring new business ventures, the connections I formed at USD continue to fuel my personal and professional growth. This community plays a key role in helping me tackle the challenges of entrepreneurship and expand Aro Jewelers' reach in the industry.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

After becoming a certified appraiser, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a surge in people purging their homes, making estate appraisals a focal point of my work. I developed a passion for identifying and restoring family heirlooms, allowing me to redesign these pieces to be wearable while honoring their original craftsmanship.

My involvement with historical societies has deepened my interest in anthropology and traditional jewelry-making techniques. Before moving back to Iowa in 2023, I was the only certified gemologist appraiser in South Dakota. This unique position allowed me to introduce services and education that weren't previously available in the state, filling a significant gap in the local market. I provided expertise in gemstone identification, appraisals, and restoration/metal fabrication while educating clients about the history and value of their pieces.

This role enabled me to share knowledge through public speaking engagements and writing for jewelry blogs and magazines, which helped elevate the jewelry industry in the region. By bridging traditional jewelry-making techniques with modern design, I influenced how people in South Dakota understood and valued their jewelry.

In 2023, I established Aro Jewelers as a brand that merges craftsmanship, cultural appreciation and personalized customer experiences. Using my background as a GIA-certified gemologist and my skills in CAD/CAM, jewelry design and appraisals, I've built a business that offers high-quality, stylish pieces and serves as a trusted resource for significant life moments. Aro Jewelers has quickly gained recognition for its product lines, which reflect a blend of everyday style and luxury. My commitment to celebrating Native American jewelry-making traditions has allowed me to connect deeply with the community and emphasize the cultural significance of my work.

Through authentic customer relationships and a dedication to quality, I've created a space where people feel valued, and I'm proud to influence the local jewelry scene with a brand rooted in tradition, handcrafted artistry, and meaningful connections.

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Taylor Douglas

Child Care Service Program Specialist II | State of South Dakota

Describe your current professional or educational pursuits.

My current position allows me the opportunity to have a seat at the table when it comes to discussing South Dakota's child care needs. I recently assisted in conducting a statewide child care workforce study to determine South Dakota's current child care needs as well as the impact they have on South Dakota's workforce. Through these interactions, I have learned what has proven to be beneficial to providers regarding payment rates, eligibility requirements, payment practices and accessibility. Working closely with the families DSS serves and their benefit specialists has allowed me to gain a better perspective on the day-to-day challenges individuals in our state are facing and how I can help to better equip the State of South Dakota to address those challenges.

My position as a program specialist also allows me to better understand what South Dakotan constituents feel is working with our current child care system as well as changes they would like to see made. Child care providers across the nation are in a difficult spot right now and I feel as though I am helping to make strides in the right direction to ensure the success of not only the children and families in our state but also the providers who serve them. South Dakota is not alone in its child care struggles, and my education and experience at USD has provided me with the tools and strategies needed to think outside the box when it comes to finding solutions to the issues our child care providers and communities are facing.

How did USD influence your personal and professional experiences following graduation?

I feel that the University of South Dakota has played a significant role in all aspects of my life. During my time spent at USD, I was fortunate enough to meet so many amazing individuals. Whether it be my instructors in the social work program, our student government association advisors, or my supervisor at the Vucurevich Children's Center, I always felt supported. I always knew I had someone in my corner when it mattered most. This support provided me with the confidence in myself and the resources needed to succeed after graduation.

Not only did USD's academics go above and beyond to set me up for success in my career, but they also provided me with numerous professional relationships that continue to assist me in my personal and professional growth and success. My time spent attending USD also allowed me to form lifelong friendships with my sisters of Alpha Xi Delta, members of the Social Work Club, fellow Student Government Association members and my peers. These friendships have only strengthened with time and continue to be one of my strongest support systems. Through life's highs and lows, the USD and the relationships made there continue to provide a sense of happiness and belonging.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?

Success is a hard thing to define. I believe in taking small meaningful steps to reach your final goal. Most often my professional successes are not overnight large-scale obstacles I overcome. They are multi-step, detailed, data-driven and methodically planned out projects. I have learned to take a step back and look at the micro-social work being completed vs the macro-social work we all strive to achieve. Success in my profession is the meaningful connections I have made with the providers and families I serve, which have allowed me to research and write constructive policies that benefit families and child care providers. It has allowed me to gain a better understanding of the world around me and help guide me to topics and places where I can make the most positive impact. Not only does this include my career as a social worker, but also the work I do for my community. I currently serve on the Missouri Shores Domestic Violence Center's Board of Directors along with serving as the current vice president of Little Learners Preschool of Pierre's Board of Directors.

My service to the community of Pierre, South Dakota, is one of the most rewarding endeavors, second to becoming a mom to my wonderful children. I have not only been able to get to know members of my community but also take a deeper look at their needs. It has allowed me to utilize my professional experience and bachelor's degree from USD to improve life for the individuals in the community I live in through the organizations I am a part of. Everyone deserves to feel safe, cared for, and equal to those around them. My service, whether at work or volunteering, allows me to ensure the children and families in my community and across the state of South Dakota feel those things.