

SMU Office of Engaged Learning

OEL Newsletter


Fall 2025

Issue no. 11

This Fall in the Office of Engaged Learning, our students showed what experiential learning looks like at its best: using hands-on research, creative problem-solving, and real-world collaboration to shape their academic and professional journeys. From career-readiness workshops and industry-focused events to projects that take learning well beyond the classroom, our programs continue to help students turn curiosity into capability. We're especially proud to spotlight the growing momentum among our women entrepreneurs, whose ideas, leadership, and community-building are strengthening SMU's innovation ecosystem. These stories capture the heart of OEL: learning by doing, creating with purpose, and preparing Mustangs for what comes next. *Jen Ebinger, EdD, Executive Director OEL*



Team Elevated pitching at the Fall 2025 Big iDeas Pitch Competition. Read more on p.4

Upcoming Events:	March	Featured Events:
<p>January</p> <p>1/26 & 1/27 ELF Info Sessions</p> <p>1/28 Big iDeas E-Launch Bootcamp</p> <p>1/29 MM+PBI Winter Welcome Event</p> <p>February</p> <p>2/12 Lab Hopping</p> <p>2/13 Mustang Mentors Valentine Event</p> <p>2/16 & 2/17 Grad School Prep Workshop</p> <p>2/24 PBI PAL Innovate and Create Workshop</p>	<p>3/9 & 3/10 Research Poster Workshop</p> <p>3/9 Big iDeas Pitch Practice</p> <p>3/12 Big iDeas Spring Pitch Competition</p> <p>3/23 & 3/24 Elevator Pitch Workshop</p> <p>3/25 Research Innovation Week Undergraduate Poster Session</p> <p>3/27 ACC InVenture Prize Competition at University of Notre Dame</p> <p>April</p> <p>4/10-4/12 ACC Meeting of the Minds at Florida State University</p> <p>4/13-4/15 National Conference for Undergraduate Research (NCUR) in Richmond, VA</p>	<p>1/29 Mustang Mentor + PBI Winter Welcome Event</p> <p>2/12 Lab Hopping</p> <p>3/12 Big iDeas Spring Pitch Competition</p> <p>3/25 Undergraduate Poster Session</p> <p>See the full list of events and register on SMU360</p> 

Entrepreneurship

Women's Innovative Network

OEL welcomed the inaugural **Women's Innovative Network (W.I.N.)** cohort on November 11, celebrating undergraduate women pursuing research, innovation, and entrepreneurship. The event included a pinning ceremony symbolizing each member's entry into a supportive community of innovators. The student organization now begins a transformative year of workshops, mentorship, and opportunities designed to elevate women's voices and projects across campus.



2025-26 Inaugural W.I.N. Cohort: **Dylan Biggs, Andy Cao, Kitty Eid, Delaney Graves, Makenna Hanscom, Tanya Harathi, Izzy Monserrate, Wisdom Ojo, Dyanna Ortiz, Bianey Rojas, Abigail Schade, and Linh Vu.**

Big iDeas Competitions

In its 17th year, the **Big iDeas** program continues to evolve for a bigger impact, expanding collaboration across the SMU entrepreneurship ecosystem. Congratulations to the winners this fall!

Fall 2025 Big iDeas Business Plan Winners

Travis Pryor *Focus Path*, **Wade Hunter** *Sandra*, **Cameron Flores** *MiraMira Education*, **Keeley Pierzchalski** *Past Forward*, **Inzwi Zunga** *Khaya*, **Daniel Kauffman** and **William Wright** *Impact Threads*, and **Angel Guerrero** *Humaximus*.

Fall 2025 Big iDeas Pitch Competition Winners

Diyaa Shah, Neema Mwangi, and Linh Vu *Elevated*, **Daniel Kauffman** and **William Wright** *Impact Threads Apparel*, **Carlos Alvarez Maumejean** *Sanum*, **William Zhao** *HAWTCHA*, **Cecilia Tipping** *Grace*, **Johnna Sterett** *BOOTCAMPUS*, **Iyanna Christie** (MIO), **Holden Price** (Quoting AI), and **Manuel Albarran** (SunTap).

Undergraduate Winner at Hilltop Founders Pitch Competition

Angel Guerrero, Humaximus (*Big iDeas Business Plan Winner*)

SMU Varsity Entrepreneurship Team

See team names on p.4

Research

First-Year Research Experience



The **First-Year Research Experience (FYRE)** program is going strong in its second year. This fall, OEL welcomed 34 first-year students to work under 16 faculty mentors: **Sabri Ates, Matthew Boulanger, Amy Brewster, Patrick Breysse, Alexander Chase, Anindita Das, Pokhraj Ghosh, Eric Godat, Jill Kelly, Leanne Ketterlin Geller, Chrystyna Kouros, Joel Meyers, Eli Olinick, Christopher Roos, Brett Story, and Brian Zoltowski.**

Where Research Begins

The Office of Engaged Learning is excited to offer **UNIV 2103: "Where Research Begins"** in spring 2026. Based on the book by Thomas Mullaney (Stanford) and Christopher Rea (University of British Columbia), this course enables students to generate strong research questions and projects. In the 1-credit class, students will learn a variety of techniques for generating and testing research questions. By the end, they will increase their research skills and produce a proposal for a robust independent project.

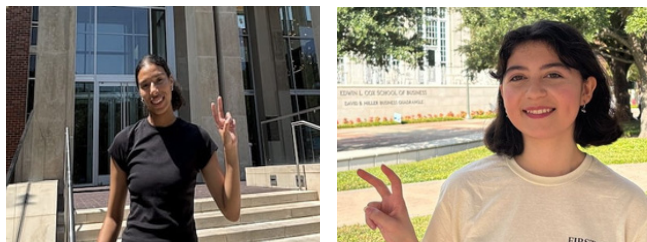
ELFs Present Local & National

SMU's Engaged Learning Fellows continue to share their research on campus and beyond:

- **Ellen Aughenbaugh, Faith Bellamy, Caleb Garcia, Jordan Naivar, and Mille Wiita** presented at the Fall Research Symposium on November 4.
- **Haley Kim** presented a poster at the American Chemical Society SE & SW Regional Meeting in Orlando.
- **Roberto Diaz** presented a poster at the Texas Undergraduate Conference for Social Sciences at UNT.
- **Maria Murad** presented a paper at the National Communication Association conference in Denver.

Mustang Mentors

Mustang Mentor Ambassadors



Cydney Leach '27 (L) and **Jacqueline Sastre '29 (R)** serve as the first Mustang Mentor Ambassadors.

Cydney, a Music Education major, is motivated to be a kind of leader that fosters connections between others. She shared, “being able to see the strengths in my mentee and pull them out of them is something I’ve gotten better at in my peer relationships.”

Jacqueline transferred to SMU from Dallas College and found having a mentor made the transition more manageable: “Having a mentor that was pursuing the same major as me was a huge help...they knew about finding a community and what classes best suit me.”

As Ambassadors, they strengthen peer-to-peer engagement, support event planning, and foster connections across the cohort.



*There are now 439 Mustang Mentors at SMU!
Become a mentor or gain a mentor today
smu.edu/mustangmentors*

PBI

Pathways to Business and Industry

Pathways to Business and Industry continues to expand its reach and impact, supporting 171 participants from majors across campus as they explore careers in business and industry. This fall, PBI held 3 PBI and Peer Academic Leader (PAL) events with PBI PALs **Ruth Assefa '27** and **Tiffany Nguyen '27**, 4 signature PBI events, 2 co-hosted events with the Department of Journalism and History. Students also benefited from ongoing coffee chats and career exploration with Steppingblocks Digital Degree Counselor.



SMU alumni Elizabeth Guevara '24, Shelbi Hamilton '22, Connor Pittman '21 and Saniha Aziz '19 with Dr. Jay Batsell at the PBI Business Journalism event

PBI strengthened cross-campus collaborations with the Hegi Family Career Center, Mustang Mentors, University Advising Center, and Peer Academic Leaders (PALs) while also forming new partnerships with the Lyle Career Center and Meadows School of the Arts Alumni and Career Success office, and the Department of World Languages and Literatures.

Academic Transitions

Each semester, OEL with Academic Affairs proudly plays a role in shaping students' introductions to life at SMU. This fall, we kicked off with **Mustang Mindset**, a part of Stampede orientation helping incoming students dive into to what it means to be intellectually curious and growth-oriented. Additionally, new commuter and transfer students connected at the **Commuter and Transfer Lunch** and networked with faculty and staff from across the university. September's **Academic Explorations Open Houses** turned campus into a tour of possibilities, with Dedman, Simmons, Lyle and Meadows hosting departmental tours, informational open houses, and pizza galas to connect undergraduate students with faculty and explore potential majors and minors.



Student and Faculty Spotlights



ELF Student Spotlight

Anna Foweather, a Dedman Scholar senior majoring in Data Science and Psychology with a minor in Statistical Science., serves as the Editor-in-Chief of SMU's Journal of Undergraduate Research and received

an Engaged Learning Fellowship for her research project with Dr. Sarah Kucker in Psychology, "The Effect of Academic Lesson Structure on Learning Outcomes for High School Students." Throughout her time at SMU, Foweather has been committed to research, working as an Undergraduate Research Assistant in the SMU Kids in Development Lab. She plans to pursue a P.h.D. after graduation.

Entrepreneurship Student Spotlight



Diyaa Shah, founder of Elevated, at the Big iDeas Pitch Competition

Team **Elevated** (Diyaa Shah, Neema Mwangi, and Linh Vu) won the top prize at the Fall 2025 **Big iDeas Pitch Competition** for their universal attachable shoe lift that makes height adjustment easy, stylish, and accessible. Designed to support people with leg length discrepancies and anyone wanting a height boost, Elevated offers a practical alternative to costly, time-consuming shoe modifications.

Founder Diyaa Shah shared, "This is a problem that affects me, and I'm really happy to build something that brings together my interests and helps other people...It's important to know what you're doing is helping people, not just creating something new, but making a real impact." The team is now deep in research and testing as they work toward their first MVP prototype, using the Deason Innovation Gym to model and 3D-print their first designs.

PBI PAL Spotlight

Junior Computer Science major **Ruth Assefa** brings a strong technical background and thoughtful leadership to her role as a PBI Peer Academic Leader (PAL). This year, she has taken an active role in planning

skill-building opportunities for students, including a Data Analysis and Visualization Workshop developed in collaboration with the SMU Statistics and Data Science Club. Ruth shared, "The business field and technology field intersect at times and I believe that I can help students find resources that can help them strengthen their technical skills as they explore other careers and internships in technology and business."



Faculty Spotlight

Eric Godat, Ph.D., is the Director of Research Technology Services in the Office of Information Technology. He and his team support research projects across all campus disciplines. Godat's passion for

research and expertise in data science and HPC were developed during his doctoral work here at SMU in theoretical particle physics where he studied nuclear parton distribution functions. This fall, Godat served as a faculty mentor for students in the First Year Research Experience (FYRE) course. He also works with OEL on the NSF Data Science Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU), leading the data science bootcamp and mentoring students on research projects each summer.



Varsity Entrepreneurship Team

SMU Ecosystem selects student founders to join the Varsity Entrepreneurship Team, representing SMU at regional and national pitch competitions.

Congratulations to the 2025 Varsity Team:

Travis Pryor, Ayoola Olaosebikan, Christy Marunza *FocusPath*

Yaw Boaten, Inzwi Zunga, Ameen Zia *InfoSavvy*

Kwanghyun Kim, Taezja Phelan *Popkle*

Ryder McNeal *PREVO*

Support OEL

It costs approximately \$2500 to fund a student project. Want to make a difference? smu.edu/givenow

