Simmons Solutions

FALL 2026



CLOSER TO THE ACTION

INSIDE: STUDENTS GO BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE WORLD CUP, A $5 MILLION GIFT INVESTS IN FACULTY EXCELLENCE, COLLEGE ACCESS OPENS DOORS TO HIGHER EDUCATION, FUTURE PRINCIPALS LEAD CHANGE ACROSS TEXAS, CENTERS TEAM UP TO STRENGTHEN MATH LEARNING OUTCOMES

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Simmons
Solutions

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Leon Simmons Endowed Dean of Simmons School
Michael S. Harris

Editor
Kati Li

Contributors
Sarah Bennett '11
Kelsey Kiser Radunsky '17, '19

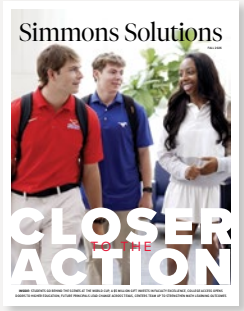
Copy Editor
Ellen Rossetti

Graphic Design
Brooke Carlock Design

Photography
Kevin Gaddis
Jesse Hill
Kim Leeson
Guy Rogers, III

Learn how you can support Simmons School by contacting Director of Development Jeff King at 214-768-4844 or jeffreyk@smu.edu.

ON THE COVER



Sport management students make their way through Harold Clark Simmons Hall between classes, reflecting the community at the heart of this issue's cover story.

Letter from the dean



THERE IS A WORD WE TALK ABOUT A LOT ON CAMPUS THESE DAYS: MOMENTUM.

Not because momentum guarantees success, but because it reflects something deeper. Momentum happens when talented people move together with purpose toward a shared vision. It is the energy created when students, faculty, staff, alumni and partners invest in something larger than themselves. It is progress that builds on progress, creating opportunities that would not exist otherwise.

Since being named dean, I've seen that momentum across the Simmons School of Education and Human Development. We've strengthened partnerships throughout Dallas and beyond, expanded opportunities for students, and continued to grow our research enterprise. Each accomplishment is meaningful on its own, but together they tell a much bigger story – one of a school that is building, innovating and leading with intention.

This issue captures that story.

You'll meet future school leaders who are preparing to strengthen schools across Texas. You'll see how our sport management students are gaining hands-on experience with professional organizations and global sporting events in one of the nation's premier sports markets. And you'll read about faculty and students working together to advance research that addresses some of the most pressing challenges in education, counseling, health and sport.

That same spirit is evident in our research enterprise. During the past fiscal year, Simmons generated nearly $11.5 million in sponsored research expenditures, a 19% increase over the previous year. While those numbers are significant, what matters most is what they represent: the commitment of our faculty, staff and students, to expanding knowledge, strengthening communities and creating meaningful impact through their work.

Our alumni are also an essential part of this momentum through their leadership, service and commitment that extend the impact of Simmons far beyond our campus, inspiring the next generation to pursue meaningful work and bold ideas.

Although the stories in these pages span different disciplines, they share a common purpose. At Simmons, we prepare people to lead, solve problems and create meaningful change. Whether that work takes place in a school district, a research lab, a counseling clinic or a sport organization, our mission remains the same: improving lives through education and human development.

Momentum happens when talented people move together with purpose toward a shared vision.

Thank you for being part of the Simmons community. I hope these stories leave you with the same sense of optimism they leave with me.

The momentum is real. It is growing. And together, we're just getting started.



Michael S. Harris, Ed.D.
Leon Simmons Endowed Dean





Building on a legacy

Nancy Ann Hunt ’65 and Ray Hunt ’65 continue their commitment to education with a $5 million endowed chair at Simmons.



FOR DECADES, NANCY ANN HUNT '65 HAS CHAMPIONED EDUCATION as one of the most powerful ways to strengthen communities.

A lifelong educator and longtime member of the Executive Board in the Simmons School of Education and Human Development, Hunt has dedicated her career and philanthropy to expanding educational opportunity through investments in students, faculty and schools. Together with her husband, Ray L. Hunt ’65, they have helped shape the future of SMU and the Dallas community through sustained leadership and generosity.

Their latest commitment reflects that enduring belief.

The Hunts recently established the Nancy Ann Hunt Eminent Endowed Chair in Education, a $5 million faculty endowment that will help Simmons recruit and retain nationally recognized scholars. The gift makes Simmons the first school to establish one of SMU’s new Eminent Endowed Chairs, a new endowment level established by President Jay C. Hartzell to promote faculty excellence. This endowment will strengthen research, enrich the student experience and expand Simmons’ impact for years to come.

“Teachers have a profound opportunity to change the trajectory of a student’s life,” says Hunt. “Supporting the people who prepare those educators is one of the most meaningful investments we can all make for the future.”

The gift builds on a long-standing partnership with Simmons. Through the Nancy Ann and Ray Hunt Residency-in-Teaching Master of Education Endowment Fund, the Hunts have supported aspiring educators preparing to serve in high-needs schools across North Texas. Their philanthropy has helped reduce financial barriers for future teachers while reinforcing the school’s commitment to preparing leaders who strengthen schools and communities.

“The leadership and investment of the Hunts continues to be a powerful driver of our success,” says Michael Harris, Leon Simmons Endowed Dean of Simmons. “Endowed faculty positions are among the most enduring investments a university can make. They help Simmons attract and retain exceptional scholars whose teaching, mentorship and research will influence students and strengthen the school for decades.”

Together, scholarship support and endowed faculty positions ensure Simmons can continue attracting exceptional students and distinguished faculty while advancing its mission to improve lives through education and human development. ❖

“Teachers have a profound opportunity to change the trajectory of a student’s life. Supporting the people who prepare those educators is one of the most meaningful investments we can all make for the future.”

- Nancy Ann Hunt ’65

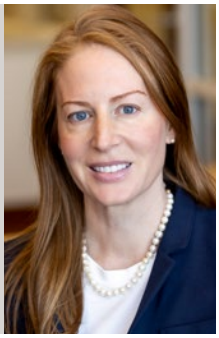
Meet the newest members of the Simmons community

Ten new faculty members joined Simmons this year, bringing expertise from education, counseling and the sport industry. As accomplished scholars, practitioners and mentors, their perspectives reflect a shared commitment to mentorship, innovation and student success. Together, they represent Simmons' continued investment in the people who make purpose-driven education possible.



"Everything about Simmons and SMU felt like the right fit. The role is teaching-focused, which aligns strongly with what I enjoy most while allowing me to build meaningful industry connections for students."

Brett Anderson, Applied Physiology and Sport Management



"This is an exciting time to join Simmons because the sport industry continues to evolve rapidly. Issues such as leadership, revenue generation, athlete development, technology and organizational strategies are reshaping the profession, creating new opportunities for students and educators alike."

Kelly Brock, Applied Physiology and Sport Management



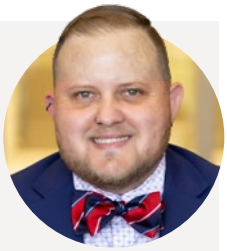
"I am thrilled to join SMU as faculty, and in many ways, I am coming home. SMU is the university that shaped my master's experience, and as a Dallas native and first-generation college student, I know firsthand what it means to have educators who are truly invested in you. I am deeply committed to providing that same experience for every SMU student I have the privilege of working with. The Simmons School's dedication to equity and student success aligns directly with my life's work, and I could not be more proud to be here."

Concepción M. Cummings '17, Teaching and Learning



"What stood out to me most about joining Simmons and SMU was the cohesion within the program. There is a strong sense of connection, shared purpose and commitment to excellence among the faculty that creates an environment where both students and faculty can thrive. Joining Simmons felt like an opportunity to contribute to a program I already respected while becoming part of a team whose values and standards closely align with my own."

Ruben Gomez, Counseling



"I was drawn to Simmons' commitment to preparing students who are genuinely ready for real-world practice, not just academically prepared."

Beck Munsey, Counseling



"I make it a personal goal to show each student every day that I want them to succeed in and outside of the classroom."

Braden Norris, Applied Physiology and Sport Management



"What excites me most about joining Simmons is the opportunity to be part of a community that values rigorous, policy-relevant research and its connection to practice. I look forward to contributing to that mission through my work on leadership labor markets, school boards and education policy analysis."

Se Woong Lee, Education Policy and Leadership



"What drew me to this school was its commitment to integrating scholarship and practice. The counseling program's emphasis on ethical practice, quality supervision and preparing culturally responsive practitioners aligns well with my interests and values."

Rakima Parson, Counseling



"The strong faculty, students and reputation in the community for the counseling program – additionally, having an in-person program – attracted me to SMU."

Hayley Stulmaker, Counseling



"I'm truly drawn to Simmons and SMU because of the incredible momentum and opportunity here. The University is fast-growing and deeply connected to the greater DFW area – a region filled with dynamic sports opportunities."

Jiayao Qi, Applied Physiology and Sport Management

We solve what matters



Four Simmons sport management students interned with the PwC SMU Athletic Forum in spring 2026.

FROM HEARING FIRSTHAND FROM JESSE COLE, FOUNDER OF THE SAVANNAH BANANAS, about reimagining the business of sports to contributing to research that is strengthening STEM education, Simmons students are engaging with the people, ideas and real-world challenges shaping their professions long before graduation day.

That commitment to purposeful learning has helped make the Simmons School of Education and Human Development among the top three public and private schools in Texas and one of the nation's top graduate schools of education. Across a wide range of programs, Simmons prepares counselors, educators, school leaders, researchers, sport industry professionals and community advocates to create meaningful change in their professions and communities.

"Our mission has always been larger than preparing students for their first job," says Michael Harris, Leon Simmons Endowed Dean of the Simmons School of Education and Human Development. "We prepare students to become leaders, problem-solvers and changemakers who can navigate complex challenges and improve lives. What unites every program at Simmons is a commitment to connecting knowledge with action."

That philosophy is evident throughout the school, where research and real-world application go hand in hand. Across Simmons, grant-funded research led by 24 tenure-track faculty is addressing some of today's most pressing challenges while creating meaningful opportunities for students to learn alongside nationally recognized scholars.

Faculty members Bo Li and Kevin Byon are examining the impact of sports wagering on student-athlete well-being, while Quentin Sedlacek, associate professor of STEM education, is leading a multi-university study exploring how exposure to diverse role models can improve outcomes for students pursuing STEM careers.

Students are not simply learning about this work in the classroom – they are participating in it. Through close faculty mentorship and hands-on research opportunities, they gain practical experience while

contributing to projects that have the potential to influence policy, practice and communities nationwide.

"I call it the Simmons Advantage. The relationships we build with students continue long after they graduate. Our graduates stay connected, seek guidance and share milestones as they advance in their careers."

- Roxanne Burleson

That philosophy is evident in the sport management program. This year, students played an active role in executing the nationally recognized Doak Walker Award event on the Hilltop, gaining firsthand experience managing a major sports event. They also participated in the PwC SMU Athletic Forum, one of the nation's premier sports leadership forums, where students engage with influential athletes, executives and innovators exploring the intersection of sports, business and leadership. Students also learned directly from industry innovators, including Savannah Bananas founder Jesse Cole, and regularly engaged with professionals from organizations such as the Texas Rangers and Dallas Stars.

For sport management major Victor Celis-Shugrue '28, attending the Global Sports Business Summit, co-hosted by SMU and the Dallas Sports Commission, provided a firsthand look at the industry's evolving landscape. The experience allowed him "invaluable opportunities to connect with people in the sports industry, while learning about emerging opportunities shaping the future of the field."

Beyond the experiences themselves, students leave Simmons with something equally valuable: lasting relationships with faculty mentors who continue to support them long after graduation.

"I call it the Simmons Advantage," says Roxanne Burleson, assistant department chair and clinical professor in Education Policy and Leadership. "The relationships we build with students continue long after they graduate. Our graduates stay connected, seek guidance and share milestones as they advance in their careers."

Those relationships help prepare students to lead from day one.

"Our graduates are leadership-ready and highly sought after for leadership positions," Burleson says.



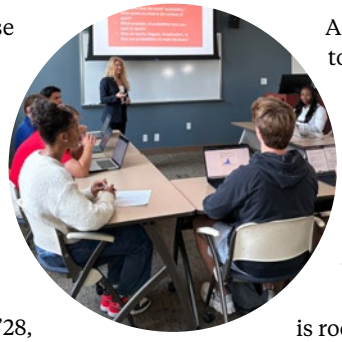


Education Policy and Leadership students collaborate over the summer, taking classes and bringing actionable insights back to their classrooms.

"What distinguishes the student experience at Simmons is the combination of exceptional faculty expertise, personalized mentorship and a strong commitment to professional preparation," says Greta Davis, clinical professor in counseling. "Our students learn from experienced counselor educators and practitioners while developing the knowledge, skills and professional identity needed to serve clients and communities with competence, compassion and integrity."

That commitment to experiential learning extends beyond research and into the communities Simmons serves.

"What makes Simmons distinctive is that community engagement isn't an add-on to the student experience – it's woven into everything we do," says Stev'anne Horton, assistant dean of strategic initiatives. "We believe students learn best when they can connect their coursework to real needs and real people."



As Simmons continues to expand its research, strengthen partnerships and invest in programs that address emerging needs in education and human development, its mission remains unchanged.

"The future of Simmons is rooted in the same values that have guided us since the beginning," says Harris. "We believe education should improve lives. When our students succeed, the impact extends far beyond campus."

In a rapidly changing world, Simmons continues to prepare graduates who are ready not simply to enter their professions, but to lead them – improving lives, strengthening communities and shaping the future through education and human development. ❖

A legacy of literacy

Stephanie Al Otaiba has spent her career helping teachers become more effective literacy instructors, creating a ripple effect of improved learning outcomes for thousands of students.

LONG BEFORE NATIONAL AWARDS RECOGNIZED HER WORK, Stephanie Al Otaiba helped define what research at Simmons could be: rigorous, practical and centered on improving lives.

As the Patsy and Ray Caldwell Centennial Chair in Teaching and Learning, Al Otaiba has dedicated her career to helping more children become confident readers by supporting teachers and improving how literacy is taught. Her research has shaped classroom instruction, informed education policy and equipped educators with evidence-based practices that continue to influence schools across the country.



Her impact earned national recognition in 2026. Al Otaiba received SMU's Faculty Career Achievement Award, was named a fellow of the Association for Psychological Science and was selected as the Normand Geschwind Memorial Lecturer for the International Dyslexia Association's annual conference. Each honor reflects a different facet of her influence, but together they tell the same story: decades of scholarship that have improved outcomes for teachers and students alike.

Annie Wilhelm, professor and Teaching and Learning Department chair, describes Al Otaiba as one of the faculty members who embodies the very best of Simmons.

"What makes Stephanie exceptional isn't just the quality of her scholarship. It's her commitment to ensuring that research finds its way into classrooms, where it can make a real difference for teachers and the children they serve," Wilhelm says. "That's the kind of impact every university hopes to have." ❖

Q&A with Stephanie Al Otaiba

WHAT INSPIRED YOUR PASSION FOR LITERACY EDUCATION?

When I was first starting in my career, I volunteered in the United Arab Emirates with the United Nations Development Program, working with students who had special needs. After more formal training to be a special education teacher, I taught in an inclusive kindergarten classroom. I really enjoyed teaching children to read and was surprised how children seemed to learn to read more easily in Arabic than in English. That discovery drove my curiosity to understand more about language, and how letters and sounds go together to help kids decode (or sound out) words.

WHAT DO THIS YEAR'S HONORS MEAN TO YOU?

Professionally, these awards reflect the incredible research teams and collaborators I've worked with over the years. You can never do this work alone. Personally, it's very humbling to have this kind of recognition, but it really represents the joy and achievement that my whole department has embraced.

WHAT ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF?

I've had the opportunity to work with nearly 400 teachers over the years. Every now and then when I feel like an impostor, I think of how all those teachers, if they reach at least 20 kids in a year, how many children have learned to read through evidence-based practices that I've been able to share? And how has that in turn given that teacher more confidence in their classroom literacy instruction, to help 20 kids the next year? It's amazing, being able to witness a child learning to read. It's so exciting.

WHAT BRINGS YOU THE MOST JOY IN YOUR WORK TODAY?

One of the more recent accomplishments that I'm proud of is seeing the data come out from a decade-long collaboration with Jill Allor. With our team (including Jennifer Cheatham '10), we developed and wrote a curriculum called "Friends on the Block." We're seeing data that includes children with disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, learning to read. In an experimental trial, we've been able to show that children exposed to our curriculum could read at much higher levels, with more fluency and more comprehension when compared to standard classroom instruction.



Higher education at Simmons

WHEN PEOPLE THINK ABOUT HIGHER EDUCATION, they picture students attending classes or professors conducting research. Less visible are the leaders responsible for shaping the institutions themselves.

From recruiting and retaining students to measuring institutional effectiveness and planning for the future, today's colleges and universities depend on professionals whose work extends far beyond the classroom. At Simmons School of Education and Human Development, graduate programs in higher education prepare those leaders through its Master of Education and Doctor of Education degrees.

"Higher education is one of the most influential sectors in our society, yet many people don't realize it's a profession that can be studied," says Sondra Barringer, associate professor and Ed.D. program director. "Behind every college campus are people deciding how resources are allocated, how students are supported and how to engage with communities, governments and other outside entities. Our job is to help our students understand how these decisions are made and to prepare them to make these decisions and lead in their community, college or university."

The recently redesigned hybrid M.Ed. program recognizes that many of today's higher education leaders are expected to do more than support students. They're asked to interpret enrollment trends, evaluate programs, measure outcomes and help guide institutional decisions. They're expected to answer difficult questions: Why are students leaving? Which programs are working? Where should resources be invested? The new curriculum enables students to learn how to collect, interpret and communicate data, and offers an opportunity to practice and apply those skills to challenges they're already encountering in their campus roles.

For experienced professionals, the Ed.D. is designed around a challenge that derails many doctoral students: finishing the dissertation. Rather than treating the dissertation as work that occurs outside of the classroom, the Ed.D. program has built dissertation milestones into the curriculum. As of August 2026, through structured faculty mentorship and collaborative cohort support, 100% of students who have defended their dissertation proposals have gone on to graduate.

"I was seeking an in-person program that would challenge me academically while allowing me to learn alongside professionals with diverse perspectives and real-world expertise. Equally important, I wanted the academic freedom to conduct dissertation research aligned with my interests," says Asmara Saleemi '25. "SMU Simmons School was the clear choice."

Students, staff, faculty and the communities in which colleges and universities are located are impacted by the decisions made behind the scenes at a college or university. Simmons prepares the people who will make those decisions for the next generation. ❖

A candid conversation on campus with *The Dallas Morning News*

Higher education leaders are navigating a period of heightened scrutiny and rapid change. Rising tuition costs, student debt, political criticism and the emergence of artificial intelligence have all contributed to declining public confidence in colleges and universities. According to Gallup's Confidence in U.S. Higher Education survey, only an average of 38% of Americans have reported having a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in higher education since 2023.

These questions and more took center stage this summer as *The Dallas Morning News* hosted a public forum at SMU on the future of higher education. Michael Harris, Leon Simmons Endowed Dean of the Simmons School of Education and Human Development, joined Sondra Barringer, Simmons associate professor of higher education; Warren von Eschenbach, president of the University of North Texas at Dallas; Marc Christensen, executive vice president for academic affairs and provost at The University of Texas at Dallas; and Nakia Douglas, former executive director of the Dallas Education Collective and former executive director of TRIO and pre-collegiate programs at UNT Dallas, for a discussion moderated by *The News'* higher education reporter, Milla Surjadi. Together, the panel explored the challenges shaping higher education today, from affordability and workforce preparation to research funding, institutional accountability and the changing expectations students and families bring to college.

"Many of the questions discussed during the panel are the same issues our students explore in the classroom. Hearing leaders wrestle with those challenges in a public setting helps bridge theory and practice in a tangible way for our students and community members," says Barringer.

For Simmons students preparing to become higher education leaders, these are more than headlines. They are the kinds of challenges graduates will encounter throughout their careers, and the discussion served as a reminder that effective higher education leadership extends beyond campus operations. It requires engaging thoughtfully with the communities that colleges and universities are designed to serve.



Bright futures on the horizon

College Access has been preparing students to pursue education for half a century.



SINCE 1966, COLLEGE ACCESS PROGRAMS HAVE ASSISTED THOUSANDS OF LOW-INCOME, FIRST-GENERATION AND UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENTS in preparing for college – and, since 2012, graduate school.

It all started with SMU's first grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Since then, SMU has received multiple federal grants to support these students as they pursue their dreams of higher education through academic planning, tutoring, test preparation, career exploration, college visits, educational events, core subject instruction and financial literacy support. The staff work to implement goal-setting structures for the students on the path to success in a variety of fields.

"Our programs give students the opportunity to do two things: one, be a part of the SMU campus, and two, have the opportunity to dream," says College Access Director LaChelle Cunningham.

Though the programs are buzzing with activity year-round, summer is a special time on the SMU campus as these students stay in residence halls, take classes, get support on college applications and engage in research projects.

High schoolers take classes in standard subjects such as math, science and English as well as college readiness curriculum on topics such as scholarship applications and financial aid. For residential students staying on campus, there are still opportunities for fun at the pool and other spots around campus. A showcase at the end of the five-week program gives students the chance to celebrate their hard work with parents present.

Students who have demonstrated a particular interest in STEM fields go on field trips and work in science labs thanks to Dedman College of Humanities and Sciences professors. This

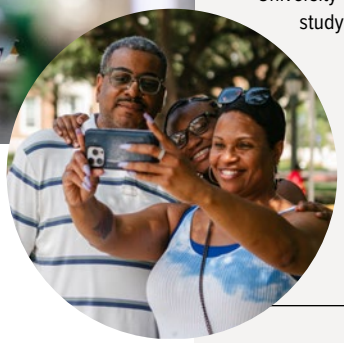
Family testimonial

When Kamyra Heard first moved from Alabama to Texas to live with her great-aunt and great-uncle as a middle school student, she hadn't given college much thought at all. It wasn't until her great-aunt, Karen Pope, started talking about it that the idea sparked.

"She had a really rough freshman year (of high school), and I was looking for something to help her break through," says Pope. A Google search – and lots of prayers – led her to Upward Bound and a phone call with Program Coordinator Phylisha Smith '28. Heard joined the program in October of her first year and stuck with it all through high school – including the residential summer programs, which allowed her to tour different college campuses.

"On the last day, when they did the luncheon, she just got award after award after award," says Pope.

While participating in Upward Bound, the natural introvert "blossomed," in the words of her family, and joined the National Honor Society, the cross country team and the fashion club and took honors and AP classes. She graduated No. 97 out of 962 students at Duncanville High School and is attending Texas A&M University on a full-ride scholarship to study psychology.



"When I say Upward Bound was a godsend, I mean Godsend with a capital G," Pope says. "It was such a blessing that she was able to be a part of it."

UB SUMMER CURRICULUM

Here's a sampling of classes Upward Bound students take during the summer.

Math
Science
English
Collegiate Writing
Theater
Graphic Design
Photography
Artificial Intelligence
KEOC – Keeping Your Eyes on College
American Sign Language





year, participants visited Equinix and Mary Kay to explore how engineering and chemistry impact those companies, respectively.

"The students were able to examine lipstick, sliding it across paper to assess its quality and determine if it was fit to put on the shelves," explains Upward Bound Math Science Program Manager Erica Fayson. "Once students start seeing the science and engineering behind everyday things, they begin to look at the world around them a little differently. Helping students make those connections can really spark their curiosity."

Other STEM students learned about "zip line math" (aka studying angles) at a zip line park or learned about the physics of golf at a mini golf course. The three-week camp ended with a college fair at Dave & Buster's for some fun, food and information.

"It's a STEM lesson with some fun attached to it," says Educational Talent Search Program Manager Leah Granados.

College Access also includes a cohort of SMU students with their sights set on graduate school.



Students can choose to either commute into campus for summer programming, or move into residential halls on campus for a fully immersive learning experience.

These scholars work on undergraduate research projects with a faculty mentor to prepare a final presentation and research paper. They also take part in graduate school visits and personal and professional development workshops. This September, students attended the McNair Conference at Florida International University to present their work.

"What's great about this program is they probably wouldn't have met through their normal schedules," says McNair Scholars Program Manager Jacqueline Lowrey. "We're so student-centered."

Thanks to these programs, high schoolers and undergraduates alike explore educational opportunities that might not have been achievable otherwise.

"Students, I think, are the heartbeat of the program," says Cunningham. "It's really a joy to see that light go off in their eyes about what they're doing." ❖

Full-circle moment

These College Access staffers benefited from the same SMU programs they now serve.

Phylisha Smith '28
Program Coordinator, Upward Bound
Bachelor's degree in social work, East Texas A&M University
Master's degree in higher education, East Texas A&M University
Doctorate of education candidate, SMU



"I went to Lancaster High School, and I'm a first-generation student – my parents were very intent on having better opportunities for my siblings and I than they had. There's no way I would've gone to college, gotten a master's degree, and now a doctorate without doing this."

Jessica Stigers
Program Leader, Upward Bound
Bachelor's degree in early childhood education and teaching, Paul Quinn College
Master's degree in human services, Lubbock Christian University



"I was in the program in high school, and then I started working as a tutor counselor, so I stayed in the dorm with the students. I've been here since 2002 and full time since 2008! I always wanted to be in education, so that was my pathway to college. I'm living proof that Upward Bound is contagious! I helped my mom get to school and she actually beat me to getting her master's!"

Get to know the program managers helping students achieve their goals.

Leah Granados
Program Manager, Educational Talent Search
Bachelor's degree, University of North Texas
Master's degree in education, Angelo State University



"I'm a Talent Search alum – I was in the program at UNT as a low-income, first-gen student, so I know the impact a program like this can have. This was always my dream job."

Jacqueline Lowrey '14
Program Manager, McNair Scholars
Bachelor's degree in political science, human rights and Spanish, SMU
Master's degree in international relations, Durham University

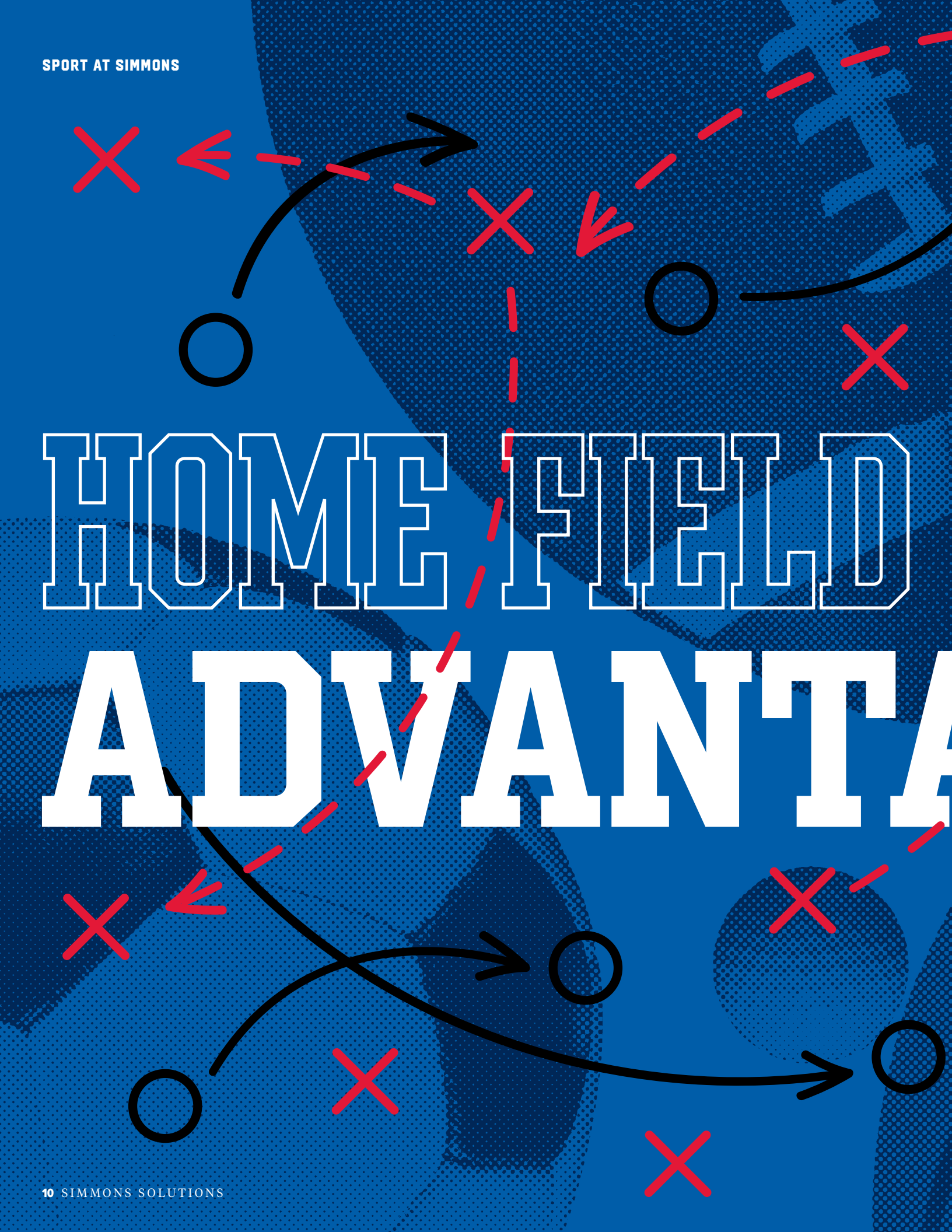


"I think what's great about this particular summer is how close the cohort has become. They're working on a variety of projects with students in anthropology, health and society, physics – all across the board."

Erica Fayson
Program Manager, Upward Bound Math Science
Bachelor's degree in marketing, East Texas A&M University
Master's degree in biblical counseling, Luther Rice College and Seminary



"It's special to see the students we've worked with and where they are now – we have doctors, counselors, lawyers, dermatologists, engineers – they go off and do a little bit of everything!"



HOME FIELD ADVANTA

SMU's sport management program, the third-largest undergraduate degree program on campus, leverages the nation's premier sports market to prepare students for careers with professional teams, global sporting events and industry leaders.

AGE

THE LIGHTS ARE BRIGHTER. THE STAKES ARE HIGHER. And for SMU senior Preston Scott '26, the world's biggest sporting event isn't unfolding from the stands – it's happening behind the scenes.

As a lead media operations intern supporting the North Texas FIFA World Cup Organizing Committee through Tony Fay Public Relations, Scott helped coordinate media operations for journalists covering matches in Dallas. From managing credentialed media to assisting with press conferences and the FIFA Fan Festival, he gained the kind of experience most young professionals only dream about.

Just a few years ago, he was a student wondering where a degree in sport management might take him.

"I've learned from professionals with decades of experience, worked alongside media members from around the world, and built relationships that will benefit me throughout my career," Scott says.

His story is remarkable, but at SMU it isn't unusual.

Housed within the Simmons School of Education and Human Development, SMU's sport management program has become a pipeline between the classroom and the front office, pairing a rigorous business-focused curriculum with direct access to the Dallas sports industry.

Dallas is home to franchises across every major professional league, world-class venues, global sporting events and leading sports brands.

"Some of the most valuable learning happens outside the classroom," says President Jay C. Hartzell. "Through internships and partnerships with professional teams, leagues, governing bodies and major events, students gain firsthand exposure to how the industry operates. Opportunities associated with events such as the FIFA World Cup and the strength of the Dallas sports market give our students access to exceptional experiences that are difficult to replicate anywhere else."

Rather than waiting until graduation, students begin building resumes – and relationships – from the moment they arrive on the Hilltop through internships, consulting projects, executive networking events and classroom partnerships with professional organizations.

This summer alone, nearly 50 SMU sport management students are working with organizations including the Dallas Mavericks, Texas Rangers, Dallas Stars, Dallas Wings, SMU Athletics, Texas Legends, the North Texas FIFA World Cup Organizing Committee, leading NFL and NIL agencies, the Los Angeles Rams and UFC.

For Director of Athletics Damon Evans, those experiences reflect one of SMU's biggest strengths.

"One of the great advantages of being at SMU is that the Hilltop sits right in the middle of one of the country's most dynamic sports markets," Evans says. "Students experience the industry firsthand through internships and networking with organizations shaping the future of sports. They graduate with meaningful experience, valuable relationships and the confidence to lead from day one."

The curriculum has evolved alongside the industry itself. Today's leaders oversee billion-dollar media rights, sponsorships, analytics, artificial intelligence, athlete branding, fan engagement and global business strategy. Success requires far

"Through internships and partnerships with professional teams, leagues, governing bodies and major events, students gain firsthand exposure to how the industry operates."

PRESIDENT JAY C. HARTZELL





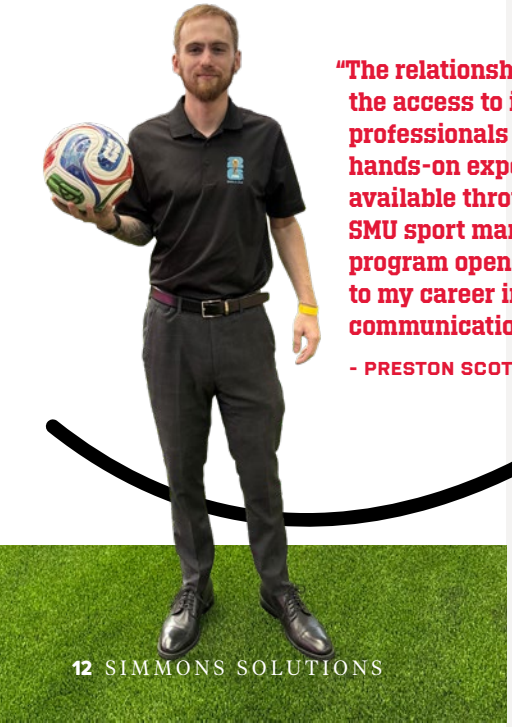
Beyond the classroom: Building a network through the Sports Business Society

Career preparation at SMU doesn't begin with an internship – it begins with community.

The student-led Sports Business Society connects aspiring sport industry professionals with executives, alumni and organizations across the Dallas-Fort Worth sports landscape through networking events, panel discussions, facility tours and professional development opportunities throughout the academic year.

Students hear directly from leaders representing professional franchises, agencies, collegiate athletics and sports business organizations, gaining firsthand insight into career paths while building relationships that often lead to internships and employment opportunities.

By bringing industry professionals to campus and connecting students with the broader sports community, the Sports Business Society helps reinforce one of the program's defining strengths: meaningful careers are built through relationships as much as they are through classroom learning.



"The relationships I built, the access to industry professionals and the hands-on experiences available through the SMU sport management program opened the door to my career in sports communications."

- PRESTON SCOTT '26

more than a passion for sports.

"There may be no better classroom for studying the business of sport than Dallas," says Michael Harris, Leon Simmons Endowed Dean of the Simmons School. "Today's sport industry demands strategic thinkers who understand finance, analytics, marketing, leadership, communications and data. Our students graduate prepared to lead complex organizations because they've already been solving real business challenges long before they receive their diploma."

The undergraduate program blends theory with practice. Students analyze live datasets, consult with organizations and present professional recommendations before they graduate.

"We value both rigorous academics and experiential learning that bridges the gap between theory and practice," says Sydney Hammit, assistant department chair and clinical assistant professor of Applied Physiology and Sport Management. "Our faculty bring both research expertise and practical industry experience into the classroom, allowing students to see how sport management concepts are applied in today's industry."

In Hammit's Sports Data and Analytics course, students develop research questions, analyze large datasets, learn coding techniques and present data-driven recommendations that mirror the work happening inside professional sports organizations.

Programs like SMU x Dallas Mavericks NBA U also take students behind the scenes of an NBA franchise, where they meet executives, tour facilities and explore how departments collaborate to create the fan experience.

Lily Podolsky '26 embraced nearly every opportunity available. She worked with SMU volleyball and basketball, interned with the Dallas Mavericks and Dallas Trinity FC, competed on SMU's nationally recognized Case Cup team and participated in NBA U before accepting a position with Legends Global supporting the University of Miami Hurricanes.

"Lily represents what is possible when students fully embrace the opportunities available to them," Hammit says. "She challenged herself academically, professionally and personally, and that's exactly what we hope every student experiences during their time at SMU."

Undergraduate as well as graduate students come together for experiences, including the Global Sports Business Summit and Life After Ball, connecting with executives, alumni and industry leaders while reinforcing the importance of relationships and mentorship. Undergraduates also gain access to prominent voices shaping the industry through programs such as the PwC SMU Athletic Forum.

The same commitment extends across SMU Athletics.

"One of the greatest strengths we have as an athletic department and as a university is our alignment," Evans says. "Our Athletics Department serves as a living laboratory for students interested in communications,



Dallas provides a home base for student learning and internship experiences with professional teams, major sporting events and international organizations.

marketing, revenue generation, compliance, creative services and operations. Students aren't just observing – they're contributing while preparing for their own careers."

While Dallas provides exceptional opportunities, the program's vision extends globally.

Students are completing internships in Australia with organizations including Tasmania FC, Collingwood Football Club and Brisbane 2032 Olympic organizing efforts. These experiences introduce students to international sport organizations, global business practices and cross-cultural collaboration.

"We want students to graduate having not only learned about the sport industry, but having experienced it firsthand," says Peter Carton, clinical associate professor and executive director of sport industry engagement and partnerships. "Whether that's with the Dallas Mavericks, in meetings with industry executives or working on projects in Australia or Europe, our goal is to develop globally minded professionals who can contribute immediately in the industry."

The results are evident in the program's alumni network. Graduates now work across professional franchises, sports agencies and international organizations, including CAA Sports, WME, the Dallas Mavericks and Legends Global.

"The professionals who will thrive in the next generation of sport are those who are intellectually curious, globally aware and comfortable operating in complex environments," Carton says. "We intentionally design our program to provide students with meaningful experiences, industry connections and international perspectives that prepare them not just for their first job, but for long-term careers and leadership in the industry."

Today, Scott is already living the kind of career many sport management students hope to build.

"Being part of an event as historic as the FIFA World Cup has been an incredible honor," he says. "The relationships I built, the access to industry professionals and the hands-on experiences available through the SMU sport management program opened the door to my career in sports communications. For anyone looking to work in the sports industry, I truly believe SMU and the Dallas-Fort Worth sports market provide an incredible place to build the experience, connections and confidence needed to succeed."

Scott's journey reflects something larger than one student's success. At the intersection of one of America's premier sports cities and one of its most forward-looking universities, SMU has built more than a degree program. It has created a talent pipeline where classrooms become consulting spaces, internships become careers and students don't wait until graduation to begin shaping the future of sport.

In Dallas, the next generation of sports leaders isn't waiting on the sidelines – they're already in the game. ❖

Graduate study built for the business of sports

SMU's Master of Science in sport management prepares aspiring leaders to understand sports not only as a competition, but as a complex global business. The one-year, full-time program brings together the sport industry knowledge of the Simmons School of Education and Human Development and the business foundation of the Cox School of Business.

Organized into four integrated modules, the curriculum spans sport management, finance, strategy, marketing and organizational leadership. Students learn from faculty and practitioners with extensive executive experience while applying their knowledge to ethical questions, consulting assignments and challenges drawn directly from the industry.

Dallas serves as an extension of the graduate classroom. Through relationships with organizations such as the Texas Rangers, Dallas Mavericks and other major sports entities, students gain direct insight into the decisions, challenges and strategies shaping the industry. Signature experiences – including the Global Sports Business Summit and Life After Ball – further connect students with executives, alumni and influential voices from across the sports business landscape.

This combination of business education, industry access and applied learning equips graduates to pursue management and leadership opportunities throughout the evolving sports landscape.



More than a scholarship: Making the most of every open door

By: Chloe Moore '29

WHEN I FIRST STEPPED ONTO SMU'S CAMPUS, I didn't expect a single scholarship program to shape my entire undergraduate experience – but that's exactly what the Hunt Leadership Scholars program has done for me. The scholarship made it possible for me to attend SMU, and once I arrived, it became much more than financial support. It opened doors to leadership opportunities, mentorship and experiences that have shaped who I am today.

As a Hunt Scholar and a sport management major in the Simmons School of Education and Human Development, I've been lucky enough to build an education that blends structure with room to explore. The Bachelor of Science in sport management program gave me a foundation in the business side of sports, but it was the people and the pushes toward leadership – inside and outside the classroom – that shaped how I think about my future.

Outside of Simmons, I've leaned hard into my love of storytelling. I'm also studying journalism, and that combination has led me to some of my favorite projects: creating short-form content for a series highlighting small businesses and nonprofits along MLK Boulevard in South Dallas, and working alongside a talented team to bring those stories to life through video and photography.

An internship with SMU Athletics allowed me to see firsthand how the business of college athletics operates while contributing to the communications that connect fans with our programs. It gave me an inside look at the industry my major prepares me for, and I've felt that same hands-on investment throughout my time here – from the Hunt program to my professors to the mentors who've pointed me toward opportunities I wouldn't have found on my own. It's clear that the people around me at SMU aren't just teaching a curriculum; they're genuinely invested in helping me figure out who I want to become, both in my field and beyond it.

If there's one lesson the Hunt Leadership Scholars program has reinforced for me, it's that leadership isn't a title – it's showing up consistently, staying curious and being willing to learn from every room you're in, whether that's a classroom or a sports game. That kind of support has made my time at SMU feel less like checking boxes toward a degree and more like being prepared, deliberately, for what comes next. ❖



"It's clear that the people around me at SMU aren't just teaching a curriculum; they're genuinely invested in helping me figure out who I want to become, both in my field and beyond it."

– Chloe Moore '29

Expanding mathematics interventions for young learners

A new contract with United Way of Metropolitan Dallas will boost mathematics initiatives in Lancaster ISD.

FOURTH THROUGH EIGHTH GRADERS IN LANCASTER ISD ARE GETTING A NEW BOOST in their mathematics studies thanks to a contract between SMU and United Way of Metropolitan Dallas. This summer saw the launch of Middle School Math Momentum, called "M&M," which is intended to span a five-year partnership.

"United Way has an extensive history with Lancaster and identified Simmons as experts for key areas of this project," says Karen Pierce, executive director of The Budd Center.

The impact of the partnership will be felt across three centers within Simmons School of Education and Human Development: The Budd Center, The Addy Foundation Center on Research and Evaluation (CORE), and Research in Mathematics Education (RME).

"The work that we are doing and proposing with Lancaster uses all materials and resources that have a long history of effectiveness," says Leanne Ketterlin Geller, professor, director of Research in Mathematics Education, and Texas Instruments Endowed Chair in Education. "There is plenty of evidence that shows those (interventions) implemented can provide the necessary support to parents and teachers."

> **"We're all teachers and want to see what's best for kids – that is the primary goal."**
>
> *- Leanne Ketterlin Geller*

The implementation brings together many factors across student learning to create a more holistic approach that helps students, teachers and families. Students receive academic support in the classroom to build their knowledge retention and comprehension; teachers and campus leaders receive the professional development necessary to implement these strategies; and parents receive the tools needed to care for their students' learning outside of the classroom.



"The work, made possible by partnership with United Way of Metropolitan Dallas, brings the best that each center has to offer to Lancaster students, teachers and families," says Annie Wright, executive director of The Addy Foundation Center on Research and Evaluation. "The project will ensure that evidence-based math instruction, anchored by playful learning approaches and meaningful parent and family engagement, saturates Lancaster ISD classrooms as well as out-of-school learning environments."

The first year of the partnership will focus on designing and implementing a strategy that will support the district's needs. That includes programs such as "Fraction Face-Off" for older elementary students and "Promoting Algebra Readiness" for middle schoolers; "Active Playful Learning" professional development for teachers; and "Parent Zone" events and at-home resources for family engagement.

"We're all teachers and want to see what's best for kids – that is the primary goal," says Ketterlin Geller. "This is our opportunity to see the power of these interventions that are evidence-based and impact kids outside of our research." ❖

LANCASTER ISD BY THE NUMBERS

6 elementary schools

1 sixth grade campus

1 middle school

400–450 sixth grade students

50–100 students per campus enrolled in the program

900 middle school students

6 family engagement sessions per school year

50 families per session



Leading the way

SMU's principal preparation program develops the next generation of school leaders while strengthening schools across Texas.

AFTER FUTURE PRINCIPALS BEGIN THEIR CLASSES AT SMU SIMMONS School of Education and Human Development, their mindset shifts, says Les Black, Jr., clinical professor in Simmons.

"Our students begin to think differently," says Black, one of the founding faculty members of SMU's principal preparation program. "They're no longer focused solely on what happens inside their own classroom – they begin thinking about the entire school and how systems work together to improve outcomes for every student."

That shift in perspective lies at the heart of SMU's principal preparation program. For the past 16 years, the Simmons School of Education and Human Development has prepared educators to think beyond individual classrooms and become leaders capable of strengthening entire schools, districts and communities.

Today's principals navigate increasingly complex legal and political landscapes while supporting student well-being, improving academic outcomes, recruiting teachers and engaging families. Success requires far more than instructional expertise – it demands courageous, systems-minded leadership.

Rather than simply preparing educators to earn principal certification, Simmons equips future leaders to improve schools, influence districts and create lasting change across Texas.

Black has watched that transformation unfold hundreds of times.

"Across the board, it's fascinating to see the growth occurring in their mindset," he says. "They begin thinking about the entire school and, ultimately, the systems that shape student success."

That systems mindset has produced leaders whose influence extends far beyond a single campus. Some graduates have gone on to shape education nationally. Alumna Greses Perez '14 earned her doctorate at Stanford University after completing the program and now serves on the faculty at Tufts University. Closer to home, Simmons graduates lead schools and districts throughout North Texas. In Dallas ISD alone, more than half of the district's principals are Simmons alumni, many of whom now mentor residents, supervise field experiences and hire future graduates.

For Nick Gesualdi, that lasting impact reflects the program's broader mission.

"We don't think about this as simply getting students ready to pass an exam," says Gesualdi, a clinical



M.Ed. program curriculum is designed for working teachers, featuring courses scheduled over summer months and after hours during the school year.



associate professor in Simmons. "The work of school leadership is a linchpin for communities. Our responsibility is to prepare leaders who can navigate complexity and lead lasting change."

That commitment continues beyond a single degree. Simmons offers both a Master of Education and a Doctor of Education in educational leadership, and many graduates return to earn their doctorate after discovering the program's distinctive blend of scholarship and practice.

That emphasis on authentic leadership experiences leaves a lasting impression on many graduates.

Yoshi Totsuka '08, '14, '24, both an alumna and adjunct faculty member, experienced that transformation firsthand.

"When I became a teacher, I wanted to support students," she says. "I realized that wasn't going to happen only in the classroom. I wanted to be part of larger solutions and make change on the systemic level."



"Our students begin to think differently. They're no longer focused solely on what happens inside their own classroom – they begin thinking about the entire school and how systems work together to improve outcomes for every student."

- Les Black, Jr.

Moving through the program as a cohort, students learn from scholar-practitioners while receiving coaching from former principals during immersive field experiences. Through partnerships with Dallas ISD, Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD, Grapevine-Colleyville ISD and Highland Park ISD, aspiring principals apply what they're learning in authentic leadership roles while strengthening district leadership pipelines.

Recent graduate Jarrod Williams '26 experienced that same transformation. While completing the program, he was promoted from Dallas ISD teacher to assistant principal before accepting a leadership role in Forney ISD.

"The program challenged me to become the kind of leader who serves with purpose, builds strong relationships and creates opportunities for every student and educator to succeed," he says.

This year, Simmons expanded its reach by launching a fully online principal certification pathway for educators who already hold a master's degree, broadening access to its leadership model across Texas while maintaining its face-to-face Master of Education program.

Over the past five years, more than 150 Simmons students have earned principal certification with a 94% first-time pass rate on the state's Principal as Instructional Leader exam.

More importantly, they leave prepared not simply to lead schools – but to strengthen the systems that help every student thrive. ❖

Expanding leadership across Texas

This year, Simmons announced and launched a fully online principal certification program, giving educators across the state the opportunity to earn Texas principal certification without stepping away from their careers or commuting to campus. The 21-credit-hour program can be completed in approximately 12 months, combines online coursework with supervised field experiences on each student's home campus, and is approved by the Texas Education Agency. The online certification pathway complements Simmons' existing Master of Education and Doctor of Education programs, extending the University's reach while maintaining its commitment to rigorous, practice-based leadership preparation.

PROGRAM AT A GLANCE

94% first-time pass rate
on the Texas Principal as Instructional Leader (PAIL) exam

150+ educators
have earned principal certification since 2020

16 years
preparing school leaders

12 months
is the approximate time to complete the online certification pathway

160 hours
of field-based internship experiences completed on the student's campus of employment



A new home for big ideas

SMU now serves as the headquarters for the Association of Graduate Liberal Studies Programs

IN FEBRUARY, SMU BECAME THE NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS for the Association of Graduate Liberal Studies Programs, a title previously held by Rice University. In addition to that, this summer, the Hilltop hosted the AGLSP's Annual Conference from July 16 to 18.

"We've always done it in hotels for the past 10 to 15 years, so we're excited to be the new home of the office and host our institutional members on campus," says Lue Kraltchev '22, '26, a Simmons School of Education and Human Development graduate assistant, M.L.S. alumnus, D.L.S. candidate and administrative manager for the AGLSP national office.

The conference, themed "New Beginnings: Knowledge in Motion," brought together program directors, faculty, students and alumni from peer institutions, including Rice University, Johns Hopkins University, University of Pennsylvania, Stanford University and Duke University.

"It's a way to shine the light on SMU and Simmons, and the investment that Simmons has made in our programs," says Kraltchev. At the conference, several students presented their studies, showing the breadth of their interdisciplinary interests.

But presenters aren't the only Mustangs who took the stage at the conference. Mag Gabbert, clinical assistant professor and former poet laureate for the city of Dallas, received the AGLSP 2026 Faculty Award; Dionne Ross-Bacon '24, '29 won the 2026 *Confluence* Award for Excellence in Interdisciplinary Writing; and Camille Kraeplin, retired SMU faculty member and current student, won the 2026 *Confluence* Frederick Luis Aldama Excellence in Creative Writing Award. Ross-Bacon and Kraeplin were invited to publish their essays in the AGLSP journal *Confluence*.

"The concept of interdisciplinary learning is, I think, at the core of what I do as a poet and is so close to my heart as an educator, so being acknowledged in this way means a great deal to me," says Gabbert.

The welcome reception and awards ceremony took place at the Meadows Museum, including a Creative Writing Spotlight, where participants could submit a creative piece to read. "It's a little bit like an open mic," says Kraltchev.

But overall, it's the opportunity to share SMU's commitment to human-centric interdisciplinary approach and community of lifelong learners that program leaders were most excited about.

"Hosting the AGLSP National Conference is a tremendous honor and a natural milestone for Southern Methodist University as a charter member over 50 years ago," says Kate Montgomery, Human-Centered Interdisciplinary Studies department chair and clinical assistant professor. "This year's theme perfectly mirrors our own department's mission to push academic boundaries and foster dynamic intellectual exchanges." ❖

A LIST OF SMU STUDENTS AND ALUMNI PRESENTERS

Michael Capps '26
Carlos Rovelo '27
Erin Prather Stafford '28
Sophie Ying Chen '22
Malcolm McGuire '14
Barbara Goss '24
Diem Vu Bich Dao '26
Darlea Wilbeck '25





"SMU becoming home to the AGLSP national office and hosting this year's conference brings ideas from many backgrounds to campus and puts the University at the center of that work."

- Erin Prather Stafford '28





More than 75 attendees gathered at SMU in July as Simmons hosted its first AGLSP National Conference, featuring two days of presentations, discussions and events across campus.





Galloping into a new school year

Simmons takes a new approach to Stampede programming

For new students, the first week of college is about more than finding classrooms and learning campus traditions. It's the beginning of finding a community. This fall, the Simmons School of Education and Human Development is making that connection a priority through an expanded Stampede experience that introduces students to the people, places and programs that will shape their time at SMU.

"We want students to feel like they have a home in Simmons from the moment they arrive on campus," says Francesca Go, associate dean of assessment and student success and clinical professor. "This is their first opportunity to get to know other students in their major."

Students first gathered by major, where they met faculty, staff and classmates while learning more about the programs they were interested in pursuing. From there, they headed out on a scavenger hunt that introduced them to the people and places they'll encounter throughout their time in Simmons. The afternoon concluded with Pokey O's ice cream in Annette Caldwell Simmons Hall, where they enjoyed a sweet treat while getting to know the classmates they'd soon see in the classroom.

"We hope that it helps them to get to know us better and earlier, so that they keep us in mind as they make decisions about what they want to study, and feel connected to us from the beginning," says Annie Wilhelm, professor and department chair for Teaching and Learning.

Compared to previous years, the 2026 Stampede program offered enhanced opportunities for students to get to know their new schools – in addition to learning about Mustang culture and traditions. It's part of a larger initiative across campus to build upon exceptional experiences for students under the new leadership of President Jay C. Hartzell.

"We want students to feel at home at SMU and within the Simmons community by introducing them to the many possibilities ahead, including, for some, the rewarding path of becoming a teacher and making a difference in the lives of young people," says Karla del Rosal, director of teacher preparation and clinical assistant professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning.

At the beginning of the school year, Simmons had about 50 declared majors who were invited to participate in these incoming festivities, with staff and faculty ready and excited to greet them.

"It's important for students to have a strong home base, especially where they can come for information and support throughout their time at SMU," says Ryan Cole, assistant dean for enrollment marketing. "It's all about making connections and making the experience in Simmons more personal." ❖

More than 50 new undergraduate students gathered in Harold Simmons Hall for Stampede, an expanded orientation experience designed to help students find their place at Simmons. Students connected with faculty and classmates while learning more about their programs and the Simmons community.







Test your knowledge

1. When was the Simmons School named?
2. Which of the Simmons buildings was constructed first?
3. How many undergraduate degrees does Simmons currently offer?
4. How many total degrees and certificates does Simmons offer?
5. True or false: Simmons received the largest research grant ever awarded to SMU.
6. In 2025–2026, what were Simmons' sponsored research and community outreach project expenditures?

1. 2007 2. Annette Caldwell Simmons Hall 3. 4 4. 20 5. true 6. $11.5 million

Bringing new lessons back to the classroom

By: Heather Houston '24



WHAT I LOVE MOST ABOUT BEING AN EDUCATOR IS THE RELATIONSHIPS I BUILD WITH MY STUDENTS and the opportunity to continue learning alongside them. Teaching has given me a passion for learning because the more I learn, the more I am able to share with my students. As I begin my 19th year in the classroom with the Dallas Independent School District, where I currently teach eighth grade physics at Jesús Moroles Expressive Arts Vanguard in West Dallas, I find myself reflecting on the experiences that have shaped the educator I am today.

In the spring of 2022, I was given the opportunity to pursue a master's degree in education with a focus in special education and STEM at the Simmons School of Education and Human Development. Even as a veteran educator, I knew there was still so much I could learn, and I was especially excited about receiving a STEM education from SMU.

Throughout the program, I was introduced to concepts and experiences that expanded my abilities as an educator, from coding and emerging technologies to research and special education practices. Just as valuable was the collaboration with my classmates. Learning alongside both veteran educators and those just beginning their careers challenged me to consider different perspectives and often left me inspired and excited to return to my own classroom.

My SMU experience has had a lasting impact on my career. My special education coursework gave me greater confidence in identifying, supporting and advocating for students with disabilities. My STEM courses introduced me to technologies I continue to incorporate into my instruction and even gave me the opportunity to learn coding – something I never imagined myself doing. Studying quantitative and qualitative research also gave me the tools to continue investigating ways to improve my teaching.

Most importantly, SMU strengthened something that has always been at the heart of who I am as an educator: the desire to keep learning. The knowledge, confidence, experiences and relationships I gained at SMU continue to influence the teacher I am today and, through my students, extend far beyond my own classroom. ❖

Finding the courage to choose a new path

By: Sarah Eck '26

Call me if you ever want proof that growth isn't linear.

My path to SMU's graduate counseling program was paved with an amalgam of corporate burnout, a house flood and a long-overdue return to self. After more than two decades in marketing, I'd begun to feel as though I was seeing the same movie on repeat. While I still enjoyed the creativity and problem-solving, I could no longer maintain the persona often expected in corporate environments.



Then, during the pandemic, our house flooded, I entered my 40s, and I found myself wandering in an existential wilderness. I felt the universe gifting me – albeit in some rather challenging ways – an opportunity to reimagine the second half of my life. An opportunity to move in the world more authentically.

When my husband and I were in the process of fertility treatment to build our family, I toyed with the idea of a career pivot to counseling. The infertility journey can be a constant yo-yo of highs and lows, hope and disappointment, celebration and loss. And mental health is often left unaddressed along the way. I became a passionate advocate and resource among my friends and colleagues for discussing the mental and emotional realities of infertility, but it never seemed like the right time to try to make a career of it.

Until it was.

I was fortunate enough to know Jennifer Nollkamper, fellow twin mom and Simmons adjunct professor in the Department of Applied Physiology and Sport Management. She provided me with information about the Master of Science in counseling program, and it felt like kismet.

From PONI Day (the information and interview session day) onward, the counseling program felt like the place I was always meant to be. Faculty were warm and welcoming, while also challenging students to engage in thorough and compassionate introspection. Class options were structured so that even a busy mom of two, working full time in her previous career, could succeed. And the day I sat in front of my first clients, I felt prepared with the skills to empathically and ethically hold the space that every individual deserves.

I can also say that, despite being a nontraditional student, I was able to forge connections with a diverse group of colleagues in the program, many of whom I am now fortunate to call lifelong friends.

Simmons made it possible for me to pursue a dream that had been waiting patiently for the right moment. Whether your path is a straight line or a winding one, growth doesn't happen on anyone else's timeline. Sometimes it begins the moment you're willing to trust where your own journey is leading.



STAY UP TO DATE ON ALL THINGS SMU









October	November	November	March	April
25	**12–15**	**21**	**2027**	**2027**
Hilltop Hustle 5k	Homecoming	SMU vs. Notre Dame	Giving Day	Founders' Day Weekend

Back to the Boulevard

Your favorite traditions are waiting.

Reconnect with classmates, faculty and friends as we celebrate another year of the Simmons community. Join us at the Simmons Homecoming tent before kickoff for food, refreshments, giveaways and plenty of Mustang spirit before cheering on SMU together.

Whether it's been one year or 50, we'd love to welcome you back.

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Thank you for believing in me

"This scholarship has meant so much more to me than financial support. It has been that little push of encouragement that I needed, a reminder that someone had my back and believed in what I could accomplish."

ROSSANA LUNA '28, a Hunt Teaching Scholar at SMU Simmons, is pursuing her Master of Education and teacher certification after working as a special education teacher aide. Her experiences supporting students with disabilities, along with her bilingual and bicultural background, have shaped her goal of creating classrooms where every student feels valued, capable and supported. The Hunt Teaching Scholars Endowment provides critical support for aspiring educators preparing to enter the classroom, particularly those committed to serving urban and high-need schools. Supporting scholarships like Rossana's helps prepare dedicated teachers while giving them the encouragement and opportunity to believe in what they can accomplish. Your gift to Simmons School scholarships is your chance to make a lasting impact on the future.

LEARN MORE by contacting Simmons Director of Development Jeff King at 214-768-4844 or jeffreyk@smu.edu or scan the QR code.