

APULIFE

AZUSA PACIFIC UNIVERSITY MAGAZINE

SPRING/SUMMER 2025

A NEW ERA IN COUGAR ATHLETICS ■ DEFERRED NO MORE ■ FINDING HOPE IN THE ASHES



God First Since 1899



As the spring semester concludes, the resounding theme in my heart is one of immense gratitude. God has indeed been faithful to APU this year, and I’m so thankful for all He’s accomplished as we continue to fix our eyes on Him.

With the good news last summer of a full six-year reaccreditation from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, we’ve been able to devote this year to our portfolio of academic offerings—identifying existing programs that have significant potential to grow, while laying the groundwork to launch new programs that align with the jobs of the future. Alongside this effort, our faculty have done a marvelous job redesigning our general education curriculum, including a refreshed 18 units of undergraduate Bible, all of which will launch this coming fall semester. I praise God for this!

I’m also grateful for the students the Lord continues to send our way. Total enrollment this academic year was 7,300, and we are on track to meet our aggressive enrollment targets for the coming fall semester. Our students continue to have a passion for the Lord Jesus Christ, and I’m thankful for the power of the Gospel to transform hearts and change lives. We’ve seen it in our students this year—our chapels have been filled to the brim, students are getting baptized on campus, midweek Bible studies are packed, worship nights organically pop up and go late into the evening, and students are traveling across the country and around the globe for cross-cultural ministry. More than 100 students will serve in 12 countries this summer alone. The spiritual temperature on campus is palpable. Thank you, Jesus!

I’m thankful for the friends and supporters God continues to surround us with. If you are one of the 700+ who pray for APU on a regular basis, thank you! Without question, this is the most important form of support anyone can provide. And if you’re not yet part of our prayer team, *AzusaPrays*, email me at amorris@apu.edu and we’ll sign you up.

I’m also grateful for the thousands of alumni, parents, and friends who have supported us this year financially. APU’s Giving Day broke all sorts of records, as did total giving to the university—\$32 million in total. An unexpected blessing was a single gift of \$10 million, the largest cash gift ever received in APU’s history. The generosity of this donor family will help fund numerous initiatives, including a new Military and Veterans Center on our East Campus. God has also provided a \$5 million gift for a new faith-and-service initiative, a \$5 million matching gift to help renovate portions of our East Campus, \$1 million toward a new Center for Palliative Care in the College of Nursing and Health Sciences, and so much more. We’re overwhelmed by God’s goodness, and we thank Him for His faithful provision.

This issue of *APU Life* is filled with evidence of God’s faithfulness, including the 50th anniversary of the School of Nursing. What a blessing! We continue to praise God for all He is doing in our midst. And we praise God for you, our faithful friends who support APU in countless ways. Your investment in our *God First* mission is having a profound impact, for which we are incredibly grateful!

Enjoy your summer!

Blessings in Christ,

Adam J. Morris, PhD
President

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APULIFE

SPRING/SUMMER 2025



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Azusa Pacific’s nursing graduates, along with their proud faculty, gather on the steps of Kresge Plaza on West Campus after the Nursing Pinning Ceremony on May 2, 2025, to celebrate their significant achievement and to commemorate the School of Nursing’s 50th anniversary. These new graduates join a legacy of competent and caring nurses who will make an impact in the lives of others by serving their patients with compassion and holistic care.



**AN INSIDE LOOK AT THE LIFE
OF A NURSING STUDENT**

Inspiring APU nursing student Natalie Hultgren '26 lives out her calling at home and abroad serving those in need. Watch her film.

Anonymous Donor Gives APU \$10 Million



APU announced a landmark \$10 million gift from an anonymous donor, marking the largest single cash donation in the university’s history. This transformational gift significantly advances several university priorities.

“We are profoundly grateful for the extraordinary generosity of this donor,” said APU President Adam J. Morris, PhD. “Their commitment is a powerful affirmation of our mission and a testament to the impact APU has on the lives of our students. This historic gift will enable us to enhance our programs and facilities, ensuring a brighter future for our university community.”

The gift will primarily support the university’s strategic plan, funding several key priorities over the next five years, including:

- A New Military and Veterans Center: A dedicated space on East Campus to serve the growing needs of military-connected students
- Enhanced Services and Programming: Expanded support for current and prospective military-connected students, building upon APU’s nationally recognized programs
- East Campus Renovations: Vital updates to campus facilities, creating a more conducive learning and living environment
- Faculty and Staff Development: Initiatives to foster professional growth and engagement among APU’s dedicated faculty and staff



APU is a Yellow Ribbon school, offering extra funding to help eligible veteran students pay for their education.

“This transformational gift enables APU to enhance its reputation as a thriving, Christ-centered, military-friendly university that is resourced to holistically invest in the academic, vocational, and spiritual development of our veteran and military-connected students,” said Keith Hall, EdD, vice president for student belonging and chief diversity officer.

The new Military and Veterans Center reflects the donor’s strong commitment to supporting military personnel and their families.

College of Arts, Humanities, Sciences, and Theology Gets New Dean



APU Provost Anita Fitzgerald Henck, PhD, named William McCoy, PhD, dean of the College of Arts, Humanities, Sciences, and Theology (CAHST), effective July 1, 2025. McCoy brings more than 15 years of education experience to the role, with expertise in African history and higher education administration, including strategic planning, policy formation, and curricular initiatives.

“I am delighted by the appointment of Dr. William (Bill) McCoy to serve as the inaugural dean of the College of Arts, Humanities, Sciences, and Theology,” said Henck. “A man of deep faith and academic breadth, his leadership will strengthen the launch of this community of scholars, artists, researchers, staff, and students. His care for people, passion for Christian higher education, and administrative acumen are a powerful combination with the launch of this new college. We look forward to welcoming him to the APU community.”

As dean, McCoy is responsible for the leadership, planning, direction, and management of the full range of undergraduate and graduate programs the college offers.

“From the very start of this process, the decision to join the work at APU has felt like a joyful response to God’s vocational calling on my life to serve in Christian higher education,” McCoy said. “The opportunity to offer my gifts and experience to help build the College of Arts, Humanities, Sciences, and Theology into the beating heart of a university rooted in the Wesleyan tradition and dedicated to producing graduates who live as ambassadors of Christ is one that I cannot wait to begin and that fills my heart with gratitude.”

McCoy was the chief academic and accreditation liaison officer for Eastern Nazarene College from 2020-24. Prior to that, he was a faculty member teaching African and European history.

McCoy has a PhD in African History, with minor fields in modern British history and anthropology, from Boston University (BU), an MA in African History from BU, and a BA in History from Point Loma Nazarene University.

APU Benefits from Record Year of Giving

APU’s generous supporters have made the 2024-25 school year the highest donation year in university history, with more than \$32 million given to support student scholarships, academic priorities, campus improvements, and student-facing program resources. The university celebrated a number of transformational gifts that will advance several university initiatives, including an East Campus renovation. APU donors turned out in droves to support APU’s best ever Giving Day, with the highest number of donors to give in a single day—2,162!

“We give thanks to God and our generous donors, who have helped APU experience successive record-breaking years,” said Andrew Barton, EdD, vice president of the Division of University Advancement. “Because of your partnership, we have been able to deliver and expand our Christ-centered academic and cocurricular student experience. Thank you for making this our most impactful year yet.”

Lilly Endowment Awards APU \$5 Million Grant

A \$5 million grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. will help establish The Cornerstones Project: Building Faith Through Service. This innovative five-year initiative will impact more than 10,000 young people (ages 13-25) across the nation by fostering a deeper understanding of the relationship between faith, service, and human flourishing.

The program is funded through Lilly Endowment’s National Youth and Young Adult Initiative on Faith and Service (Faith and Service Initiative), which nurtures and deepens the faith of Christian young people.

Through The Cornerstones Project, APU will empower a new generation of young leaders to live out their faith in service to others, inspired by a theological framework that integrates spirituality, reflection, and action.

“The Cornerstones Project is a testament to APU’s long-standing commitment to cultivating Christian leaders who engage with the world through meaningful service,” said President Adam J. Morris, PhD. “This initiative builds upon APU’s more-than-125-year history of transforming young adults for their higher calling.”

The Cornerstones Project will establish APU’s Institute for Faith, Leadership, and Service as a hub for collaboration to support innovative service initiatives among the university and external partners, including churches, Christian K-12 schools, and parachurch organizations.

Collaborating with Barna Group, APU will also conduct a groundbreaking research study to explore the lasting impact of service on faith formation in high school and college students. APU students will act as service ambassadors along with Barna. As part of the study, Barna will assist APU in development of resources and materials for churches, schools, youth-serving organizations, parents, and caregivers across the U.S.



Money Ranks APU Grad Education and Nursing Programs Among Best

APU education and nursing programs were ranked in Money’s Best Graduate School Programs 2025. Focusing on affordability, value, and return on investment, Money partnered with College Factual to evaluate thousands of universities across the country, with only those that score four stars or higher (out of five) making the list. APU’s graduate nursing programs earned four stars, and its education programs earned four and a half.

“We are honored by this national recognition of our exceptional education and nursing graduate programs,” said Anita Fitzgerald Henck, PhD, provost. “Our outstanding faculty equip students with the skills they need to succeed in the classroom and clinical environments after graduation. It’s incredibly rewarding to watch our graduates land jobs in their field each year as they live out their calling to impact the world for Christ.”

Unlike traditional undergraduate program rankings, which prioritize admissions rates, test scores, and subjective peer-assessed reputation, Money’s methodology focuses on return on investment for students looking to earn a graduate degree to advance in their careers. The top weighted criteria are average earnings after graduation, employment rates, and debt.

“It’s incredibly rewarding to watch our graduates land jobs in their field each year as they live out their calling to impact the world for Christ.”

ANITA FITZGERALD HENCK, PHD



Program in Early Childhood Education Launching

This fall, APU will launch a groundbreaking early childhood education bachelor’s completion program, an accelerated pathway where students who have an associate’s degree in childhood development can transfer in 60 units, with 24 units in early childhood credit, allowing them to earn a bachelor’s degree and preschool-third grade (PK-3) teaching credential within two years. APU’s program is the first of its kind in California and launches at a critical time, helping meet the state’s urgent need for qualified early childhood educators.

According to the Learning Policy Institute, California will need an estimated 11,900-15,600 additional transitional kindergarten (TK) teachers by 2025-26. In response, the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) developed the PK-3 teaching credential. School districts are eager to provide universally available preschool classes on their elementary campuses as part of a free public education system, and graduates of APU’s program will be well-positioned to meet these emerging needs.

“This program is a game changer for students looking to become PK-3 teachers at a time of high need in our state,” said Catherine Hahs Brinkley, EdD, chair and assistant professor in the Department of Teacher Education. “We’re thrilled to welcome our first cohort in August and can’t wait to see the impact they’ll have as educators.”

The program will offer online classes at night to fit the schedules of working adults, and students can start in the fall, spring, or summer. APU students will come together on campus for three residencies a year to build community and receive support from faculty and staff.

“What sets APU apart is our close-knit community,” Hahs Brinkley said. “We truly get to know our students and show them how much we care for them. We want our students to know that we’re there to support them throughout their time at APU and after they graduate, from providing job recommendations to connections with educational leaders across Southern California.”

Harden Named School of Business Executive-in-Residence



APU named Steve Harden the first executive-in-residence of the School of Business and Management (SBM), effective January 1, 2025. Harden has more than 35 years of corporate executive experience, with expertise in brand development, marketing, and entrepreneurship, including serving as CEO/president of K-Swiss and other global sports apparel companies.

“After an incredibly successful career in the corporate world, Steve is looking to give back by equipping the next generation of business leaders,” said Wendi Dykes McGehee, PhD, CF-LSP, interim SBM dean. “Steve’s insights on how to succeed in the business world will be invaluable for our students as he guides them through understanding the product lifecycle and

“Steve’s insights on how to succeed in the business world will be invaluable for our students.”

WENDI DYKES
MCGEHEE, PHD, CF-LSP

launching a business, including everything from ideation through getting a product to market. His real-world experience and industry connections will help students land top internships and jobs as they prepare to begin their careers.”

Harden will conduct workshops, seminars, and lectures and lead projects with students; serve as a mentor to students in one-on-one and group settings to guide them through the nuances of product development, launch, and growth; serve as an advisor to Zuventurez—APU’s *Shark Tank*-style pitch competition for new business ideas; and act as an ambassador for the SBM in industry settings and on the advisory board. Harden will also co-teach ENTR 420 Entrepreneurship and Innovation Practicum.

“I’m thrilled for the opportunity to give back and inspire students to create their own businesses,” Harden said. “As someone who has run multi-billion-dollar brands on a global scale, I hope to pour my knowledge and experience into these students. I want to help them unlock their potential and think bigger so they’re prepared to become successful entrepreneurs after graduation.”

Women Leaders Honored at Mary Hill Luncheon

On March 26, APU held the third annual Mary Hill Luncheon, honoring women in leadership roles at the university. In addition to the Mary Hill Award, President Adam J. Morris, PhD, presented two new honors: the Bertha Pinkham Dixon Discipleship Commission Award and the Matilda W. Atkinson Emerging Leader Award. The awards were voted on by the President’s Commission for Women in Christian Higher Education, and named after APU’s first, third, and fourth presidents.

Mary Hill Award



The 2025 Mary Hill Award went to Lori Lacy, PsyD, executive director of the University Counseling Center (UCC) and Campus Wellness. Lacy has served the APU community for 15 years, providing leadership for the UCC, the Student Health Center, Accessibility and Disability Resources, Student Wellness Resources, and the APU CARES team. “Dr. Lacy serves from her deep passion for the Lord and great compassion for students,” Morris said. “She provides workshops for campus faculty and staff, drawing from her deep care, expertise, and wisdom. She has been a gift to APU through her consistent, hope-filled leadership—helping us meet the wellness needs of our students and equipping others through collaboration to establish a culture of care and support.”

Bertha Pinkham Dixon Discipleship Commission Award



The 2025 Bertha Pinkham Dixon Discipleship Commission Award went to softball head coach Carrie Webber. She has had tremendous success on the field, leading the team to a conference championship, seven postseason appearances, and more than 500 wins, and her impact off the field has been even greater.

“Coach Webber is deeply invested in mentoring and discipling her players,” Morris said. “She has led several missions trips, baptized numerous student-athletes, and leads APU’s Fellowship of Christian Athletes club.”

Matilda W. Atkinson Emerging Leader Award



The 2025 Matilda W. Atkinson Emerging Leader Award went to Aisha Chen, PhD, assistant professor in the Department of Computer Science, Engineering, Math, Physics, and Statistics. Chen is the faculty advisor to several student clubs, including the Society of Women Engineers, leads a vibrant research agenda in bioengineering with undergraduate researchers, supports the biotechnology lab, and serves in a faculty governance role on the Faculty Senate and Faculty Development Council. “Aisha is deeply rooted in her abiding faith in God,” Morris said. “She is an outstanding emerging leader in STEM and beyond. We look forward to seeing how God will continue to shape her future.”

By the Numbers

100: APU’s Doctor of Physical Therapy graduates boast a 100% employment rate within six months of passing the National Physical Therapy Examination.

24: This fall, APU will launch a general education program titled the APU Core: Pathways to Flourishing, with 24 learning goals for students under the categories of worldview and wisdom, character and virtue, calling and mission, critical and creative thinking, scientific and quantitative inquiry, and communication and collaboration.

5: Azusa Pacific Libraries’ Special Collections has five items featured in a new C.S. Lewis exhibit at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, DC.

1: APU is the only Christian university on the West Coast with a tissue engineering research facility, enabling science students to perform cutting-edge research in the Segerstrom Science Center and prepare for the jobs of the future.

Nine Students Earn Full-Tuition Trustees’ Scholarships

Each year, thanks to the generous gifts of donors, APU gives out nine full-tuition Trustees’ Scholarships, which recognize scholars who have consistently demonstrated high academic achievement and will perpetuate APU’s mission during their academic studies and later in their chosen careers. After a thorough selection process, finalists are invited to campus to interview with APU faculty and administration before the nine recipients are chosen. Meet the incoming class of Trustees’ Scholars:



Pitzil Avila-Castellanos
Pitzil is from Walnut, California, and plans to major in computer science. “I chose APU because there is such a supportive community here,” she said, “and I am confident that I can grow as a computer scientist, as a Christian, and above all, as a person.”



Yoonseo Choi
Yoonseo is from Seoul, South Korea, and is planning to double major in political science and Honors humanities. “During Trustees’ Weekend, I felt APU was the ideal Christ-centered community I had been searching for,” she said. “I hope to grow as God’s worker among loving friends and professors.”



Aidan Colvin
Aidan is from Oregon City, Oregon, and plans to major in acting for the stage and screen. “I chose APU because of how compassionate and spiritually rooted everyone on campus was,” he said. “APU showed me that people can be successful in a variety of fields as Christians.”



Rachelle Cutler
Rachelle is from Chino, California, and plans to major in nursing. “I chose APU because of their strong commitment to faith, service, and community,” she said. “I am excited to grow academically, spiritually, and personally while being surrounded by an incredibly supportive family that APU uniquely offers.”



Corrine McCorkle
Corinne is from Fontana, California, and plans to major in criminal justice with a minor in Honors humanities. “I chose APU because I am passionate about making a positive impact in my community, and I love the way APU integrates faith into every part of their academics,” she said. “I can’t wait to grow in my walk with God, expand my knowledge, and prepare for a future in the criminal justice field.”



Connor Neally
Connor is from Upland, California, and is planning to study nursing with a minor in Honors humanities. “I chose APU because of its high-quality education and strong foundation in Christian values,” he said. “What excites me most is the sense of community and the journey that college will bring.”



Ryan James Ontiveros
Ryan is from Arcadia, California, and will major in mechanical engineering with an emphasis in hardware. “I knew APU was the place for me the second I walked on campus and saw the love these students had for God and each other,” he said. “I’m excited to meet all the incredible students here and to grow my relationship with God.”



Santiago Regueiro
Santiago is from Azusa, California, and plans to study business management. “It was the mission statement that ultimately drew me to Azusa Pacific,” he said. “The words *God First* were not only engraved in stone, but were imprinted in every student, teacher, and faculty. What I am most excited about during these college years is the opportunity to unravel my goals, strengthen my passions, and focus on who God called me to be.”

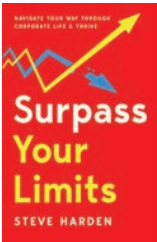


Hope Strayer
Hope is from Salem, Oregon, and is planning to double major in psychology and Honors humanities and minor in Spanish. “I chose APU because from the moment I stepped on campus, I could see how on fire for Jesus the community is,” she said. “I believe my time at APU will strengthen me intellectually and spiritually. Along with my studies, I’m excited to start a new adventure: serving, worshipping, and meeting amazing people! At APU, I know that I am home.”

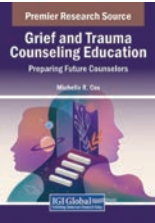
Scholarship at Work



Nursing Ethics, 1880s to the Present: An Archaeology of Lost Wisdom and Identity (Routledge, 2024) by *Marsha Fowler, PhD, RN, FAAN, professor emerita*
This important text draws on decades of research, arguing that modern nursing germinated in and grew an ethics from its own soil, which is rich, fulsome, and philosophically informed, grounded in the tradition and practice of nursing. It is an ethics with a positive agenda for the good nurse, a good society, a healthy people, and human flourishing. This native nursing ethics was forgotten, creating space for a foreign bioethics colonization of nursing in the second half of the 20th century. Drawing from a wide range of sources from the US, the UK, Canada, and Ireland, the book addresses the early and enduring ethical concerns, values, and ideals of nursing as a profession that engages in direct clinical practice and in developing policy. Fowler calls for reclaiming and renewing nursing’s ethical tradition. This systematic and comprehensive book is an essential contribution for students and scholars of nursing ethics, and was awarded first place in the History and Public Policy category of the 2024 *American Journal of Nursing* Book of the Year Awards.



Surpass Your Limits: Navigate Your Way Through Corporate Life and Thrive (Reflek, 2024) by *Steve Harden, executive-in-residence, School of Business and Management*
Surpass Your Limits offers a roadmap to greatness, drawing from Harden’s 30-year leadership legacy with global brands. This book is more than a career guide; it’s a journey of self-discovery. Learn to rise as an inspiring leader, mastering prioritization and focus to drive impactful results. Embrace setbacks as stepping stones, transforming hardships into triumphs. And discover how to inject adventure and fun into your work, fostering a thriving environment where others flourish. Harden reveals the secrets to daily positive action, empowering you to build, motivate, and unlock your full potential. This book equips you to face challenges with a growth mindset, crafting your path to a fulfilling and impactful career.



Grief and Trauma Counseling Education: Preparing Future Counselors (IGI Global, 2024) by *Michelle Cox, PhD, professor, Department of School Counseling and School Psychology*
The challenges inherent in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic unfold in the experiences of those who shouldered the weight of caregiving responsibilities and who lost loved ones. This book is a valuable asset for practicing and future counselors, psychologists, school counselors, and social workers, providing essential tools for navigating the grief process from diagnosis to the end of life, encapsulating the essence of a caregiver’s journey, and offering advice for those seeking support in the face of grief-related challenges resulting from the pandemic. Cox was inspired to publish the book as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the loss of her husband to pancreatic cancer. She includes her detailed personal experience of grief while caring for her husband, who was diagnosed in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.



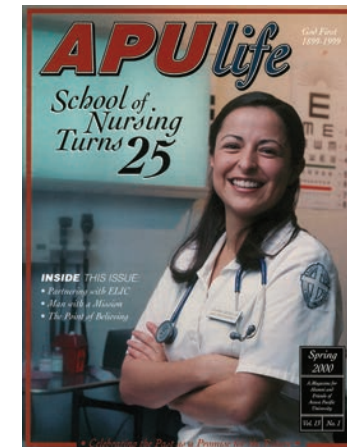
God First: Devotions for Business and Professional Life (Kendall Hunt, 2025) edited by *Wendi Dykes McGehee, PhD, CF-LSP, interim dean, School of Business and Management, and Todd Pheifer, EdD, assistant dean and associate professor, School of Business and Management*
This book builds on the motto of Azusa Pacific University by providing a guide on how to put *God First* in our vocation, including a variety of everyday situations that Christians face in their personal and professional lives. The devotionals bring together voices from across the APU community, put together by the School of Business and Management (SBM). Each devotional title starts with *God First* and blends Scripture with individual perspectives, real-life stories, and calls to action. Because the 150 devotionals in the book were written by 82 students, alumni, faculty, and staff from the SBM, all proceeds will go to SBM scholarships and student programs. There has been great enthusiasm for this project, and it has been rewarding to see students and alumni prayerfully contribute to the ongoing mission of APU.



A Half Century of Excellence

School of Nursing Celebrates 50th Anniversary

BY ABIGAIL REED



The Spring 2000 issue of *APU Life* celebrated the School of Nursing's 25th anniversary. The last quarter century has been a time of continued growth for Azusa Pacific's nursing program, which ranks in the top five percent of the country, according to College Factual.

Equipped with two patient beds, a worn mannequin donated by a local church, and hearts for Christ, newly recruited faculty gathered in May 1975 to begin teaching APU's first nursing courses. With around 50 baccalaureate students, housed in a round building aptly nicknamed the Yurt, the School of Nursing quickly turned into a tight-knit community, quite unlike any other.

"What caught me about APU's nursing program in those early days was the infusion of Christian values, how they look at nursing as a calling, not just a job," said Aja Lesh, PhD, RN, former dean of the School of Nursing. "I became committed to ensuring that this faith foundation was fully embedded in the nursing program, partnered with—but never outgrown by—research-based practice."

This is exactly what she, and the other leaders of the school, have done. Little did they imagine the reach and impact this mission would have in the years to come. Today, with 2,300 students across numerous graduate and undergraduate programs, the School of Nursing is highly regarded for the caliber of its faculty and program offerings and the success of its graduates, who go on to work in some of the top hospitals in Southern California and around the world. In 2024, College Factual ranked APU's nursing programs in the top 5% of the nation. Money's Best Graduate School Programs 2025 includes APU's graduate nursing offerings based on program outcomes, including high return on investment and employability. Over the last 50 years, nearly 10,000 APU graduates have launched into the nursing workforce.

"The School of Nursing is thrilled to be celebrating its 50th anniversary," said Renee Pozza, PhD, RN, CNS, FNP-BC, dean of the College of Nursing and Health Sciences. "An anniversary provides a space to reflect on all of God's many blessings to the School of Nursing and its faculty, students, staff, and alumni, as we celebrate a wonderful legacy and history steeped in the Christian faith. This Christ-centered foundation propels us forward to where we are today."

APU'S RISE ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE

"I desired that my students develop a global perspective on health care, to take them overseas," Lesh said. So, when serving as a professor in 1993, she took a group of 10 nursing students to Burma. Several years later, another small team ventured to Thailand. Those early trips marked the start of the School of Nursing's widespread international presence and global opportunities for students.

"Not only did we start bringing our nurses to the world, but we created an exchange program that brought nurses to us," said Lesh. "These students

Continued on page 14



Leading with Distinction

Rosemary Liegler, PhD, RN (top), was professor and dean of the School of Nursing from 1991-2003. Aja Tulleners Lesh, PhD, RN (middle), is a nursing professor who served as dean of the School of Nursing from 2003-22.

Renee Pozza, PhD, RN, CNS, FNP-BC (bottom), is dean of the College of Nursing and Health Sciences. Pozza was named dean in 2023 after various teaching and administrative roles at APU for 29 years.

Continued from page 13

from across the globe were able to experience Christ and how our nurses, and programs, are different.”

Today, the School of Nursing offers a diverse array of global experiences in Vietnam, Norway, China, Thailand, Kenya, and Uganda—including short-term transcultural trips and entire study-away semesters specific to nurses. Undergraduate students may also decide to pursue a minor in international health nursing, developing perspectives that enhance their practice for years to come.

For Lianna Namanya ’16, like many others, the wealth of global nursing opportunities drew her to APU and helped reveal God’s calling on her life. “APU confirmed my desire to be a part of global health and grew my relationship with Jesus, which is closely integrated in my practice today,” said Namanya, who studied in Kenya, China, and Costa Rica during her undergraduate career, achieving a minor in international health nursing along with her Bachelor of Science in Nursing.

While in Kenya, God’s calling became even clearer when she volunteered at Juli (McGowan ’01) Boit’s palliative care organization, Living Room Ministries. There, she witnessed the transformative impact of tender and compassionate care for those with chronic or life-threatening diseases, and God placed a distinct calling on her future.

She answered, and in 2021 she became the founder and director of Kabale Christian Care, a nonprofit in Uganda dedicated to providing free palliative care to those in need. With a team of 11 nurses, social workers, and medical clinical officers, the organization has cared for more than 300 patients—from a young boy with throat cancer to a woman suffering from HIV—providing Christ-inspired care in their most challenging times.

THE SPREAD OF COMMUNITY IMPACT

As nursing students began making an impact across the globe, they also poured into their neighbors surrounding the APU campus. From clinical rotations in local hospitals to providing health care to Azusa residents, students invested in the well-being of their community with compassion.



In the early 2000s, APU president Jon Wallace developed a vision to extend this presence to communities across Southern California, beginning the School of Nursing’s expansion to regional campuses. Over the next 10 years, nursing programs launched in Monrovia, Inland Empire, San Diego, High Desert, and San Bernardino, bringing with them a deepening commitment to serve and love our neighbors.

“I’ve always envisioned that each program area would become the students’ community: that they would develop a commitment to the people who live there,” said Lesh.

By 2019, the school’s numbers reached an all-time high—2,300 students spread over several campuses. Today, longstanding academic partnerships with nationally acclaimed hospitals, top-ranked medical centers, community agencies, churches, and school districts bolster student learning and impact. Whether treating wounds in emergency rooms or tending to patients in children’s hospitals, students bring and experience transformation within their surrounding area.

“We instill the ‘why’ into our practice,” said Pozza. “If our students view nursing as a calling and ministry, they gain a commitment to the profession for the sake of improving the lives of the patients, families, and the communities in which they serve.”

With a heart for their community, along with invaluable local connections, APU nurses continue to make a difference in California long after graduation. As of last year, around 90 percent of graduates stay

in California, and 100 percent are employed within three months of graduation—which means that right around 500 newly licensed APU nurses per year continue serving in the community they’ve grown to love.

PATHWAYS FOR EVERY NURSE

“Our expansion has always been tied to God’s vision and mission,” said Lesh. “We grow to deliver the impact and nurses needed by our communities.”

This sentiment rang true when a shortage of nurses burdened the nation around 2005. In response, APU developed an innovative pathway—the first of its kind in Los Angeles County—that allowed individuals with degrees in other disciplines to complete a specialty nursing track. Now known as the Entry-Level Master of Science in Nursing, this program began a cascade of unique nursing pathways for students from all backgrounds, whether undergraduates studying at a partnered community college or working professionals with families.

Today, APU offers numerous degree programs, specialty tracks, certificates, and pathways. Intentional partnerships with local community colleges offer the quickest, most cost-effective model for nurses, featuring concurrent classes, a seamless pathway into the bachelor’s program, and 100% pass rate on the NCLEX board examination. Those already practicing as registered nurses with an associate’s degree benefit from the online RN to BSN program, ranked the No. 1 RN to BSN program in California by Nurse.org.

“APU is the second-largest school of nursing in California when considering the number of baccalaureate nursing graduates,” said Pozza. “We continue to play a vital role as nursing shortages continue, increasing our number of graduates through innovative and cost-effective pathways.”

DISCOVERING TRUTH THROUGH RESEARCH

In March 2025, more than 1,000 individuals—students, faculty, alumni, preceptors, and healthcare professionals—gathered for the 20th annual Nursing Research Symposium. Centered around the theme of gratitude, hope, and the healing of trauma, APU submitted more than 45 scholarly posters, sharing newfound knowledge with the healthcare community.

This symposium reflects the School of Nursing’s long-standing commitment to faith-based truth through research, which can be traced back to the launch of the PhD in Nursing in 2005. The first doctoral program at the university, this program ushered in a new era of student and faculty research. “We value the tension between faith and science, and show our students you can do both with excellence,” said Lesh.

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Above left:
In 1978, APU nursing students participate in a capping ceremony as they prepare to enter the profession.

Below:
APU nursing students prepare to compassionately meet patient needs in today’s continually changing healthcare environment.



Since its founding, APU's School of Nursing has graduated exemplary nurses who demonstrate a deep level of compassionate care and competence in clinics, hospitals, schools, and beyond.



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Today, as the future of nursing places an increasing emphasis on data-driven education, students and faculty in the MSN in Nursing Education and both doctorate programs explore highly relevant topics such as the use of genetic markers in care and implementing evidence-based practice, with a special interest in spirituality and health unique to APU.

For graduate Valerie Willis, MSN '08, with dual APRN specialties as Pediatric Nurse Practitioner and Parent-Child Clinical Nurse Specialist, studying at APU helped prepare her to fulfill her calling in one of the most rapidly advancing areas of research in health care: genetics.

Upon graduation from APU, she began work as a nurse practitioner in high-risk infant neurodevelopmental follow-up, a natural fit after years as a bedside nurse in the neonatal intensive care unit. "I began to wonder if some of the issues

'my little friends' were experiencing after hospital discharge were due to factors beyond prematurity," said Willis.

This ignited pursuit of a PhD in nursing and health science with an emphasis in genetics and health policy, so that she'd be better equipped to advocate for the children and families she was blessed to serve. "My advisor at APU, Leslie Van Dover, PhD, RN, encouraged me to go on to get my doctorate and planted that seed in me," said Willis. "I truly don't think that's something I would have dreamed for myself."

Now, Willis works as an adjunct assistant professor, clinical division, at Indiana University School of Medicine, Department of Medical and Molecular Genetics. She has successfully led efforts to develop and implement a postgraduate education and training program to upskill licensed nurse practitioners and physician assistants to provide genetics specialty care in inpatient and ambulatory settings. This alleviates the shortfall of genetics providers and improves genetics health equity through greater access to genetics specialty care.

NAVIGATING THE FUTURE OF HEALTH CARE

The early leaders of APU's School of Nursing had a vision, but never imagined the breadth of its expansion. As its current leaders look once again to the future, it seems as though God is ready to work once again.

"I feel like we're right on that same precipice that we were many years ago," said Elaine Goehner, PhD, RNC, CPHQ, professor emerita. "The Lord is positioning us with new opportunities, of which we have no complete sense as of yet. He's not done with us—I think He's going to continue blessing the School of Nursing in unique ways."

As the field of health care rapidly changes and increases in complexity, APU advances to meet the demand. In a care system with innovative treatments and advancing technology, nurses of competence and care hold more importance than ever. Not only this, but today's healthcare workers need the ability

to collaborate across disciplines as they care for the multifaceted needs of their communities.

APU recognizes this shift. In 2024, in a realignment of the university's colleges and schools, APU introduced the College of Nursing and Health Sciences. This has created an emphasis on interdisciplinary studies—partnerships with healthcare disciplines such as physical therapy, kinesiology, child life specialist, and public health—while retaining the high-quality nursing education distinct to APU.

"The collaboration and interdisciplinary nature of the newly established College of Nursing and Health Sciences will enhance the educational experiences of our students, strengthen our academic-practice partnerships, and allow APU to develop innovative pathways for programs and research in health care," said Pozza.

Other developments also seek to address the demands of modern health care, positioning APU as a pivotal difference maker in the field. For example, as the shortage of healthcare workers increases, the aging population only expands, bringing with it more chronic health conditions and age-related complications. In an effort to meet the resulting demands, APU received a nearly \$5 million grant from the U.S. Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA) to develop curriculum and provide accessible geriatric education. As 1 of only 41 higher education institutions in the country, and 1 of only 2 in California, to receive this HRSA grant, APU is uniquely positioned to provide age-friendly and dementia-friendly health care to the underserved aging population of San Bernardino County.

"As a distinctly Christian university, we're training up a workforce that knows how to care for the whole person, not just the physical," said David Picella, PhD, FNP, CNS, GS-C, CPG, nursing professor and principal investigator of the grant. "For older adults facing spiritual and existential needs, such as those in hospice, this makes all the difference."



PHOTOS FROM THE APU ARCHIVES, DANA ATTEBERY, MA, AND GAB JOHNSON

UNWAVERING COMMITMENT IN A CHANGING WORLD

Lights dim and the audience quiets as newly pinned nurses light the flames of candles—a warm glow spreading throughout the auditorium. Together, the nurses, their families, and faculty sing the opening words of an age-old prayer: "Lord, make us instruments of Your peace."

This tradition continues year after year at the nursing pinning ceremony, pointing to the central, constant quality of the School of Nursing: a commitment to graduating nurses set apart by their Christ-driven love and care. As the school adapts to changing health care—whether expanding interdisciplinary opportunities or launching new grants—this faith foundation remains strong.

"Given all of the rapidly occurring technological and social changes, it's vital that faith-inspired care is incorporated in healthcare organizations across the nation," said Picella. "We've become part of this movement as a Christian university. God put us here for a reason."

Abigail Reed '20 is a freelance writer living in Manzanita, Oregon. abbiejreed@gmail.com

APU nursing graduates gather for a photo before the spring 2025 Nursing Pinning Ceremony.



A New Era in Cougar Athletics

APU Bringing Back Football,
Moving to NCAA Division III

BY NATHAN FOSTER

Azusa Pacific University will begin a new era in Cougar athletics with the return of its football program, set to take the field for the 2026 season after a five-year hiatus. The university is excited to reinstate this beloved sport and foster a renewed sense of school spirit and community engagement.

“This is an incredibly exciting announcement; we know how unique football is to the history and identity of Azusa Pacific,” said athletic director Gary Pine ’84, MBA ’05. “Since the 1950s, football has brought together the students, faculty, staff, and alumni of Azusa Pacific while engaging the local community members and developing deep relationships. Whether it was the beauty of the field on Hillside Campus, the new amenities of Cougar Stadium, or the overwhelming sound of thundersticks at Citrus Stadium, football has always been a memorable experience at Azusa Pacific.”

In conjunction with the program’s revival, APU athletics will transition to NCAA Division III. APU will compete in the Southern California Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (SCIAC) after receiving a unanimous vote from the presidents of member institutions. This strategic move aligns with the university’s commitment to prioritizing the

academics/athletics balance of its student-athletes, while fostering a competitive and enriching athletics environment. The decision comes after 18 months of study and review by APU’s executive leadership, with the help of consultants from Bowsby Sports Advisors.

“The return of football is momentous for APU,” said President Adam J. Morris, PhD. “This decision reflects our dedication to providing a well-rounded educational experience where students can excel in the classroom and on the field. We are confident that our membership in SCIAC and transition to Division III will allow us to maintain this balance while continuing our athletic excellence and building a successful and competitive football program.”

Azusa Pacific fielded a football team for more than 50 years and moved onto the national stage in the 1980s, nearly making the NAIA playoffs in

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“We are committed to building a football program that embodies the enduring values and principles of APU athletics and DIII philosophy.”

GARY PINE ’84, MBA ’05
DIRECTOR OF ATHLETICS

The Lineup

Azusa Pacific will join the Southern California Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (SCIAC), which includes the following member schools:

- California Institute of Technology
- Occidental College
- Pomona-Pitzer Colleges
- University of Redlands
- Whittier College
- California Lutheran University
- Chapman University
- Claremont-Mudd-Scripps Colleges
- University of La Verne

APU Athletics Hall of Fame

- Stephanie Alpenia, Volleyball

Kwame Apea, Men’s Soccer

Kojo Asamoah, Men’s Soccer

Jennifer Babel, Women’s Soccer

Airat Bakare, Women’s Track and Field

Chris Barbone, Football, Baseball

Doug Barnett, Track and Field, Football

Mike Barnett, Track and Field

John Baugus, Men’s Soccer

Gordon Billingsley, Men’s Basketball

Ellen Binkle, Women’s Basketball

Lynsee Bock, Women’s Soccer, Softball

Chuck Boswell, Men’s Basketball

Phil Boyce, Football

Jim Brownfield, Track and Field, Football, Men’s Basketball, Cross Country, Men’s Tennis

Russ Carroll, Baseball

Brianna Carstensen, Track and Field, Cross Country

Dawn Castaneda, Softball

Bryan Clay, Track and Field

Stephanie Clement, Women’s Soccer

Ron Cochran, Football

Steve Connor, Football

Jennifer Cowper, Women’s Soccer

Nancy Culver Hurst, Women’s Basketball

Jennifer Dao, Women’s Tennis

Dexter Davis, Football

Bill DesRochers, Men’s Basketball

Cindy DeYoung, Women’s Basketball

Dennis Dickens, Men’s Basketball

Justin Duarte, Football, Baseball

Denise Duncan, Women’s Basketball

Katrina Dunnagan, Women’s Basketball

Wayne Edwards, Baseball

Innocent Egbunike, Track and Field

Davidson Ezinwa, Track and Field

Osmond Ezinwa, Track and Field

Jim Farmer, Football

Valmir Fernandes, Men’s Soccer

Sam Fletcher, Men’s Tennis

Terry Franson, Track and Field

Elizabeth Garman Williams, Track and Field

Caleb Gervin, Men’s Basketball

Becky Goodman, Volleyball

James Gustin, Football

Jeff Gustin, Football

Cliff Hamlow, Men’s Basketball, Administration

Sue Hebel, Women’s Basketball

Josh Henderson, Football

Art Jenkins, Men’s Basketball

Dave Johnson, Track and Field
- Clayborn Jones, Men’s Basketball

Don Lawrence, Men’s Soccer

Alane Le Grand, Volleyball

Sharon Lehman, Softball

Doug Loisel, Track and Field

Marvin Mardock, Track and Field

Sammy Maritim, Track and Field, Cross Country

Bill McCorkle, Football, Baseball

Debbie Meche, Volleyball

Jim Milhon, Football

Peder Moore, Football

Robert Murphy, Baseball

Jack Nance, Track and Field

Paul Nath, Football

Gerry Nelson, Baseball

Tom Nelson, Football, Baseball, Men’s Basketball

Bill Odell, Men’s Basketball

Christian Okoye, Track and Field, Football

Ade Olukaju, Track and Field

Kendra Payne, Women’s Soccer

Tage Peterson, Track and Field

Jim Phillips, Football, Baseball, Men’s Basketball

Gary Prestesater, Men’s Basketball

Dan Ray, Men’s Tennis

April Reed, Women’s Soccer, Softball

Cedric Reed, Men’s Basketball

Ross Ritter, Football

Aron Rono, Track and Field, Cross Country

Teresa Saathoff, Volleyball

Jenna Sagehorn, Volleyball

Norm Slosted, Football

Chris Stempson, Men’s Soccer

Bob Storey, Football, Baseball

Keith Stroup, Men’s Basketball

Carl Swift, Track and Field, Cross Country

Michelle Teodoro, Track and Field

John Tully, Football, Baseball

Chuck Van Schoyck, Baseball

Dennis Vanzant, Men’s Basketball

Stephen Vogt, Baseball

T.J. Walker, Men’s Basketball

Amy Walter, Women’s Basketball

Duane Waltmire, Track and Field, Cross Country

Eric Wattree, Men’s Basketball

Lindsey West, Women’s Basketball

Jack Williams, Football

Jim Wilson, Men’s Basketball

Jason Wyatt, Track and Field, Football

Fatimat Yusuf, Track and Field



PHOTOS OF APU LIBRARY’S SPECIAL COLLECTIONS BY DANA ATTEBERY, MA ’17

competitive excellence, and commitment to the true student-athlete experience all fit well within our regularly assessed membership criteria, and we were thrilled to be able to welcome them to DIII.”

At a time when college athletics across the country are experiencing great disruption, with numerous institutions shutting down or reducing programs, APU’s bold decision to transition to Division III allows the university to extend its sports offerings— by bringing back football, but also by introducing a women’s flag football team and another women’s sport (to be determined in the next three years). By adding three sports to the university’s athletics portfolio, APU expects to bring an additional 150+ student-athletes to campus.

The largest of the NCAA’s three divisions, DIII provides a unique balance of fierce competition and the pursuit of rigorous academics while affording student-athletes the ability to better experience the full spectrum of college life. Often referred to as the “pure sport” division, DIII encourages student-athletes to compete for the love of the game rather than financial incentives, bolstering the ideals of character, discipline, and teamwork.

Looking ahead to the transition, the Cougars will remain in the Pacific West Conference for the 2025-26 year, competing for DII and conference championships. Swimming and diving (Pacific Collegiate Swim and Dive Conference), water polo (Golden Coast Conference), and acrobatics and tumbling (National Collegiate Acrobatics and Tumbling Association) will also retain their respective affiliations next year. For 2026-27 and ’27-28, APU will play a SCIAC schedule, along with nonconference games against NAIA and other DIII schools, while adjusting its operations. In 2028-29, APU expects to be an active DIII member and compete again for NCAA championships.

As APU ushers in a new era in Cougar athletics, some things will remain the same: The program’s impact will continue to reach beyond championships, building athletes of character who are transformed to impact the world for Christ.

“Our coaches minister to their players,” said Vice President Emeritus Cliff Hamlow ’56, PhD, the architect of Cougar athletics who had a 58-year career in intercollegiate sports. “That’s always been true of all our coaches here at APU. That’s why I believe in this place.”

Nathan Foster ’20 is public relations manager in the Division of Strategic Communication and Engagement. nfoster@apu.edu



looking forward to coming back to APU for Homecoming and seeing my former teammates.”

Azusa Pacific ended its football program in 2020, a decision that reflected the decline of California football over the previous 30 years. During that time, 14 California four-year colleges dropped football from their intercollegiate rosters, and APU was the only remaining NCAA Division II school in California offering a football program, and one of only four on the West Coast. APU football became an extremely expensive endeavor with five to six road games a year. In fact, APU was the only Division II school in the nation that had to fly to all of its away games. In addition to the monetary cost, student-athletes missed valuable class time.

In joining the SCIAC, APU will play close to home—all nine member institutions are located within a 70-mile radius of Azusa. Competing with colleges in such close proximity will allow APU student-athletes to quickly return to campus after away games to continue their studies. Founded in 1915, the SCIAC is one of the longest-running athletic conferences in the NCAA, and its current membership still includes its five charter members from 110 years ago—California Institute of Technology, Occidental College, Pomona-Pitzer Colleges, University of Redlands, and Whittier College—along with California Lutheran University, Chapman University, Claremont-Mudd-Scripps Colleges, and University of La Verne. In the last decade, SCIAC schools have captured 23 national championships across 11 sports.

“Azusa Pacific will make a fantastic addition to the SCIAC and further position us as a leading conference in Division III,” Commissioner Jennifer Dubow said. “Their rising academic profile,

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1985 following the sensational season of soon-to-be NFL standout running back Christian Okoye ’86. The Cougars landed that elusive playoff berth in 1998 and ran the table all the way to the NAIA championship under head coach Vic Shealy. The Cougars advanced to the NAIA playoffs another seven times, which included a pair of semifinal appearances, and qualified for the NCAA DII playoffs twice.

On June 6, 2025, APU announced A.J. Parnell as the new head football coach. Parnell has a proven track record in player development and championship culture-building, with experience in NCAA Divisions II and III football. He is already at work, building a team for the fall 2026 program launch.

“We are committed to building a football program that embodies the enduring values and principles of APU athletics and DIII philosophy,” Pine said. “Our goal is to create a culture of excellence where student-athletes are empowered to reach their God-given potential academically, athletically, and spiritually. We are excited to welcome talented and dedicated individuals who share this vision.”

The university anticipates that the return of football will bring energy and enthusiasm to APU students, alumni, and the local community, serving as a source of pride and unity for all.

Okoye, who went on to become the Kansas City Chiefs all-time leading rusher and the 1989 NFL Offensive Player of the Year, shared his alma mater’s enthusiasm. “I learned the game at APU, having arrived to pursue track and field,” Okoye said. “Coaches poured into me, drawing out my skills and challenging me on and off the gridiron. I’m thrilled that more young men will get to experience the same kind of transformation I did attending this Christ-centered university. I’m

For the Love of the Game

Childhood Passion for Baseball Becomes Lifelong Calling for Niebla '96

BY GISSEL LOPEZ

While his original dream was to play in Major League Baseball, Ruben Niebla '96 is living his new dream as the San Diego Padres pitching coach. He credits Azusa Pacific University's baseball program with helping him advance in his career as a player and as a coach.

Raised in the border town of Calexico, California, Niebla grew up playing multiple sports, but he fell in love with baseball. His passion for the game began when he was a child watching the Cincinnati Reds and San Diego Padres.

"Watching baseball on TV, it was the sport I followed most, so I chose to invest much of my time in it," he said.

For Niebla, baseball was year-round. Not only would he play in his hometown, but also across the border in Mexicali, Mexico. After graduating from Calexico High School in 1990, Niebla started his collegiate career playing for Imperial Valley College. Following his second year, APU head coach Tony Barbone reached out with a potential spot in his lineup. Niebla transferred to APU in fall 1993 and played two seasons for the Cougars (1994-95), pitching to a stellar 2.57 ERA. Niebla looks back fondly on his time at APU: "APU created a feeling of family on and off the baseball field. We were able to build camaraderie because we were always together."

"APU created a feeling of family on and off the baseball field. We were able to build camaraderie because we were always together."

– Ruben Niebla '96

The tough love from Barbone helped Niebla improve as a player and ultimately sparked a passion for coaching. Niebla kept in touch with Barbone, and they would often talk after games before Barbone's passing in the spring of this year.

After college, Niebla signed with the Montreal Expos in 1997, then bounced around the minors until 2000. In his six years playing in independent and minor leagues, he had a combined 4.11 ERA but never broke through to the MLB as a player.

With Niebla's playing career coming to an end, God presented him with a new opportunity that drew upon his heart for coaching and excellent eye for pitching—in the 2000 offseason, Niebla received multiple calls from organizations who were interested in hiring him as a coach. He signed on with the Cleveland Indians as their minor league pitching coach from 2001-09 before making his MLB coaching debut in 2010. Then, in the 2021 offseason, a pitching position opened up with the San Diego Padres.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF RUBEN NIEBLA '96

"It was near home," he said. "My daughter had just got accepted at San Diego State University, and the Padres were a team close to their first World Series ring."

It was a perfect fit for Niebla, and he started the 2022 season as the Padres pitching coach. The Padres made postseason appearances in 2022 and '24, with Niebla bringing not only playing experience and expertise to his role, but also the knowledge he gained from his kinesiology degree at APU. His education enables him to effectively partner with the strength and conditioning staff to assess the players and determine what mechanics need to be altered for better performance.

Niebla said he has two primary goals as a coach: "I aim to bring all domains in different dimensions together to help the pitcher grow, and to educate

the player so he can understand what makes him good and what keeps him from being better." The repeatability of ability is a focus of Niebla's coaching plans.

A standout moment from his 2024 season was helping Padres ace Dylan Cease achieve his first no-hitter, against the Washington Nationals in June. It was the first time one of Niebla's players pitched a no-hitter at the major-league level. After seven innings, Cease's pitch count was low and hopes for a no-hitter were high, and Niebla recalls thinking, "It's going to happen."

"Watching him jump around, hug the guys and give high-fives, I was overjoyed for him," Niebla said.

As a major-league pitching coach, Niebla relies on his faith in Christ to sustain him. He believes strongly in the power of prayer, and asks for calmness

during high-stress games. Understanding that it's out of his hands and in the hands of God gives Niebla peace no matter the outcome.

Outside of coaching for the Padres, Niebla is president of Imperial Valley Baseball, a nonprofit organization in El Centro "created to promote the game of baseball in the Imperial Valley." It encourages youth to play baseball while also promoting the game within the community, not just with kids but with decision makers, with the goal of creating more fields. The group gives out scholarships and gathers the best players in the Imperial Valley for tournaments.

"I feel like I have the best job in baseball," he said. "I'm close to home, working with the San Diego Padres—the best fan base and the best stadium in the MLB. I wouldn't change a thing."

In the coming years, Niebla looks forward to staying in San Diego and winning multiple World Series titles with the Padres.

Gissel Lopez '26 is a social media intern in the Division of Strategic Communication and Engagement. The San Diego native is a journalism major and plans to become a sports writer after graduation.

SPORTS ROUNDUP

Swimming and Diving Nabs Historic Conference Victory



Azusa Pacific's Swimming and Diving team secured its first Pacific Collegiate Swim and Dive Conference championship, edging out Cal State East Bay by just 2.5 points. The Cougars won eight events. Montana White earned Athlete of the Meet honors. The team also picked up Cornerstone Cup points by defeating rival Biola. Head coach Tim Kyle was named Coach of the Meet.

White Makes a Splash at Nationals



Montana White capped her collegiate career at the NCAA Division II swimming and diving national championships. She helped the 800-yard freestyle relay team—including Sydnee Wilson, Mikaela Maemura, and Aleena Herrera—to an eighth-place finish (program-record time of 7:21.83) and APU's first All-American relay honor. White took second in the 200-yard freestyle and third in the 500-yard freestyle, continuing her All-American streak. White had four All-American finishes at the meet, bringing her career total to eight. She also was in the 4x100 freestyle relay and made the finals in the 100 freestyle. APU achieved its highest-ever finish at nationals—15th overall, with 90 points.

Men's Tennis Advances to NCAA National Championships



Azusa Pacific men's tennis clinched a berth in the NCAA Division II national championships with a hard-fought 4-0 win over Hawai'i Pacific in the NCAA DII West Regional final. David James Brownlee and Soeren Grandke staged impressive comebacks to clinch their matches after dropping the first set, securing APU's fourth consecutive regional title. APU heads to the 16-team national championship draw in Florida with a 23-4 record and a No. 6 national ranking.

Women's Track and Field Wins Conference Title Again



The Azusa Pacific women's track and field team won its ninth consecutive PacWest Championship. The Cougars got a 1-2-3-4 sweep in the shot put led by Hannah Richardson, who broke her own PacWest record with a throw of 16.29 meters. They also had podium finishes in the high jump, discus, and heptathlon. On the track, Esther Conde-Turpin claimed gold in the 100m hurdles, Alayna Verner secured her third straight 400m title, and Olivia Alexandre set a meet record in the 800m. Trinity Miller earned podium finishes in the 100m and 200m, while the 4x400m relay team's second-place finish sealed the title.

Hardeman Retires, Ploog Named Successor



T.J. Hardeman, the winningest coach in Azusa Pacific women's basketball history, announced his retirement after 18 years at the helm. Under his leadership, the Cougars compiled a 429-128 overall record and captured the 2011 NAIA National Championship, seven PacWest titles, and eight straight NCAA Tournament appearances. Longtime assistant Dan Ploog has been named Hardeman's successor.

Abramson Honored at Acrobatics Nationals



The Azusa Pacific acrobatics and tumbling team competed in the National Collegiate Acrobatics & Tumbling Association national championships, with strong efforts from Kendall Sullivan, Allee Kooch, and Gabby Fendrich. Senior Abbigale Abramson received the Colleen Kausrud Leadership Award, which honors a student-athlete exemplifying servant leadership.

For more news and updates on APU athletics, including team schedules, visit athletics.apu.edu.



A Trip of a Lifetime Join the APU Family in England

June 14-24, 2026

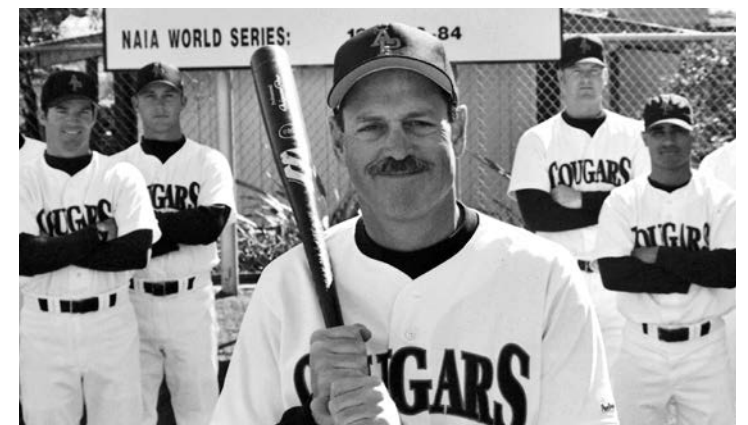


Join President Adam J. Morris, PhD, and his wife, Faith, on a unique spiritual pilgrimage as they explore the roots of Christianity in England. Enjoy rich fellowship traveling with APU alumni and friends while visiting London, Oxford, the Cotswolds, Canterbury, Lindisfarne, and more. It will be an experience you won't want to miss.

Spaces are filling up quickly so reserve your spot today. A transformational experience awaits. For more details, visit apu.edu/england-tour/.

Legendary APU Coach Tony Barbone Passes Away at 71

Tony Barbone '77, a towering figure in collegiate baseball, passed away on April 13, 2025, at the age of 71 after a long battle with a tumor on his brain stem. Over a distinguished 16-year tenure as head coach at Azusa Pacific, Barbone amassed 516 victories, setting a record that stood for nearly two decades. His teams dominated the Golden State Athletic Conference, securing eight conference titles and finishing as runner-up five times. At the time of his departure in 2002, Barbone was celebrated as the winningest coach in APU's history.



Deferred No More

Choi, MM '24, Overcomes Paralysis to Achieve Dream of Becoming Pianist

BY NATHAN FOSTER



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHUN AE CHOI (LIM), MM '24

What happens to a dream deferred? While some people never see their childhood ambitions realized, Chun Ae Choi (Lim), MM '24, finally achieved at 69 years old what she had been dreaming of since she was a girl. On November 25, 2024, Choi took the stage at one of the most prestigious performance venues in the world, Carnegie's Weill Recital Hall, and began playing Chopin Nocturne No. 13 in C Minor.

"Right before I began to play, I prayed to God to give me strength," Choi said. "He gave me the comfort I needed to perform, and it was an experience unlike any other."

The performance marked the culmination of a long journey of overcoming paralysis. Originally from South Korea, Choi contracted polio as a child, leading to nearly total paralysis in her legs. Her dreams of becoming a pianist all but disappeared, since pianists need to use their feet to play the instrument's pedals. She immigrated to America at age 23 in 1978, settling with her family in Orange County. A month after immigrating, Choi was invited to go to church with her sisters. "I realized how much Jesus loves me and I received the Holy Spirit that day," Choi said. She became active in her church and began sharing God's love with others.

A decade after moving to America, Choi met Sung Ho Lim, a pastor at her church's young adults group, and the two got married the next year. They had two sons, Ben and Stephen, and after raising them, Choi was inspired to go back to school. She had completed her elementary education in South Korea, but

was unable to continue because of a lack of support for disabled students. So at 51, she enrolled in Korean cyberschool and completed junior high, high school, and a bachelor's degree in psychology.

While Choi was proud of her accomplishments, her childhood dream of becoming a pianist lingered, galvanized by a bit of strength she had regained in her left leg. She wanted to earn a master's degree in music, but since her undergraduate degree was in psychology, she had to complete several music prerequisite classes at Fullerton College, where she met Andrew Park, DMA.

"Dr. Park was a godsend," Choi said. "He taught me more than I could imagine about playing piano and offered me the encouragement I needed."

Park taught Choi for two years at Fullerton before advising her to audition for the graduate program at Azusa Pacific University, where he had become an assistant professor. The audition went splendidly, and she was accepted into the program. Choi continued growing in her musical skills under Park's instruction. He was impressed by her tenacity to pursue music later in life, so many years after she stopped playing as a girl.

"Playing piano is not as simple as riding a bicycle," Park said. "There are really challenging techniques requiring muscles that Chun Ae hadn't used for many years."

Perhaps the biggest challenge was learning to use the piano's pedals. "Pedal use is an art,"



"I'm so grateful for the constant support of my husband and my sons, the teachings of Dr. Park, and the grace of God."

—Chun Ae Choi (Lim), MM '24

Park said. "Not using pedals would be like an electric guitarist trying to play without being connected to an amplifier—it's that important. Fortunately, she had regained a bit of power in her left foot and she learned pedal techniques. If you just listened to her play piano now, you wouldn't be able to tell she has a disability."

Choi approaches her performance with passion, perseverance, and faith. She practiced piano for five hours every day on top of her studies, and her hard work paid off when it was time for her graduate recital, a one-hour performance, in April 2024. Dozens of Choi's family, friends, and church members filled Munson Chapel to watch her play.

"It was such a touching moment," Park said. "As I watched her play flawlessly for an hour, I realized nothing is impossible with God's strength."

Just weeks after her recital, Choi took the stage again, this time at commencement as an APU graduate.

Although Choi had finished her program at APU, she returned to campus a month later to participate in a competition hosted by the International Association of Professional Music Teachers (IAPMT). The competition brought in more than 1,400 participants from across the world, including 80 in the division for musicians with disabilities. Choi's performance won the grand prize: a brand-new digital piano from Kawai America Corporation, the event's sponsor. After Choi's performance, Park, the artistic director for IAPMT, and the competition's other judges got together and decided to give her something even more valuable: an opportunity to perform at Carnegie Hall. "Sending Chun Ae to play on a world stage was the biggest joy," Park said. "Words cannot describe how much it meant."

Choi flew to New York with her husband, eager for the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. As she took the stage, seated at a grand piano in front of hundreds, Choi's heart began to race.

"My emotions were so strong, so I prayed to God that my playing would bring glory to Him," Choi said. "God took my emotional burden away and the performance was better than I could have imagined."

At 69, Choi's dream of being a professional pianist playing on a world stage came true, and she was overjoyed: "I'm so grateful for the constant support of my husband and my sons, the teachings of Dr. Park, and the grace of God."

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PHOTO COURTESY OF THE OFFICE OF SERVICE AND DISCIPLESHIP

Finding Hope in the Ashes

Students and Alumni Join L.A.’s Fire Relief Efforts

BY SAUNDRI LUIPPOLD

When disaster strikes, a multitude of emotions—disbelief, sadness, despair—and an overwhelming need for community support emerge from the chaos. In the aftermath of January’s Los Angeles fires, mere miles from Azusa Pacific University’s main campus, students were quick to step into the roles God called them to and serve communities in ways that touched the lives of fire victims.

It all started with a prayer service. Classes and chapel were canceled on Wednesday, January 8, and social work major Hannah Grace Cicciari ’25 texted a few friends, inviting them to join her in the Hartwig Prayer Chapel on East Campus.

“I had been looking forward to gathering with the APU community to start the semester in prayer and worship, so when chapel was canceled, I just wanted to connect with God and others amidst the

crisis,” she said. What began with five people soon grew to a group so large they had to relocate to Cougar Dome. A crowd of students spent the day worshipping together and praying for those impacted by the fires.

The next day, at Thursday night’s chapel service, kinesiology major Mathieu McGowan ’26 recruited more than 60 students to participate in a weekend of service through the Dream Center Foundation in L.A. He and many students also volunteered at Victory Bible Church, Flintridge Center, Harvest Rock Church, Holy Assembly Church of God in Christ, and Lake Avenue Church.

“Serving on the Maui relief trip through the Office of Service and Discipleship (OSD) exposed me to what fire relief looks like in the long term,” McGowan said. “Meeting people directly affected by the Lahaina wildfires showed me that recovery from a natural disaster is an ongoing process, even years later. The empathy I feel for the people of Maui led me to take action when more fires erupted so close to home.”

Cicciari stepped into a team leader role. “I’ve done relief work before, so I told Mat, ‘Put me wherever you need, and I’ll be there,’” she said. Cicciari and her teammates volunteered at the Pasadena Convention Center, where hundreds of victims sought shelter. While her team got to work organizing large quantities of donated items that churches and neighbors had provided, they also learned a valuable lesson about the importance of lending an ear. “Hearing people’s stories puts in perspective that service isn’t always about the physical acts of getting tasks done,” she said. “Listening attentively to those who had been affected and lost everything meant the world to people who simply longed to be heard.”

Leaning into the needs of others, students on McGowan’s team completed a variety of tasks. Unexpectedly, some directed traffic, as so many cars arrived to donate resources. “It was encouraging to see how many people wanted to give to those in need,” McGowan said. He was also part of a prayer walk around the Pasadena Convention Center and Hotel Dena.

Karen Rougely ’05, DMin, director of OSD, facilitates APU’s partnerships with organizations such as Samaritan’s Purse, World Vision, Habitat for Humanity, and local outposts to provide access for students to serve. Many participated in “ash outs”—when professionals confirmed that a space was safe, students, partnering with Samaritan’s Purse, entered wearing protective equipment and sifted through the ashes to find families’ belongings, such as silverware, plates, and jewelry.

“It’s one thing to rebuild a house, it’s another to rebuild a community,” Rougely said. “We aren’t going anywhere. We keep asking God how we can use whatever resources, skills, gifts, talents, and treasures that He has given us to come alongside our neighbors who need it most and stay committed to them for the long haul.”

Students and alumni have tapped into their God-given callings to be lights in the midst of darkness. Rachel Battaglia ’22 and Janice Kim ’21 are nurses who live in Pasadena; through Epicenter Church, they were among the first people to enter the Pasadena Convention Center. Battaglia was on a three-month sabbatical, so she was able to implement her nursing expertise to provide care as a trauma-informed helper when the fires broke out. From initial mental health help to tending to patients who had little time to evacuate their homes, she was a listening ear for many throughout the uncertainty. A week after the fires started, Battaglia was asked to run a clinic in Pasadena with Medical Mission Adventures. Partnering with four external organizations and six churches, Battaglia’s coordination and heart for serving the Lord helped many victims recovering from mental and medical crises.

“As with any grief experience, people are still in it even when other parts of a community feel like it’s over, so getting to remind patients

“We aren’t going anywhere. We keep asking God how we can use whatever resources, skills, gifts, talents, and treasures that He has given us to come alongside our neighbors who need it most and stay committed to them for the long haul.”

Karen Rougely ’05, DMin

that we’re in the hardship with them helps them feel less alone,” Battaglia said.

Kim shared the struggle of wanting to volunteer more while holding the responsibility of her full-time job at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles. She ultimately discovered the ways God called her to be a light in her workplace to those impacted by the fires. The resources she has access to as a nurse also lent a major hand in unexpected circumstances.

While staying at a church friend’s house, Kim and Battaglia had the privilege of meeting their friend’s grandmother, Nani, who planted churches in Pasadena for the Armenian community with her late husband. Sadly, she lost her home of 50 years, leaving with nothing but her dog and the clothes on her back.

“Meeting Nani, who was also a nurse, was so beautiful and we continue to stay in touch,” Kim said. Battaglia fondly recalled Kim’s intervention when Nani needed her prescription medication, which had been lost in the fire. “The insurance wouldn’t refill her medications, because they said it was too early, and she went to the hospital because of withdrawal,” Kim said. “I ended up calling the pharmacist as Nani’s nurse, putting my foot down about these meds, and it took a few hours but we secured them.” Kim’s determination and nursing knowledge helped save her new friend’s life.

APU cultivates a community that upholds service—not for the number of hours students spend completing volunteer work, but for the connections they make with those who yearn to feel seen, loved, and understood. Whether they’re sifting through ashes, sorting clothes, or getting on the phone to advocate for a friend in need, APU students enact Christ’s character by walking alongside others.

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Green and Gold is a Brick-and-Black Affair

APU Alumni Team Up on Award-Winning Film

BY SAUNDRI LUIPPOLD



Inspired by their lifelong love for the Green Bay Packers and a grandfather who was a dairy farmer, brothers Anders '08 and Davin '14 Lindwall brought together several APU alumni to put their talents into a story they hold close to their hearts. *Green and Gold*, which won audience awards at the Austin and Heartland International film festivals, debuted in theaters nationwide in January.

The plot follows a fourth-generation dairy farmer, Buck (Craig T. Nelson), and his granddaughter as they fight to preserve the land their family has owned for generations. Buck places a large bet on the Green Bay Packers winning the Super Bowl, a risk that could make or break his aspirations. It's a story of resilience, faith, and the connections we value. Anders, director and cowriter of *Green and Gold*, graduated from APU's cinematic arts program, where he learned to approach filmmaking with courage and compelling storytelling. "From the start, our

professors placed an immense amount of trust in us by placing cameras in our hands and encouraging us to try things out," he said. That same courage drove him to strive for excellence while cultivating a positive environment. Many of the crew members shared fond memories of their days on set, such as celebrating the birthday of Brooks Malberg '14 (executive producer, line producer, UPM) on their first day of filming, and of working on a project with talented individuals who share APU roots. "Working on *Green and Gold* never felt like a job, because the project was built out of passion, and the people along the way were so important to us," said Davin. Malberg echoed those sentiments: "When you get to create something with good, genuine people, it makes a huge difference. The community is what drew me into APU, and getting to see that carry through in our careers has been special." Corey Martin '14 (composer), who graduated from APU's music program, learned from professors who were industry professionals, enabling him to ask the right questions, hear people's stories, and discover how to use his composition skills effectively. "APU taught me to faithfully persevere when you're doubting yourself, which helped during every step of the film," he said. Martin's wife, Natalie '12 (vocalist), touched upon the fact that APU gathers a community of people who are incredibly uplifting and dedicated. "Having a group of people believing in something bigger than themselves created an atmosphere that allowed us to succeed," she said. What started as a group of friends having fun with their film and music classes led to a

professionally driven crew with a passion for storytelling. "One of my greatest joys is working with people whom I've collaborated with for years and watching *Green and Gold* reach its heights," Anders said. "A lot of movies aim to show the realities and harshness of life, but what's forgotten is that there's so much goodness and beauty that is also present in this world. Our goal was to make a film that is artistically sophisticated and delivers a reminder of that goodness."

Saundri Luippold '25 is a writer of poetry and creative nonfiction. saundriluippold.com

A dozen APU alumni poured their skills, time, and passion into this project:

- Anders Lindwall '08 writer, director
- Davin Lindwall '14 producer
- Brooks Malberg '14 executive producer, line producer
- Corey Martin '14 composer
- Natalie (Nichols) Martin '12 vocalist
- Dominic Laing '08 additional editor
- Jeremy McDaniel '09 second unit cinematography and camera operator
- Chadwick Trentham '08 production consultant
- Blake Heal '08 production consultant
- Bo Butterworth '08 production consultant
- Lauren Martinez '08 production consultant
- Ben Helms '08 trailer sound mixer



Congratulations, APU Graduates!

Ready to answer their higher calling, approximately 1,127 students graduated from Azusa Pacific University on Saturday, May 3, at the university's spring commencement ceremonies. These inspiring graduates earned a total of 1,144 degrees, including 555 bachelor's, 478 master's, and 60 doctorates. The APU community celebrates the class of 2025 and can't wait to see how God uses them to make an eternal impact.



Scan the QR code to watch highlights of this year's spring commencement.



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