30 UNDER 30

University of SOUTH DAKOTA





30 UNDER 30

The University of South Dakota's 30 Under 30 class reflects what the Coyote community has known for generations: a USD education creates leaders who make an impact. Our academic programs continue to shape graduates who excel personally, professionally and within their communities.

This class shows how USD adapts, innovates and rises to meet the needs of a changing world and the students who will define it. Across industries and communities, USD alumni use their talents, integrity and drive to create positive change. A USD education prepares students not only for professional success, but for lives of leadership, service and lasting contribution.

From civic trailblazers and health and science innovators to industry standouts, change ignitors and commerce catalysts, these alumni live the Coyote way every day.

University of SOUTH DAKOTA 30 UNDER 30

CIVIC TRAILBLAZERS

2026



AMBER L. COOK ‘23

Attorney

Pennington County State’s Attorney’s Office

Tell us about your current professional role: Since the summer of 2023, I have worked as a Deputy State’s Attorney for the Pennington County State’s Attorney’s Office. The position requires me to review cases for their strength and charge as necessary, represent the interest of any victims, make informed decisions regarding sentencing recommendations, research laws and write briefs, and so much more.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? As a prosecutor, I have demonstrated success and impact in my profession and community by ensuring that, in every case, I continue to represent the interest of the State and any victims, while still considering the rights a Defendant has. This allows me to effectively prosecute cases in a manner that brings justice and safety to my community.

Questioning yourself is natural, but take solace in the fact that you deserve to be where you are. You don’t know what you don’t know, so always ask questions, then ask some more, because that is the only way you will become learned in your respective profession.



CATE DAVIS ‘18, ‘21

Government Affairs Associate

Mickelson & Company

Tell us about your current professional role: I work in political advocacy, specializing in tax-motivated investment policy for the railroad industry. My role with Mickelson & Company involves drafting legislation, policy anaylsis, coalitition-building and legislative strategy. A central part of my work is managing the wide range of style and regional perspectives that lawmakers and stakeholders bring to the policy making process.

Success in this industry depends on being someone people trust to listen, communicate clearly and create the environment where collaboration happens.

My interest in advocacy began during my time at USD, where I completed several political internships and wrote my thesis on railroad investment policy, not yet realizing how directly it would steer my career path.

Earning my law degree further validated my interest in policy and gave me a deeper appreciation of how legislation is structured, interpreted and implemented in practice.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? I have worked with mroe than 15 state legislatures, the U.S. Congress and the Canadian Parliament. I connect lawmakers and industry leaders to advance long-term investment initiatives. Our work directly supports railroads and the customers they serve in core industries like agriculture, energy, manufacturing and supply chain logistics.

Success takes many forms; one day it is preserving 30 jobs in a rural community and the next, it is the construction of a multimillion-dollor facility at an urban industrial site. In every case, I take pride in the tangible impact our investment policies have on communities across North America.

I view community as something you actively build, not something you passively belong to.

One way I contribute to my community is through my early literacy initiative, Books Between Us, which has already distributed more than 600 books to local kids and teens.

The effort you put in today will prepare you for opportunities you may not yest see, but you will be ready to take on when they arrive. “Chance favors the prepared mind,” so embrace opportunities to learn, adapt and develop into the next version of yourself.

Q&A with Civic Trailblazer, **Lucas Heitkamp ‘19, ‘21**



Federal Relations Associate Director

Iowa State University

2026

What motivates your work?

People.

Q

Tell us about your current position at Iowa State University.

A

For nearly five years, I served on the staff of Mike Rounds, working across the senator’s offices on United States Capitol, Pierre and Sioux Falls. Most recently, I was a legislative assistant in the Washington office, where I advised the senator on tribal affairs, energy, trade, agriculture and natural resources policy.

In my current role at Iowa State University, I serve as one of the liaisons between the university and the legislative and executive branches of the federal government. Much of my work focuses on strengthening relationships with key federal research agencies, keeping university leadership informed of federal policy and funding developments, and supporting researchers in securing competitive extramural federal research funding.

Q “I hope my work helps…”

A “… young people from the rural Midwest realize they have the same opportunity to compete and succeed as any of their peers.”

How would your colleagues describe your leadership?

A Resourceful.

Q

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

A

I have attempted to approach my work with a philosophy of servant leadership, trying to prioritize the needs of others ahead of my own personal gain. I have found this approach helps cultivate a high-trust environment where people feel supported and empowered to succeed.

Throughout my early career, I have also made a point to mentor younger colleagues and connect students to opportunities in public policy. Many young professionals are unaware of the meaningful impact they can have in this field, and simply exposing them to these pathways can make a difference.

Q One word: what does being in 30 Under 30 mean to you?

A Humbling.

Q One fun fact about you that might surprise your coworkers.

A I am a big-time animal lover. I have always had a special soft spot for cats, dogs and many other animals.

University of SOUTH DAKOTA 30 UNDER 30

CIVIC TRAILBLAZERS

2026



CHRIS SKUNK ‘19, ‘21

3L; Law Student

University of South Dkaota Knudson School of Law

Tell us about your current professional role: I am a student at the University of South Dakota Knudson School of Law, where I focus on Indian law, public policy and tribal government relations. As a member of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, I have built my professional experience through public service, political engagement and community advocacy. Before attending law school, I served on the Lower Brule Sioux Tribal Council and as a Lyman County commissioner, experiences that deepened my commitment to leadership and advocacy at the tribal and local levels.

I have also worked with the South Dakota Attorney General’s Office and the Native American Rights Fund, gaining valuable experience in tribal advocacy and legal issues affecting Native communities. I am passionate about strengthening tribal-state relationships and expanding opportunities for Native communities, and I hope to build a career advancing meaningful change through law, leadership and public service.

> **Do not underestimate the value of relationships and consistency. Some of the most meaningful opportunities in my life have come from simply showing up, staying genuine and building trust over time. Focus on learning, being dependable and treating people well.**

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? Before law school, I served on the Lower Brule Sioux Tribal Council and as a Lyman County commissioner, gaining firsthand experience addressing issues affecting tribal and local communities. These roles taught me the importance of listening, building consensus and leading with accountability. Through my work with the South Dakota Attorney General’s Office and the Native American Rights Fund, I have contributed to efforts involving tribal advocacy, public safety and intergovernmental collaboration. One of my most meaningful accomplishments has been connecting people with different backgrounds and perspectives to advance shared goals and strengthen communities.



ERIN WEIGHTMAN ‘21

Attorney

Quinlivan & Hughes, P.A.

Tell us about your current professional role: I primarily practice medical malpractice defense litigation, while also serving as the lead attorney for the firm’s prosecution contract and assisting with business transactions. My work requires strong research, writing, communication and courtroom advocacy skills, along with close collaboration with clients, colleagues, expert witnesses and opposing counsel. Medical malpractice cases are particularly complex, requiring careful preparation, effective communication and the ability to navigate multiple perspectives. As I grow in my career, I hope to expand my experience in litigation and business law while developing a versatile legal skill set. Ultimately, I aspire to transition into public policy or government service and pursue a career as a law professor.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? During law school, I completed an externship in London with a barrister specializing in complex corporate litigation and interned with the South Dakota Governor’s Office of General Counsel. I also served as a teaching assistant, research assistant, editor and member of the North Dakota Law Review, and president of the Federalist Society, while participating in an external moot court competition. In my first year of practice, I have embraced opportunities to take on new responsibilities and collaborate with colleagues.

Since moving to St. Cloud, I have also joined the board of WACOSA, a nonprofit that helps adults with disabilities develop skills, build community and pursue employment opportunities, where I serve as a pro bono attorney. I hope to continue expanding my involvement in the community through volunteer service and additional pro bono work.

> **“Fake it ‘til you make it,” only takes you so far. Say yes to opportunities that push you outside of your comfort zone, ask the thoughtful questions and approach each experience as a chance to learn and grow.**

University of SOUTH DAKOTA CIVIC TRAILBLAZERS 2026



GRANT NAMMINGA '24

Law Enforcement

University of South Dakota Police Department

Tell us about your current professional role: I grew up in Lake Andes, South Dakota, and graduated from Wagner High School in 2020. While attending the University of South Dakota, I worked as a student ticket writer for the University Police Department and later as a corrections officer at the Clay County Jail. During my undergraduate years, I developed a strong connection to Vermillion and the university community, which inspired me to pursue a career dedicated to serving the campus and surrounding area.

In January 2024, I joined the University of South Dakota Police Department as a police officer. In this role, I respond to calls for service, patrol campus, monitor traffic safety, assist local law enforcement agencies and engage with students, faculty, staff and community members.

I have actively pursued professional development opportunities and currently serve as both a Defensive Tactics Instructor and Taser Instructor, helping to ensure officers receive high-quality training and support.

> **Be willing to take on challenges before you feel completely ready. Some of the most rewarding opportunities in my career came from stepping outside my comfort zone, asking questions and learning as I went.**

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? I believe that effective public service begins with a commitment to people. Whether assisting someone with a routine concern, supporting an individual experiencing a crisis or helping train the next generation of law enforcement officers, I strive to make a positive impact through service, compassion and problem-solving.

I regularly assist with training at the South Dakota Law Enforcement Training Academy in Pierre, where I have the opportunity to support future officers and contribute to the continued advancement of the profession.



RENEE STELLAGHER '19, '22

Attorney

South Dakota Attorney General

Tell us about your current professional role: I grew up in Pierre, SD. I attended the University of South Dakota for both undergrad and law school. After law school, I clerked for Judge Daneta Wollman for two years. I am now an Assistant Attorney General for South Dakota's Office of the Attorney General and work in the Appellate Division. In that role, I represent the state in criminal appeals before the South Dakota Supreme Court. I also am the prosecutor for several licensing boards.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? I have demonstrated success and impact in my community by volunteering and mentoring others via Special Olympics and the Teammates program.

As an Attorney, I have taken on complex assignments, analyzed statutes, drafted opinions and prepared case materials with accuracy and diligence.

> **"It is hard to fail, but it is worse never to have tried to succeed." Theodore Roosevelt**

University of SOUTH DAKOTA 30 UNDER 30 HEALTH & SCIENCE INNOVATORS 2026



ELLIE BLUE ‘26

Resident Physician

University of Nebraska Medical Center

Tell us about your current professional role: I am a lifelong South Dakota resident, originally from Brandon, SD. I completed my undergraduate degrees in Biology and Spanish from Augustana University and am proud to be a 2026 graduate from the USD Sanford School of Medicine. This summer, I look forward to continuing my training as a Family Medicine physician at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha, NE. As a family Medicine physician, I hope to lead with kindness and compassion by remaining curious, connected and engaged within the communities I serve.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? Throughout medical school, I actively sought out opportunities to engage with my community, better understand challenges faced by the patients I hope to serve, and build relationships with mentors and peers who share a commitment to service.

As clinic manager for the medical school's outreach at Bishop Dudley Hospitality House, a shelter for individuals experiencing homelessness, I worked to improve access to care by helping establish a free transportation service for guests to attend medical appointments, coordinating a six-week cooking and nutrition series, and streamlining the appointment referral process for guests seeking additional care.

Additionally, I served on the leadership board and as a volunteer for the USD Coyote Clinic, a free student-run clinic in Sioux Falls, where I worked as part of a multidisciplinary team to provide quality care for the community's most vulnerable patients. I also acted as a student representative for Women in Medicine and Science.

In this role, I helped organize educational and mentorship opportunities that encouraged young women to explore careers in healthcare and connect with physicians and medical students who could support their journey.

> **Show up for yourself, both professionally and personally. You are your strongest advocate for your education, career and interests. Make time for things that bring you joy, whether that is returning to an old hobby, learning something new or prioritizing your physical and mental wellness.**



EMILY KOKALES ‘23, ‘25

Director of Executive Support

Avera McKennan Hospital & University Center

Tell us about your current professional role: I am originally from Aberdeen, South Dakota, where I attended Aberdeen Roncalli High School. With both an older sister and brother attending the University of South Dakota (USD) at the time I graduated in 2020, choosing where to pursue my education was an easy decision.

What made that decision even more compelling was the Beacom School of Business, which offered the Healthcare Administration program I was passionate about pursuing. From a young age, I knew I wanted to work in healthcare, but in a role outside of direct patient care.

My goal has always been to support those who care for patients, and healthcare administration provided the perfect path to do so.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? I strive to lead with empathy, awareness and connection in all aspects of my work. My day-to-day responsibilities vary widely ranging from supporting clinical teams to collaborating with security on operational issues. This adaptability allows me to contribute across multiple areas and projects, creating impact at various levels within the organization.

Additionally, my involvement in executive-level conversations enables me to stay informed on leadership priorities and strategic direction. This exposure has supported my professional growth and opened doors I had not previously imagined possible. One area where my work directly impacts our community is through my role in campus wide parking initiatives. My focus is to improve the parking experience for patients, visitors and staff. Parking is often the first and last impression individuals have of our campus, and by improving processes and establishing clear, purpose-driven policies, we help better align with our mission of patient centered care. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensure a positive experience. I have also had the opportunity to step into interim leadership roles like supporting the Ear, Nose and Throat Clinic during a period that involved leadership changes, an electronic health record transition and ongoing construction. During this complex time, I helped stabilize clinic operations to ensure patients continued to receive high-quality care.

> **The effort you put in today will prepare you for opportunities you may not yet see, but you will be ready to take on when they arrive. “Chance favors the prepared mind,” so embrace opportunities to learn, adapt and develop into the next version of yourself.**

Q&A

with Health & Science Innovator,
Carson Zubke ‘21



Consultant
Chartis

2026

One piece of advice for current USD students.

Seek out experiences that stretch you.

Q “I hope to make my mark on health care by...”

A “... helping design and implement systems that work better for the people who depend on them.”

What drives your passion for innovation?

Possibility.

Q

Tell us about your current position as a managing consultant.

A

I’m a strategy and health care consultant, working primarily in organizational transformation, including mergers and acquisitions, partnerships and operating model design. The role is equal parts analyst, communicator and advisor—it is about bringing clarity to problems in a way that people can come together around, implement and scale what works.

Q

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

A

I’m most excited by work that happens in ambiguous situations—where the path forward isn't obvious. It’s a huge opportunity to think beyond what is in any deliverable—but instead on what the impact is to people and systems affected.

In my community, I try to show up the same way: connecting people, mentoring where I can and aiming to add something to the teams I am part of.

Q **One word: being a 30 Under 30 recipient =**

A **Gratitude.**

Q **What’s the most rewarding part of helping organizations improve care delivery?**

A Seeing an idea turn into real change. It’s rewarding to move from a complex or ambitious problem to a set of decisions that change how teams work together.

University of SOUTH DAKOTA 30 UNDER 30 HEALTH & SCIENCE INNOVATORS 2026



JAMIE SCHWEISS ‘23

Doctor of Physical Therapy

Pain and Movement Solutions

Tell us about your current professional role: I am a physical therapist and certified exercise physiologist dedicated to improving health and quality of life through evidence-based rehabilitation. I provide individualized care for patients with neurological, cardiac and other complex medical conditions, collaborating with health care teams to develop treatment plans that promote long-term health and independence. I am passionate about innovation, community engagement and mentorship, and hope to expand access to specialized rehabilitation services, address unmet community needs and improve patient outcomes in rural and urban communities.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? I have demonstrated success by identifying healthcare needs and creating solutions that improve access to care. One meaningful opportunity to make an impact has been developing and launching Cardiac Therapy, a comprehensive cardiac rehabilitation program that serves communities throughout western South Dakota. The program helps reduce barriers to care, particularly for rural patients who previously had limited access to cardiac rehabilitation services.

Beyond program development, I strive to make an impact through patient care, mentorship and community engagement. I serve as a clinical instructor for physical therapy students, mentor aspiring healthcare professionals and participate in community education initiatives. My goal is to create meaningful, lasting improvements in the lives of patients while helping shape the next generation of healthcare providers

> **Don’t wait until you feel completely ready to pursue an opportunity. Be willing to ask questions, seek mentorship and take initiative when you identify a problem that needs solving. Success is rarely the results of one defining moment. It is built through consistency; showing up, staying curious and looking for ways to create value.**



MORGAN DEAVER, ‘20, ‘24, ‘25

Director of Infant & Toddler Tribal Intervention

Lower Brule Community College

Tell us about your current professional role: I am a USD graduate with bachelor's degrees in communication sciences and disorders and child and adolescent development, a master's degree in special education and a doctorate in audiology. I am a licensed audiologist, special educator and speech-language pathology assistant. As director of tribal intervention, I oversee early childhood programs for the Lower Brule and Crow Creek Sioux tribes, providing developmental screenings, evaluations and direct services to children. I also serve as an adjunct professor at Lower Brule Community College and a peer navigator consultant for South Dakota Parent Connection, supporting families navigating special education services. My professional interests include rural health disparities, trauma-informed care, holistic education and pediatric and tribal populations. I hope to continue expanding access to quality health care and educational services in underserved communities.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? I have demonstrated success and impact in my community by assisting in the growth and improvement of varying Tribal Programs. I have been able to assist with making connections across the State, for both Health and Education, which have supported an increased quality of life for the Native American youth on the Lower Brule and Crow Creek Sioux Reservations. This past year, we had record numbers in the Infant and Toddler Tribal Intervention Program, and anticipate even higher enrollment throughout the next school year. Personally, I was able to provide and assist in securing contracts which afforded us additional speech, hearing, mental health and educational resources. Because of my program’s success, we have been able to ensure fewer Native American children are “slipping through the cracks” in the health and education systems in place.

> **Don’t allow fear to stop you from growing. Take the leap, try the thing, send the email, dial the phone number, complete the application, always push forward and put yourself out there. The worst that can happen is you will be told “no”, and then you can find another way.**



RILEY ACKERMAN '19, '22
Physician Assistant

Sanford Health & Monument Health

Tell us about your current professional role: I am a physician assistant with Sanford Black Hills Orthopedic Urgent Care, Monument Health General Surgery Acute Care and Trauma Surgery Service, and Monument Health REACH, which focuses on medical respite, addiction medicine and community health.

My responsibilities include performing joint injections, treating fractures and dislocations, assisting in complex surgeries and supporting individuals experiencing addiction or homelessness.

Through comprehensive patient assessments and collaboration with multidisciplinary teams, I strive to improve patient outcomes across the Black Hills region. I remain committed to building on my USD education, advancing my skills and making a meaningful difference in my community.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? My journey as a physician assistant has been shaped by my USD education and the mentorship of dedicated faculty. I strive to improve the lives of those facing traumatic injuries, musculoskeletal conditions, addiction or homelessness through compassionate, specialized care. I consider the trust patients place in me, especially during their most difficult moments, both a privilege and a responsibility I take seriously.

> **One of the most influential things you can do is find something you love and pursue it wholeheartedly, using your passion to positively impact those around you. I've learned that embracing change and stepping outside your comfort zone to grow, will not only make you a better provider, but will enrich the lives of your patients and community.**

30 UNDER 30



DEVALON WHITCOMB '19

Director of Development + Strategic Partnerships

POC Collaborative Community Resource Center

Tell us about your current professional role: In my current position, I oversee operations, financial management, strategic planning, fundraising, staff development and community partnerships. During my tenure, I have helped increase membership by 28% and facility utilization by 275%. With more than a decade of experience in nonprofit leadership and youth development, I have contributed to capital campaigns and projects totaling more than $100 million. I am pursuing two master's degrees and a graduate certificate at USD, along with additional fundraising education through the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy. I hope to use my education and experience to strengthen nonprofit organizations, expand community initiatives and create meaningful opportunities for youth.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? I believe success is measured not only by organizational outcomes but also by the positive impact we create in the lives of others. I have focused on building programs, partnerships and opportunities that strengthen communities and empower individuals. Professionally, I have led initiatives that increased membership engagement, expanded program participation and strengthened financial performance. I have been fortunate to participate in projects that have provided thousands of toys, backpacks, meals, bicycles and educational resources to families in need. Through partnerships with organizations such as Toys for Tots, United Healthcare, Free Bikes 4 Kids and numerous community stakeholders, I have helped connect critical resources to underserved populations. I serve on the boards of Parkinson's Nebraska and the Eastern Nebraska Community Action Partnership and am founding board president of the Nebraska HBCU Greek Collaborative. Through these roles, I support youth development, mentorship and community engagement. As a coach and mentor, I have helped hundreds of student-athletes achieve academic, athletic and personal success. My goal is to build confidence, create opportunities and leave people and communities better than I found them.

> **Be present where your feet are. In a world that constantly pushes us toward the next opportunity, promotion or achievement, it is easy to overlook the value of the season you are in right now. Trust that you are where you are supposed to be and focus on giving your best effort each day.**



ELDON WARNER-SORIANO '19

Actor

DDO Chicago

Tell us about your current professional role: I am a Chicago-based actor and musician specializing in musical theater. My work requires continued training in acting, singing, dancing and playing multiple instruments to perform on stages across the country. I hope to continue refining my craft while building a fulfilling career in theater.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? I have performed at theaters across the country, using my skills as an actor and musician to entertain and inspire audiences. I hope my performances encourage others to develop a deeper appreciation for theater and make it a more meaningful part of their lives.

> **Allow yourself to enjoy the process and realize the value of what you bring to the world. There is no one quite like you, and so only you can share what you have to give.**

Q&A with Industry Standout, **Ingrid Cho-Absher ‘21**



Museum Curator

National Museum of the American Indian

2026

What’s your go-to way to recharge after a busy day?

Spending time with my dog, Toby, and watching a movie

Q “I hope to make my mark by...”

A “... continuing to remind Native poeple interested in museums that their voices matter.”

Who is one historical figure you’d love to interview?

A Oscar Howe

Q

Tell us about your current position as a museum curator.

A

Previously, I was a fellow at Wind Cave National Park, where I focused on community engagement with bison-related projects and building relationships with associated Tribal communities. My work is rooted in Indigenous methodologies and reflects a strong commitment to meaningful community engagement.

Currently, I am a curator at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., where I work with collections to research and inform visitors about the histories of Indigenous peoples.

Q

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

A

My goal in museum work is to create accessible, engaging interpretation that helps diverse audiences connect with complex histories. As an Indigenous professional, I prioritize building strong relationships with source communities, supporting meaningful consultations and advocating for more inclusive collections care and practices.

I measure success and impact by expanding access to belongings that have historically been held without community knowledge or involvement.

Q One word: What drives your passion for preserving and sharing stories?

A Interpretation.

Q **What’s one object from your own life you’d put in a museum 100 years from now?**

A A journal from my brief time at the Sacred Stone Camp on the Standing Rock Reservation in 2016.

University of SOUTH DAKOTA 30 UNDER 30 — INDUSTRY STANDOUTS 2026



MELISSA EBERTS '19

Enrollment Marketing & Engagement Manager

University of South Dakota

Tell us about your current professional role: I serve as enrollment marketing and engagement manager at the University of South Dakota, where I develop email campaigns, print materials, digital projects and admissions communications that connect prospective students and families with USD. My focus is turning complex information into clear, engaging messages that help students confidently navigate important decisions.

As a USD alumna, I'm proud to give back to the university that shaped me while continuing to grow as a leader, writer and creative thinker.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? I'm proud to be part of a team that has made enrollment marketing at USD more intentional, strategic and student-centered. By tailoring our communications to prospective students' needs throughout their college search, we're building meaningful relationships, helping families make confident decisions and encouraging students to envision their futures at USD.

My commitment to Vermillion extends beyond my professional role. I am an investor in the Vermillion Area Chamber and Development Company's Grow Vermillion initiative, previously supported the Vermillion NOW! 3 campaign and served three years on the Vermillion Cultural Association board.

Although I no longer live in Vermillion full time, I remain deeply connected to the community. Recruiting students to USD also means introducing them to a place that has profoundly shpaed my life, a responsibility and privilege I value.

"Take the time to build real relationships. One connection can lead to an opportunity you never saw coming, and you never know who may someday be willing to speak your name in a room or open a door you didn't even know existed. Be the kind of person others remember for the right reasons."



MORGAN MATZEN '19

Education Reporter

Argus Leader

Tell us about your current professional role: I am the education reporter at the Argus Leader, covering early childhood education, K-12, higher education, policy and politics. Since February 2021, I have served as the state's only reporter dedicated exclusively to education coverage. Previously, I worked at the Rapid City Journal, where I became the primary COVID-19 reporter. I graduated from USD in December 2019 with a bachelor's degree in journalism and minors in Spanish and women, gender and sexuality studies.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? Through my reporting, I've made a meaningful impact on my hometown and the schools and communities that shaped me. I've published more than 1,000 articles, building relationships with sources and highlighting issues that matter to South Dakotans.

My coverage of the state's social studies standards process earned recognition from the Education Writers Association and the South Dakota NewsMedia Association (SDNA) in 2021. That year, I also received SDNA's first-place award for government reporting for my investigation into teacher disciplinary record privacy laws.

In 2024, I received the Friend of STEM Ed Award from the South Dakota Science and Math Teachers Association. In 2025, SDNA named me Outstanding Young Journalist and awarded me second place in the A-Mark Prize for Investigative Journalism for my investigation into property ownership and spending by South Dakota's public universities and their foundations.

"My career advice for fellow young professionals is to network and stay connected. You never know who your coworker, colleague or potential source will be in the future. Also, never be afraid to ask questions, even the "dumb" ones. Odds are, you aren't the only one wondering about the answer."



SYDNEY STEVENS '19
Chief Creative Officer
Miz Stevens Publishing, LLC

Tell us about your current professional role: I am a graphic artist and illustrator from small-town South Dakota, currently serving as chief creative officer at Miz Stevens Publishing LLC. My work includes book illustration, formatting, editing, advertising and website design. I strive to continually develop my creative skills while inspiring and bringing joy to others through my work.

> **Choose kindness. You never know what someone is going through in their life and choosing to be kind can make a world of difference. This is applicable not only for other people's lives, but for your life personally and professionally.**

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? As chief creative officer at Miz Stevens Publishing, I've had the opportunity to illustrate several children's books, including "Red Was Blue," a story about finding joy and giving back during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through my illustrations, I strive to connect with readers, spark meaningful conversations and inspire kindness. The book resonated with our community, encouraging compassion during challenging times.

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University of SOUTH DAKOTA

CHANGE IGNITORS

2026



BRETT HUGHES ‘20

6th-8th Grade English and Social Studies Teacher

Harrisburg East Middle School

Tell us about your current professional role: Since fall 2020, I have taught in the Harrisburg School District, serving at Harrisburg North Middle School from 2020 to 2023 and Harrisburg East Middle School since 2023. During that time, I have taught sixth-grade English and sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade social studies. Beyond the classroom, I serve as student council advisor, Hope Squad advisor, seventh-grade football coach, track and field coach, chess club advisor and Breakfast Club advisor.

Drawing on the teaching, leadership and content knowledge I developed through USD’s education and history programs, I have grown as both an educator and leader within the district. I plan to continue teaching and mentoring middle school students while pursuing a master’s degree in educational administration and leadership, with the goal of transitioning into a school administration role.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? I have made a meaningful impact in education through my commitment to students, colleagues and the broader school community. Beyond the classroom, I have remained actively involved in student council, Hope Squad, athletics and extracurricular clubs, providing mentorship and support for students in a variety of settings.

I have also served as a mentor teacher for practicum and residency candidates, helping prepare future educators for success in the classroom and the teaching profession. Most importantly, I have built lasting relationships with students that continue well beyond middle school, serving as a trusted mentor and source of encouragement throughout their educational journeys.

> **The most important thing an aspiring secondary teacher needs is a love for working with, teaching and mentoring young adults. Adolescence is a difficult stage of development, and teachers must approach students with empathy, understanding and passion.**



IRENE ARANGO GÓMEZ ‘20, ‘22

Community Care Coordinator & Adjunct Instructor

South Dakota State University, College of Pharmacy & Allied Health Professions

Tell us about your current professional role: As a first-generation American, I have been guided by the belief that education and service can create lasting change. I currently serve as community care coordinator at South Dakota State University’s Innovation Center, where I work with communities, health care organizations and local partners to expand access to health resources and implement grant-funded initiatives. My work focuses on strategic planning, program development, stakeholder engagement, data analysis and cross-sector collaboration to improve health outcomes across rural South Dakota.

I also serve as an adjunct instructor in the SDSU/USD Master of Public Health program, bringing applied, community-based public health experience into the classroom. This fall, I will continue my education at George Washington University, pursuing a Doctor of Public Health degree. Through this program, I aim to strengthen my leadership and research skills to advance community-driven solutions, reduce health disparities and build healthier, more resilient communities.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? I have supported the implementation and expansion of peer recovery coaching, medication-assisted treatment (MAT) and other substance use and mental health recovery services across rural South Dakota. Much of this work has focused on the START-SD initiative, which strengthens prevention, treatment and recovery resources in rural counties. In this role, I help coordinate efforts that increase access to care, reduce stigma and foster collaboration among health care providers and community organizations.

As START-SD has expanded into additional rural counties, I have supported outreach, program implementation and community engagement to ensure services reach the people who need them most. This work has strengthened community-driven approaches to behavioral health and substance use recovery in areas with limited access to care. I also prioritize inclusive, culturally responsive outreach by supporting engagement with Spanish-speaking communities and promoting language access. My understanding of socioeconomic barriers further informs my commitment to making public health services accessible and relevant to diverse populations.

> **Just when you think you have gotten out of your comfort zone, I promise you, you more than likely haven’t. You can go more than another step further. Continue to grow and be careful not to close doors on yourself by saying “no” to new opportunities.**



KATIE JACOBS '23, '25

High School Speech & Debate Teacher & Coach

Brookings School DIstrict

> **Your voice matters! It matters long before you feel confident using it, and it matters just as much on the first day of a new job as it does on the day you retire. Ask questions when something does not make sense. Speak up when something seems wrong. Strive for clear, honest and accurate communication, both from yourself and others.**

Tell us about your current professional role: I earned a Bachelor of Arts in religion and philosophy from Augustana University in 2019 before continuing my education at the University of South Dakota, where I completed the Alternative Teaching Certificate Program in 2023 and a Master of Arts in secondary education in 2025. I currently serve as a speech and debate teacher and head debate coach at Brookings High School. In this role, I teach information literacy, argumentation, critical thinking and effective communication.

My work extends beyond the curriculum by helping students develop confidence, resilience and advocacy skills they can apply in the classroom and throughout their lives. The position requires mentorship, leadership, instructional design, communication and problem-solving. Through this work, I hope to continue expanding opportunities for students, strengthening the speech and debate program, and helping young people grow as communicators, leaders and lifelong learners.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? I believe I have made my greatest impact as a speech and debate teacher and coach. Committed to continuing Brookings High School's tradition of excellence, I have helped lead the program to state championships in Public Forum (2022, 2024 and 2026) and International Extemporaneous Speaking (2025), a third-place finish at the National Speech & Debate Association (NSDA) National Tournament, a Debate Team Excellence Award (2024), a third-place finish at the 2026 state tournament and numerous finalist and elimination-round appearances.

Personally, I received the SCASD Outstanding Young Speech Teacher of the Year Award and was nominated for the FCA South Dakota Debate Coach of the Year Award. I also serve as a state leader for Congressional Debate and on national legislation and topic review committees, helping shape competitive materials while supporting educators and the broader speech and debate community.

I serve on Brookings High School's PBIS, TAT, Literacy and Health Crisis teams, as well as the district's grades 6-12 AI Committee. These leadership roles allow me to help strengthen instructional practices and schoolwide supports.



LAUREN FOXHOVEN '20, '21

Career Success Center Manager

University of South Dakota Beacom School of Business

Tell us about your current professional role: I graduated from the University of South Dakota in May 2020 with a Bachelor of Business Administration in business administration and a minor in marketing before earning a Master of Business Administration in August 2021. After working in several marketing roles in Sioux Falls, I returned to USD in August 2022 as manager of the Beacom School of Business Career Success Center and added undergraduate advising responsibilities in January 2024.

In my current role, I work closely with students on career and academic advising, helping with resumes, internships, job searches, networking and academic planning. Much of my work centers on listening, problem-solving and helping students identify the path that best aligns with their goals. I have always wanted to serve in a role where I can support others, and I value being a trusted resource as students prepare for their future.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? I believe my greatest impact comes through the relationships I build with students and the support I provide. I strive to understand each student's unique goals and experiences while creating opportunities for personal and professional growth through networking events, career development programs and employer connections. Seeing students gain confidence, secure internships or employment, and feel prepared for the next stage of their lives is on of the most rewarding aspects of my work.

> **Stay open to where things might take you, even if it does not look exactly like what you originally planned. Give yourself a chance to try new things, pay attention to what you enjoy about your work and don't be afraid to ask questions.**

Q&A with Change Ignitor, **Abbie Wiebers ‘18, ‘22**



School Psychologist

Cornbelt Educational Cooperative

2026

What fuels your passion for helping students succeed?

Empathy.

Q “I hope to ignite change by...”

A “... being a person that everybody can feel safe around.”

What’s one skill you rely on every day?

Adaptability.

Q

Tell us about your current position as a school psychologist.

A

As a school psychologist, my job involves collaborating with teachers, students, parents and other school professionals to provide services based on students’ educational, behavioral, social and emotional needs. A large portion of my job involves conducting standardized assessments to identify learning disabilities and behavioral challenges among students in my nine rural school districts. I am also qualified to identify symptoms of anxiety, depression, ADHD and autism and indicate how those symptoms may be affecting a student’s success in the school setting. Along with the rigorous assessment and evaluation training I received at USD, I think a valuable skill I use often is my ability to connect with people and build relationships quickly. My goal as a school psychologist is to help students achieve academic success, improve mental health and provide support in an individualized way. Another goal of mine is to provide support to teachers and help them feel equipped to handle challenges in their classrooms.Working in rural school districts is a specific interest and passion of mine, and I want to continue working in this area.

Q

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

A

Working in nine different rural school districts can be challenging because I’m not able to be physically present in each school throughout the week, but I think I have developed and worked hard to maintain relationships with teachers in a way that makes them feel like they can call, text or email me at any time, and I will do my best to support them and work through any challenges they are facing. I also use my social skills to quickly build rapport with students so they feel comfortable and give their best effort during assessments. I know I have been successful with this because it is common for me to go to one of my schools and be greeted by a student I worked with for only a short amount of time, yet they are excited to give me updates on things we may have talked about when we worked together.

Q **How would your colleagues describe your approach?**

A

Compassionate.

Q **One piece of advice to your college-aged self.**

A Learn Spanish! Communication and building connections are so important for my job and I’m currently trying to learn Spanish so I can communicate with more people.

University of SOUTH DAKOTA 30 UNDER 30

CHANGE IGNITORS

2026



MATTHEW COLBERT '19, '25

International Admissions Professional

University of South Dakota
Gallagher International Center

Tell us about your current professional role:
Originally from the shores of New Jersey, I came to Vermillion in 2016 to pursue a bachelor's degree in international studies with a minor in Russian studies. During my time at USD, I became one of the first students in many years to study abroad in Russia, where I completed a year of intensive Russian language study.

After graduating, I served the university as a full-time professional for six years while earning a Master of Science in administration. As assistant director of international admissions at the Gallagher International Center, I recruited and supported prospective international students throughout the admissions process. My education strengthened both my intercultural communication skills and my ability to navigate administrative and managerial responsibilities. I hope to continue applying my education and professional experience to opportunities focused on international engagement, education and intercultural communication.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community?
After earning my bachelor's degree, I knew I wanted to give back to USD by supporting the next generation of students. During more than six years at the Gallagher International Center, I represented the university on international recruitment assignments and guided prospective students from around the world through the admissions process. I also advised several student organizations, mentoring student leaders and supporting campus engagement. Watching students I recruited and mentored succeed at USD and beyond has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my career.

My advice to fellow young professionals is to dream big and be open to opportunities. Putting yourself out there and casting a wide net can lead to incredible opportunities. I also strongly recommend pursuing international and cultural experiences, as they add tremendously to both your personal growth and professional toolbox.



SYDNEY BITZ '21, '22

6th-8th Grade Reading Lab Teacher

Rapid City Area Schools

Tell us about your current professional role: I am a Rapid City native and first-generation college student who earned a bachelor's degree in art education from USD in 2021 and a master's degree in reading and literacy coaching in 2022. I am currently pursuing a master's degree in human development and educational psychology at USD, with plans to earn a doctorate.

I serve as a reading interventionist at North Middle School in Rapid City, helping students strengthen their literacy skills and overcome reading challenges. Previously, I worked as a correctional educator in Vermont and a K-8 reading specialist in New Hampshire.

In my current role, I use research-based instructional practices, student achievement data and individualized support to create an engaging, inclusive learning environment. I also serve on my school's Response to Intervention and leadership teams and coach volleyball.

Combining my background in art education with my passion for literacy, I incorporate color theory, graphic design and creative classroom themes to create a welcoming space where students feel supported and inspired to learn.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? I help strengthen my school's Response to Intervention (RTI) model by collaborating with colleagues, analyzing student data and improving systems that provide timely literacy support. For the past two years, I've presented at the Elevate.Educate.Empower — Moving Literacy Forward Across South Dakota conference, sharing practical strategies with more than 100 educators and administrators to improve literacy instruction and build students' confidence.

I've also contributed to educator resources through Avanti, a professional learning platform developed by Solution Tree, supporting professional development across diverse educational settings.

In 2021, I helped revise South Dakota's fine arts standards, working alongside educators to strengthen arts education and expand opportunities for student learning and creative expression statewide.

My piece of advice for other young professionals is to be adaptable enough to evolve, coachable enough to improve and self-aware enough to recognize when an environment is helping you grow versus making you question your value. The right opportunities will challenge you, not diminish you.



KENLEY LAMBERTY '22

Director of Political Strategy & Engagement

Dakota Credit Union Association

Tell us about your current professional role: I am a registered lobbyist for the Dakota Credit Union Association, where I advocate for policies that support credit unions and the members and communities they serve. I believe credit unions, as member-owned financial cooperatives, play a vital role in helping individuals achieve financial independence. My work involves building relationships with lawmakers, stakeholders and community leaders to advance the credit union movement through strategic advocacy and communication.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? I believe meaningful change begins at the local level, which drives my commitment to community involvement. I currently serve as chair of the Sioux Falls Board of Adjustment, am a Rotary member and volunteer with Habitat for Humanity and Veterans Community Project. I also served on the Shape Sioux Falls 2050 Comprehensive Plan Committee, helping guide the city's future growth and development.

> **Take advantage of opportunities like the Farber Fund and speak with your professors about ways to get involved. Never be afraid to ask someone to grab a coffee or go to an event.**



MONTE RYSAVY '18, '19

Principal Examiner

National Credit Union Administration (NCUA)

Tell us about your current professional role: I am originally from Wagner, South Dakota, and earned my bachelor's degree in 2018 and MBA in 2019 from USD's Beacom School of Business. Since 2020, I have worked for the National Credit Union Administration in Minneapolis, where I currently serve as a principal examiner. I lead complex, risk-focused examinations to strengthen the safety, stability and integrity of credit unions nationwide. As a subject matter expert in Bank Secrecy Act and anti-money laundering regulations, I evaluate internal controls, identify risks and guide credit union leadership on regulatory compliance and risk management. I am committed to strengthening financial institutions, mentoring professionals and protecting credit union members in an evolving financial landscape.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? I've demonstrated professional impact by leading complex, risk-focused examinations that strengthen credit unions nationwide. My work helps institutions address governance challenges, fraud concerns and operational risks while protecting their members.

> **Lead with purpose and never stop learning. Every challenge is a chance to stretch your abilities, discover new strengths and become the best version of yourself. Let curiosity fuel your growth and adaptability define your journey, so you can thrive, inspire and make your impact felt where you go.**

From 2023 to 2024, I served on the National Credit Union Administration's Cultural, Diversity and Inclusion Council, which reported directly to the agency's chairman.

During my tenure, I helped advance initiatives to improve transparency, employee engagement and workplace culture. These efforts reflect my commitment to strengthening the credit union system and fostering a more collaborative organization.

Q&A with Commerce Catalyst, **Thejaswini Paripally '23**



Modeling and Forecasting

JPMorgan Chase

2026

What's one surprising skill you use every day?

Communication!

Q "I hope to make my mark by..."

A "... turning complex data into meaningful insights, making financial forecasting more transparent and effective."

What fuels your curiosity?

Possibility.

Q

Tell us about your current position at JPMorgan Chase.

A

I build and automate loss forecasting models that directly inform how the bank manages risk and allocates reserves across its portfolios. My work sits at the intersection of quantitative modeling, data engineering and executive storytelling—I'm not just running numbers, I'm making sure the right people understand what those numbers mean and can act on them confidently.

Daily, I leverage an advanced quantitative toolkit, including Python, SAS, Alteryx and Databricks, to manage portfolio risk, evaluate CECL reserves and translate large-scale, complex credit risk metrics into clear, strategic visibility for senior leadership. Through my education at the University of South Dakota, I aimed to master the intersection of data governance and predictive analytics. I am using this foundation to drive operational excellence in financial technology, creating highly resilient forecasting frameworks that directly support sound executive decision-making in volatile global markets.

Q

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

A

I have demonstrated professional success by leading complex default servicing loss forecasts for critical CCAR and budgeting exercises, successfully engineering automated processes that cut manual effort and significantly enhanced model precision and reporting turnaround times.

In the community, I combine my passion for technology and service by actively volunteering and mentoring others, drawing on my previous background teaching STEM and Python concepts to empower peers to fearlessly pursue technical fields.

Q How would you colleauges descirbe your approach?

A Thorough.

Q One piece of advice to current USD students.

A Build your technical skills, but don't stop there. Learn to communicate and look for opportunities to work on practical projects.

University of SOUTH DAKOTA

COMMERCE CATALYSTS

2026



SAM CRAIG '20

Senior Accountant

Ag Processing

> **Stay curious and never stop learning. It can be tempting to focus purely on mastering your current role, but some of the best growth comes from asking questions and seeking to understand the bigger picture. Above all, remember that life is short. Work hard but make sure you have fun along the way.**

Tell us about your current professional role: I serve as a Senior Accountant at Ag Processing Inc. (AGP), one of the largest farmer-owned soybean processing cooperatives in the United States. In my role, I work across accounting, merchandising and plant operations teams to analyze financial and operational performance, identify trends and support decision-making throughout the organization.

After joining AGP as an Accountant, I was promoted to Senior Accountant within my first year, taking on expanded responsibilities across the business. What I enjoy most about my work is helping people understand the story behind the numbers. Whether reconciling information across departments, analyzing production yields or identifying operational trends, I focus on turning complex data into insights that are useful to the people making decisions.

I have also built automated reporting tools that save time and give stakeholders faster access to the information they need. My time at USD gave me the problem-solving foundation I rely on every day. I am continuing to build on that by expanding my skills in analytics and process improvement while helping AGP operate more efficiently and make better decisions across the business.

How have you demonstrated success and influence in your profession and community? One of my proudest professional accomplishments has been contributing to the launch of a new crush plant, where I helped establish accounting processes and systems while working closely with plant operations to get everything up and running from a financial standpoint. Seeing that work come together and knowing I played a role in building something new from the ground up was a meaningful experience.

Beyond that, I continue to look for ways to create value outside of my day-to-day responsibilities, whether through developing automated reporting tools that give stakeholders faster access to information or identifying opportunities to streamline processes across the organization. Being promoted from Accountant to Senior Accountant within my first year reflected the trust others placed in my work, and I have worked to continue earning that trust ever since. Outside of work, I volunteer with Open Door Mission and Food Bank for the Heartland, two organizations that provide critical support to people in need. These experiences have reminded me that even small contributions can make a meaningful difference, and I try to carry that into my professional life as well.

30 UNDER 30