



President’s Column: Momentum, Mission, and the Power of ‘We’

This fall, Bluefield State University celebrated a milestone that speaks volumes about who we are and where we are headed. Our enrollment has reached the highest level in ten years, with 1,416 students enrolled, and our first-time freshman class has grown an impressive 37% over last year. These numbers are not just statistics. They represent students who believe in our mission, who see their future here on this hill, and who trust us to help them reach it.

Momentum like this does not happen by accident. It is the result of every conversation that encouraged a student to apply, every class that inspired curiosity, every office that extended a helping hand, and every community partner who believes in our vision. The truth is that success at Bluefield State is shared success. Whether you teach in our classrooms, work behind the scenes, mentor a student, or support our programs in the community, you are part of this remarkable story.

We are growing because we have dared to dream bigger and to show that a small university can have a big impact. We are proving that access and excellence are not opposing forces, but two sides of the same coin. As more students, families, and employers recognize the value of a Bluefield State education, our role as a catalyst for opportunity in southern West Virginia continues to expand.

As we look ahead, let us keep that spirit of collaboration and purpose at the heart of everything we do.



Dr. Darrin Martin

Every success we achieve, every new partnership we form, and every student we help cross that graduation stage strengthens not only this university, but the community we proudly serve.

Thank you for believing in Bluefield State, for giving your best every day, and for helping us build something extraordinary together. The momentum is real, and it is only the beginning.

**Guard the Hill,
Darrin L. Martin, Ed.D.
President, Bluefield State University**

Bluefield State University Announces Christopher Todd Richardson Scholarship for Mining Engineering Technology Students

Bluefield State University announced the creation of the Christopher Todd Richardson Scholarship, a new award that will support students pursuing degrees in Mining Engineering Technology. The scholarship was introduced on Tuesday evening, September 9, during the Fourth Annual Pocahontas Royalties and Bluefield State University Mining Engineering Technology Fundraising Dinner at Club on the Green in Bluefield.

The scholarship honors the life and legacy of Christopher Todd Richardson, a Richlands, Virginia native, respected mining professional, and beloved son, brother, father, and friend. Richardson began his mining career at age nineteen with Frontier-Kemper Constructors and rose from laborer to Mine Operations Manager during a distinguished fifteen-year tenure. He was remembered throughout the evening for his work ethic, loyalty, and belief in what he called “the freedom to be,” qualities that continue to resonate deeply within the mining community.

President Darrin Martin shared that the scholarship will help ensure that Richardson’s spirit of determination continues to guide future Bluefield State students. “Tonight’s announcement ensures that Todd Richardson’s legacy will continue to inspire and support future generations of Bluefield State students,” Dr. Martin said. “This scholarship reflects both his passion for mining and his commitment to helping others succeed.”

Family members joined university leaders, industry partners, and community supporters for the announcement. Proceeds from the annual fundraising dinner, along with additional contributions, will help fund the scholarship and strengthen the Mining Engineering Technology Program.

The program, once one of the university’s most recognized offerings, was recently reinstated



to meet renewed industry demand and to honor Bluefield State’s historic ties to the coal and energy sectors. With its return, students have renewed access to hands-on training in a field that has shaped the region for generations.

“Todd believed in hard work, fairness, and giving people the chance to reach their potential,” said Brian Richardson, Todd’s brother. “Knowing that students at Bluefield State will be able to pursue their dreams in mining with help from a scholarship in his name is the best way we could ever honor his life.”

The Christopher Todd Richardson Scholarship will support students who demonstrate the qualities that defined Richardson’s career, including perseverance, integrity, focus, and a strong work ethic. It is intended to help students reach their full potential while carrying forward a legacy built on character and commitment.

This year’s event was supported by generous sponsors, including Performance Drives Inc., Frontier-Kemper Constructors, Jones Mining and Welding, Komatsu Joy, Warrior Met Coal, Industrial Mining Supply Inc., SkyLine Contracting, and A and A Resources.

Bluefield State University Takes First Place in 2025 Disney on the Yard Innovation Challenge Internship



Left to Right: Hojahnea Hodges, Shyiana Francis, Ashley Adams, Victoria Hall

A Bluefield State University student team earned first place in the 2025 Disney on the Yard Innovation Challenge, a national competition that showcases the creativity and talent of students from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) across the country.

This year's challenge required teams to work within a defined timeline and specific constraints while responding to a distinctive prompt. Traditionally focused on new uses of modern technology, the competition took a different direction this year. Students were asked to imagine a world where today's technology never existed and to design an innovative concept that could thrive in that alternate reality. The shift called for imagination, resourcefulness and a strong narrative.

For the Bluefield State team, storytelling became the foundation of their project. Ashley Adams, a senior computer-science major from Jamaica, said the group knew they needed a concept that

felt true to Bluefield while capturing the heart of a Disney story.

"We understood it was Disney so we had to create a story and connect it to Bluefield history," Adams said.

Their story centered on the region's historic railroad importance. They envisioned a reimagined world where trains served not only as engines of steel but as engines of human connection. Their presentation began with the lines:

"Once upon a time, in the mountains of Bluefield, trains and coal powered the world. They were not just engines of steel. They were engines of connection. The tracks carried stories, dreams, and futures, long before Wi Fi or smartphones ever existed."

From that opening, the team introduced The Dreamline Express, a concept that imagines a campus connected through creativity, tradition and shared experience rather than screens. In their story, trains

carry imagination instead of coal, and every student's dream becomes fuel for a collective journey that unites the community.

The judging panel included executives from ESPN and The Walt Disney Company, along with a room full of corporate mentors and recruiters. Despite the accomplished audience, Adams said the team felt "less intimidated and more excited to share their idea."

Their innovative approach earned the Bluefield State team top honors. Each team member received a \$4,000 scholarship, and Bluefield State's School of STEM received a \$10,000 grant. In addition, all four students were surprised with an all-expense paid trip to Disney in February.

"I am going to Disney!" Adams exclaimed.

The winning team included Victoria Hall, Ashley Adams, Shyiana Francis and Hojahnea Hodges,

pictured left to right in the attached link.

Bluefield State competed against respected HBCUs such as Alabama A&M University and Alabama State University.

"This victory reflects the dedication, intelligence and spirit of our students," said Dr. Darrin Martin, president of Bluefield State University. "They represent the bright future of Bluefield State and demonstrate the powerful experiences that happen when our students are encouraged to think boldly and aim high."

The Disney on the Yard Innovation Challenge strengthens pathways for HBCU students by offering hands-on learning, mentorship and exposure to careers across The Walt Disney Company. Bluefield State's first-place finish reinforces the university's mission to prepare students for meaningful careers through opportunity, access and real-world engagement.

Bluefield State University Posts One of West Virginia's Strongest and Most Diversified Enrollment Gains

Bluefield State University is celebrating one of the most impressive and well-rounded enrollment gains in West Virginia this fall. New data from the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission show that while enrollment across the state grew by 1.7% and national growth reached about 2%, Bluefield State moved far beyond those trends. Our total headcount grew by 7.8%, rising from 1,313 students last fall to 1,416 students this year.

Bluefield State recorded the second highest overall headcount increase among West Virginia's four year public institutions and led the state in two important categories. Full time equivalent enrollment increased 9.5%, a sign that more students are taking fuller course loads and engaging more deeply in their academic experience. Our incoming first time freshman class grew by 37%, one of the strongest new student classes our university has seen in many years.

President Darrin Martin shared his appreciation for the collective work behind these results. He noted that our progress reflects a campus wide effort to expand access, strengthen programs, and support students at every point on their journey. He added that our growth stands out because it is diversified and positioned for long term sustainability.

The data released Friday paint an encouraging picture across many student groups. Enrollment excluding dual enrollment increased 6.1%, and dual enrollment itself grew 17.8%, showing continued strength in the university's long term recruitment pipeline. Out of state enrollment increased 16.1%, and international enrollment rose 16.7%, expanding our reach and balancing demographic challenges within West Virginia.

President Martin explained that the mix of gains supports long term stability. Strong freshman

growth helps build the next several years of enrollment. Growth in full time students indicates higher levels of engagement. The rises in out of state, international, and dual enrollment contribute to a broader and more resilient student body. He also noted that state investment in Bluefield State directly supports workforce needs, regional development, and access to higher education in an underserved area.

Our leaders shared that these results reflect focused strategy, including new workforce aligned academic programs, stronger community and K to 12 partnerships, and heightened visibility across the region and beyond our traditional service areas.

Bluefield State serves a high number of first generation college students. Affordability and access remain central to our mission to provide a meaningful pathway to public higher education for students throughout southern West Virginia and the region. That mission aligns with the WV Climb initiative, a statewide effort to increase the number of residents who earn degrees and credentials that support workforce needs. Through certificate, associate, bachelor, and master programs, Bluefield State continues to open doors for students and prepare graduates for strong careers and stronger communities.

As a STEM focused institution with campuses in Bluefield and Beckley, the university continues to earn recognition for its value and outcomes. Research.com recently named Bluefield State one of the Best Value Colleges in West Virginia, a reflection of our commitment to student success and long term affordability.

The HEPC noted that statewide enrollment has not yet returned to pre pandemic levels, although the upward trend is encouraging. President Martin reminded everyone that progress at Bluefield State is measured by more than headcount. Our responsibility is to help students persist, complete their programs, and graduate ready to contribute to their communities and to our state.

As West Virginia builds on this positive momentum, Bluefield State University continues to play a vital role in expanding educational opportunity and strengthening the workforce of tomorrow. President Martin captured this spirit best. Guard The Hill means building momentum, not simply preserving history. At Bluefield State, it means preparing students to succeed, to graduate, and to step into their futures with confidence.

Bluefield State University Celebrates Successful 2025 Humanities Challenge

Bluefield State University welcomed students and educators from seven area high schools for the thirteenth annual Humanities Challenge on Wednesday, October 29, marking the event's largest and most spirited competition to date.

Fourteen teams, each with three members, competed in a full day of quiz-bowl style rounds that tested knowledge across literature, history, philosophy, fine arts, world cultures, current events, and music. Forty-two students participated, representing Graham High School, Tazewell High School, Rich-

lands High School, Princeton Senior High School, PikeView High School, James Monroe High School, and Narrows High School.

Narrows High School captured first place. The winning team of Camden Newby, Alice Cowart, and Haleigh Meredith, recruited by Narrows High School Librarian Joshua Sparks, received the championship trophy and \$500 tuition waivers each, redeemable upon enrollment at Bluefield State University.

Graham High School placed second. Seniors Mad-dee Young, Elise Jacobs, and Baila Turner earned



Bluefield State University welcomed students and educators from seven area high schools for the thirteenth annual Humanities Challenge

the runner-up trophy and \$250 tuition waivers each, also redeemable upon enrollment at BSU.

All participants were recognized by BSU Provost Dr. Sarita A. Rhonemus, who praised the students for relying on their minds and intellectual curiosity rather than artificial intelligence. This message was echoed by Athletic Director Brodderick Tucker, who, along with Coach and Athletic Administrator Paul K. Davis, supported hosting the event in the BSU gym for the first time. In celebration of the shared values of academics and athletics, every student participant received passes to all BSU athletic events until they enrolled at the university.

"This event showcases sharp minds, teamwork, and a love of learning," said BSU President Darrin Martin. "We are proud to welcome these exceptional students to our campus, and we hope this experience encourages them to continue their academic journeys here at Bluefield State."

"The humanities give students the tools to understand the world and connect with others," said Sudhakar R. Jamkhandi, Ph.D., Professor of English and founder of the Humanities Challenge. "This Challenge celebrates those skills and highlights

how vital they are in developing thoughtful, creative leaders."

Under the leadership of Humanities Professor Dr. Jeffrey Yeager, the event was supported by an outstanding team, including Dr. Bonnie Reese, Adrian Scott, Mark Botts, Sarah Keffer, Jack Sheffler, and Dr. Sudhakar R. Jamkhandi. Rev. Garry Moore announced questions, and Adam K. Davis provided electronic systems support.

The day featured hospitality coordinated by Dr. Amanda Matoushek, Dean of the College of Arts, Education, and Social Sciences, who ensured that contestants enjoyed breakfast and lunch. The BSU Admissions Office welcomed students with informational packets and t-shirts, reinforcing the Challenge as both a celebration of scholarship and a meaningful recruitment opportunity.

First launched in 2013 by Dr. Jamkhandi, the Humanities Challenge has become a signature Bluefield State tradition that honors academic discipline, focus, and intellectual competition. Held in the gym for the first time this year, the event showcased the shared values of both academic and athletic excellence: perseverance, teamwork, dedication, and spirited competition.

Bluefield State University Students Gain Transformative Experience at AfroTech 2025

Senior Kellie Williams Represents BSU Through Disney Internship



Left to Right: Kellie Williams, Victoria Hall, Ashley Adams, Shyiana Francis, Hojahnea Hodges

BLUEFIELD, W.Va. — Bluefield State University students returned from the AfroTech Conference in Houston with new skills, strong industry connections, and a renewed sense of confidence after attending one of the nation’s largest gatherings for Black professionals in technology.

Among them was senior Kellie Williams, a computer science major from King George, Virginia, who attended AfroTech through her paid internship with The Walt Disney Company, where she serves as a Security Engineer Intern. Williams, who came to Bluefield State to compete in Track and Field, said she discovered early on that the university’s small HBCU culture provided the support and community she needed to thrive. As an introvert, she learned that networking is a skill she could develop, and she embraced the importance of “not only making connections, but growing them.”

Her internship has challenged her to grow professionally while balancing work, school, and athletics.

“It has taught me how to manage my time in new ways,” Williams said. “Balancing my internship, my classes, and Track and Field has pushed me, but it has also shown me what I am capable of.”

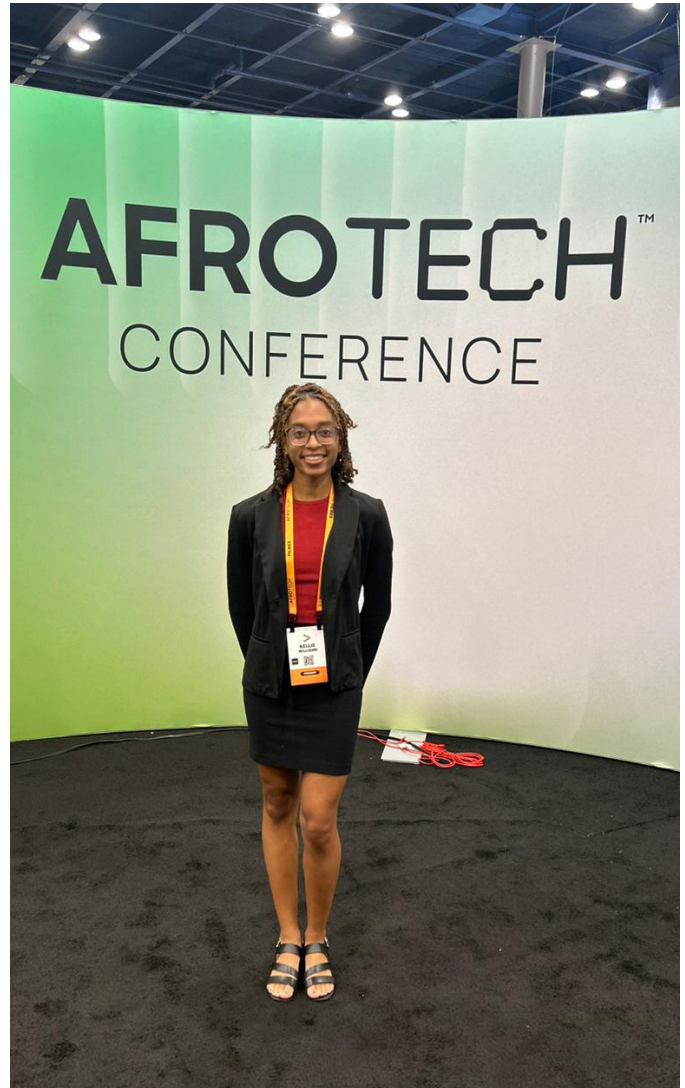
Attending AfroTech had been a goal for Williams for years. The opportunity with Disney opened the door.

“I knew I had to get there. When they gave me the opportunity, I was grateful. I took it and ran with it,” she said.

Her first day included an exclusive session for Disney Scholars, where she met technologists and recruiters from across the company. She said that moment set the tone for the week.

“It made me feel like this was going to be a great week. I learned a lot and met great people.”

Williams was one of eight Bluefield State computer science students who made the journey to AfroTech from October 28 through 31. Their determination turned an idea into reality, and the group represented the university with pride. The students were Victoria Hall (junior), Shyiana Francis (junior), Ashley Adams (senior), Hojahnea Hodges (senior), Kellie Williams (senior), Sampson Anaba (junior), Tajari James (junior), and Joseph Boadi (senior).



BSU Senior Kellie Williams

During the conference they met with recruiters from leading technology companies, participated in mentorship sessions, and gained valuable career insights. Several received on-site interviews and potential internship opportunities. Collectively, the students made more than 100 new LinkedIn connections, strengthening their professional networks and bringing positive attention to Bluefield State.

AfroTech 2025 featured more than 168 companies and drew nearly 40,000 attendees. Williams said that even as a student at an HBCU, she had never before seen such a large community of women of color working in technology.

“To see it made me happy,” she said. “These were people I could collaborate with and people I could look up to.”

Williams arrived prepared with polished networking skills, an updated resume, and a clear sense of purpose as she prepares to graduate in May. She

said the experience strengthened her confidence and readiness to begin her career.

“I hope to make connections and continue building my skills. That is what will help me the most after graduation.”

President Darrin Martin praised the students for their initiative, professionalism, and commitment to growth.

“Kellie represents the very best of Bluefield State,” Martin said. “Her drive, her talent, and her willingness to step into new opportunities show what our students can achieve. We are proud of her success and excited to see where her path leads next. The entire group demonstrated what it means to be part of a rising university that invests in its students and prepares them to lead.”

Williams said she credits both Disney and Bluefield State for helping her reach this milestone. “I would not have been there if it was not for my HBCU. I am grateful for the opportunities Bluefield State has given me,” she said.

The 2025 AfroTech Conference took place at the George R. Brown Convention Center in Houston, offering a platform for students to learn, connect, and grow as future leaders in technology. Their participation showcased the talent, teamwork, and determination that define Bluefield State University’s Computer Science program and its commitment to excellence.

Bluefield State University Expands Student Transportation with Three New Passenger Vans

Bluefield State University has added three new passenger vans to its fleet, thanks to the generosity of two longtime community partners: The Shott Foundation and The Paul and Carol Cole Foundation.

The vans will significantly enhance student transportation, providing safe and reliable travel for academic field trips, athletic teams, student organizations, and community engagement activities. Designed for comfort and safety, the vehicles will ensure Bluefield State athletes and other student groups can travel together with confidence.

“Reliable transportation is vital to connecting our students with opportunities beyond campus,” said Dr. Darrin Martin, President of Bluefield State University. “We are deeply grateful to The Shott Foundation and The Paul and Carol Cole Foundation for their generous support. These vans will help us expand learning, service, and engagement experiences for our students.”

The new vehicles will support the University’s athletic programs, allowing teams to travel safely to

competitions throughout the region. They will also provide comfortable, dependable transportation for student clubs, service-learning projects, and other activities that strengthen Bluefield State’s role as both an educational and community partner.

“Both the Shott Foundation and the Paul and Carol Cole Foundation have a long history of investing in the success of Bluefield State students,” said Keith Olson, Director of Communications. “This gift ensures that our students can travel together safely, representing the University and our region with pride.”

The addition of the three vans underscores Bluefield State’s commitment to providing a high-quality student experience while building strong partnerships with local foundations, businesses, and community leaders.

Bluefield State University Earns Fifth Fulbright HBCU Leadership Honor

Bluefield State University has been named a Fulbright Historically Black College and University (HBCU) Institutional Leader for 2025, marking the fifth time the university has received this recognition from the U.S. Department of State.

The annual designation recognizes HBCUs with exceptional engagement in the Fulbright Program, the U.S. government’s flagship international academic exchange initiative that promotes cultural understanding through educational partnerships worldwide.

Fulbright HBCU Institutional Leaders demonstrate outstanding support for international exchange participants and actively encourage campus-wide engagement with visiting scholars. The program highlights HBCU excellence while promoting these institutions as premier destinations for international students and faculty.

“Being recognized as a Fulbright HBCU Institutional Leader underscores Bluefield State’s mission to prepare students for leadership in a global society,” said Dr. Darrin Martin, president of Bluefield State University. “Through Fulbright, our students and faculty connect with diverse cultures, bring new perspectives back to campus and strengthen Bluefield State’s role as a bridge between Appalachia and the wider world.”

Over more than two decades, Bluefield State has hosted four Fulbright Scholars in Residence: Dr. Sergey Zhigulov of Russia (psychology, 2009), Dr. Mariya Kharina of Russia (biology, 2016), Jackson Tamba of Liberia (electrical engineering, 2017) and Dr. Santoshi Halder of India (special education/autism, fall 2024).

The university has also welcomed Fulbright Language Assistants for Arabic, Russian and Swahili



BSU Fulbright Institutional Leaders

since 2009, according to Dr. Sudhakar R. “Jammy” Jamkhandi, Fulbright Program liaison at Bluefield State.

“We have hosted numerous Fulbright Scholars based at other U.S. higher education institutions for short visits to interact with our students across various disciplines as well as those in area high schools,” Jamkhandi said.

Samaher Omrani, Bluefield State’s current Fulbright Arabic Language instructor from Tunisia, said her academic year at the university provides an opportunity to teach Arabic and share her culture while growing as a cultural ambassador.

“My time at BSU has been incredibly rewarding,” Omrani said. “I have been welcomed into a supportive academic community where both faculty and students are open, curious and encouraging.”

Omrani said she has discovered that Americans are generally warm, welcoming and eager to learn about other cultures.

“I am seeing firsthand the diversity within the U.S., not just ethnic and cultural diversity, but also diversity of thought, lifestyle and opportunity,” she said.

The Fulbright Program operates in more than 160 countries worldwide with funding from the U.S. government and support from participating governments, host institutions, corporations and foundations. Jamkhandi served as a Fulbright Specialist for Internationalizing Higher Education from 2011-2016.

More information about the Fulbright Program and HBCU engagement is available at <https://fulbright-program.org>.

West Virginia Legislative Committee on Education Tours Bluefield State University

Members of the West Virginia Legislature’s Joint Standing Committee on Education visited Bluefield State University on Monday, November 3, for a campus tour and discussions highlighting the university’s record enrollment growth, expanding academic programs, and facility improvements that support workforce development across southern West Virginia.

The visit coincided with legislative interim meetings held at Pipestem over the weekend. Faculty, staff, and students had the opportunity to share the many ways Bluefield State University extends its impact throughout southern West Virginia, across the state, and into the broader region, demonstrating the university’s reach and influence. Legislators saw how the combined impact of state funding, federal grants, and private donor support is propelling BSU’s growth and expanding opportunities for students.

Bluefield State is experiencing record enrollment for Fall 2025, with 1,442 students, the highest number in a decade. Overall enrollment has increased nearly 10 percent compared to last year, while first-time freshman enrollment rose an impressive 43.57 percent. This growth reflects renewed confidence in BSU’s direction, the strength of its academic offerings, and its expanding role in preparing graduates to meet West Virginia’s workforce needs.

“Bluefield State is growing in ways that directly strengthen the economy and workforce of southern West Virginia,” said Dr. Darrin Martin, President of Bluefield State University. “We are grateful to our legislators for taking the time to see firsthand how their continued support translates into opportunity for our students and our communities.”

During the visit, legislators toured Dickason Hall, home to the university’s engineering and computer science programs, and the Medical Education



President Darrin Martin addresses members of the West Virginia legislature

Center, which houses nursing and health sciences classrooms and labs. Presentations highlighted new programs in business, education, and allied health, as well as plans for expanded student housing and campus infrastructure improvements.

Faculty from the School of Nursing and Allied Health also provided an overview of how Bluefield State's health sciences programs are helping meet the growing demand for nurses and healthcare professionals across southern West Virginia and neighboring regions. Lawmakers learned how BSU graduates are filling critical positions in hospitals, clinics, and long-term care facilities, and how expanded training opportunities supported by modern labs, simulation equipment, and partnerships with local healthcare providers are strengthening both the regional workforce and access to quality care.

President Martin also delivered a presentation emphasizing the economic importance of Bluefield State University to the City of Bluefield, the State of West Virginia, and the broader Appalachian region. He highlighted data showing BSU's role as a key driver of local investment, job creation, and workforce retention, noting that more than half of

Bluefield State graduates remain in West Virginia to live and work, contributing directly to the state's long-term economic vitality.

Bluefield City Manager Cecil Marsen emphasized the strong and growing partnership between the city and the university, citing their collaboration on the Safe Streets For All and Reconnecting Neighborhoods grants. "Our partnership with Bluefield State keeps getting stronger," Marsen said. "We share the same goal, to make Bluefield a place where people want to live, learn, and invest. Working together on projects like Safe Streets and Reconnecting Neighborhoods is helping us build a community that is safer and more vibrant for everyone." The tour concluded with a discussion and refreshments in the Medical Education Center's multipurpose room, where lawmakers met with faculty, students, and community partners who are helping drive Bluefield State's continued growth.

Bluefield State Honors Beloved Nursing Professor Dr. Bernadette Dragich

with Memorial Service and Dedication



Bluefield State University honored the life and legacy of long-time nursing professor Dr. Bernadette Dragich

Bluefield State University honored the life and legacy of long-time nursing professor Dr. Bernadette Dragich with a memorial service held Friday, September 12, at 1 p.m. in the Medical Education Center's Nursing Department.

Dr. Dragich, who served as a dedicated member of the Bluefield State nursing faculty for more than 20 years, was remembered by colleagues, former students, family, and the broader BSU community. As part of the tribute, the University dedicated its Obstetrics Simulation Room in her name, ensuring that her impact on future generations of nurses will live on in the heart of the program she helped strengthen.

The service featured the Southern West Virginia Nurse Honor Guard, who conducted the solemn Nursing Last Call ceremony. This marked the Honor Guard's first official service in the region, adding historic significance to the day.

"I was blessed to know Dr. Dragich as both my faculty in nursing school and a colleague when

I came to work at Bluefield State University. Her mentorship to faculty and new nurses was a true gift to healthcare," said Sandra Wynn, Director of the Associate Degree Nursing Program at Bluefield State.

In addition to honoring Dr. Dragich, the memorial also recognized Women's Gynecological Cancer Awareness Month. The day was observed as Women's Cancer Awareness Day at BSU, highlighting Dr. Dragich's courageous battle with cancer and the resilience shared by many in the community.

"Dr. Dragich devoted her life to preparing nurses not only with knowledge and technical skills but also with compassion and courage," said BSU President Darrin Martin. "This memorial reflects both her enduring legacy at BSU and our commitment to continue raising awareness about women's health."

The event was open to the public, drawing together faculty, alumni, students, healthcare professionals, and community members to remember a beloved professor, colleague, and mentor.

From First-Generation to First-Class

How Bluefield State Shaped Paige Whittington's Story



I was recruited to play softball, and when I visited campus, it felt like home. - P. Whittington

When Paige Whittington crossed the West Virginia state line four years ago from Hagerstown, Maryland, she was chasing more than a softball dream; she was chasing a future no one in her family had ever reached.

"I'm a first-generation college student," she says with quiet pride. "That's a big deal in my family."

Her father owns a painting company. Her mother manages a towing business. Her older brother works with their dad. College wasn't the family norm, but Paige saw a path. She had been a competitive softball player for years, and when Bluefield State University came calling, it just felt right.

"I was recruited to play softball, and when I visited campus, I just knew," she remembers. "It felt like home. Everyone was so welcoming; it was comfort-

able and alive. The friends I made that first week are still my best friends. I'm even still rooming with my freshman roommate."

Now a senior double major in Sports Management and Marketing, Paige has turned her time at Bluefield State into a showcase of leadership, creativity, and determination. She's a student-athlete, Vice President of the Campus Activities Board, a Business Senator, and a proud member of Alpha Sigma Alpha sorority.

Her path into marketing began almost by accident. "I was posting photos from campus events, and one day the Chief Marketing Officer asked, 'Who's taking these pictures?'" she laughs. "That changed everything. I realized photography and content creation weren't just hobbies; they could be a career."

Since then, Paige has served as a Media Marketing Intern for BSU for more than two years, interned with the Flying Boxcars semi-pro baseball team, and worked as an interim media and content creator for the CIAA.

“Bluefield State put me in situations that made me uncomfortable, and that’s where I grew,” she says. “I learned to communicate, to lead, and to believe I belonged in the room.”

Paige can’t name just one mentor. She’s had many. Each helped her grow into the confident leader she is today.

Dr. Baylock taught her to think beyond the textbook and to see the real-world connections in her studies. Coach Chelsea Holliday pushed her to new heights athletically and personally. “She made me realize my possibilities,” Paige says. “She helped me set goals that once felt out of reach.”

Chief Marketing Officer Ansel Ponder opened professional doors, connecting her with mentors and opportunities beyond the classroom. Through his encouragement, Paige learned to trust her instincts and see herself as a professional.

And then there was Cynthia Higgins-Atwell, her accounting professor, who guided Paige through some of her most challenging moments. When the numbers didn’t come easily, Higgins-Atwell reminded her that learning differently doesn’t mean learning less. Paige still recalls the reassurance in her voice: “She was so patient and kind, and she always reminded me to try my best. “Each of these mentors revealed a different part of Paige’s potential. “That’s what Bluefield State does,” she reflects. “It builds you up.”

“It really is a community,” she says. “Everyone takes care of each other. You can never be an outcast here. It’s warm, exciting, and unique, and it’s beautiful.”

After graduation, Paige plans to stay in Bluefield, pursue her master’s degree, and continue helping students find their own paths. “I want to be a resource for others, someone they can go to with questions,” she says.

When Paige talks about scholarships and donor support, her gratitude shines through. “These kids

are here, and they want to stay,” she says. “The opportunities we get are amazing. They give us a chance to grow. It creates a community of givers, and when, not if, I’m in a position to give back, I will.”

If she could thank a donor face-to-face, she wouldn’t hesitate. “Thank you for giving me the opportunity to do the things I love, and for setting me up for success and greatness. Thank you, Big Blue family, for letting me be a campus leader.”

Every scholarship. Every internship. Every opportunity. They’re made possible by alumni and friends who believe in the mission of Bluefield State University and in students like Paige.

When you give, you’re not just helping a student pay for school. You’re helping them find their voice, their confidence, and their future.

Join Paige in building the next generation of leaders. [Make your gift today to Bluefield State University.](#)