

► SUMMER 2025



# NEWSLETTER



**COMMENCEMENT 2025**

# OUR LARGEST CLASS EVER!

**ALSO INSIDE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**ALUMNUS SPOTLIGHT AARON BURGESS JR.**

**FACULTY SPOTLIGHT DR. SAM TRUONG**

**UPCOMING EVENT PERFORMING ARTS CENTER**



# TURNING STUDENT ADVOCACY INTO A CAREER IN POLICY REFORM



When Aaron Burgess Jr. enrolled at Crafton Hills College, he was searching for a fresh start.

"I had just come out of a rough high school experience where I didn't always feel seen or understood," he said. "I needed a place to figure out who I was and where I was going. Crafton was close to home, affordable, and it felt like somewhere I could grow without being boxed in."

That decision turned out to be the beginning of a much bigger journey. Today, Aaron is the

Policy Manager for the City of San Diego's Commission on Police Practices, where he reviews procedures like police pursuits and traffic stops and works with legal teams, law enforcement, and the public to recommend changes that support accountability.

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**"Every day is different," he said. "But at the heart of it, my job is about making sure community voices are heard, especially when it comes to how they're policed."**

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Aaron says his interest in advocacy began at Crafton, where he threw himself into student government, campus jobs, and leadership programs. One of his earliest mentors, Crafton Associate Dean of Student Support Dr. Ericka Paddock, helped him step into those roles and supported his growth every step of the way.

"She gave me room to lead, to make mistakes, and to grow from them," Aaron said. "Eventually, I became student body president, and that experience still shapes how I work today, how I bring people together, listen and advocate for change."

One class, Honors English, with Crafton's English Professor Cynthia Hamlett, helped him connect his personal story to a larger purpose.

"She let us write without filtering ourselves, and she wanted us to really dig into what we believed," he said. "When I wrote a paper about Malcolm X, it hit something deep for me. I started thinking about how I'd spent so much time trying to fit into places where I didn't feel valued, and I realized those experiences were actually part of my strength."

That moment, he said, sparked his passion for policy and social change. "From that point forward, I knew I wanted to do work that made a difference."

Aaron went on to transfer to the University of California, San Diego, and later earned a master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania. He says Crafton prepared him both academically and personally.

"The Honors Institute gave me a strong foundation," he said. "But even more important, Crafton gave me confidence. It taught me how to speak up, how to communicate professionally, and how to believe I belonged in rooms where people didn't always look like me."

During his time at Crafton, Aaron also worked on an initiative to support Black male students through mentorship. He was involved with the national organization Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB) and hoped to bring a chapter to campus to build community and create space for students to grow together. While the program didn't move forward, the process left a lasting impression on him.

"It didn't happen the way I envisioned, but it taught me something important," he said. "Sometimes, even good ideas take time. Even when things don't work out, you keep showing up, keep advocating, and stay committed to creating space for others."

That mindset carried with him into his policy work today.

"I don't see policy as just paperwork. It's about shaping how people experience the world, especially people who've been left out of the conversation," he said. "What I do now started back at Crafton, when I first learned how to listen, how to lead, and how to work with others to get things done."

To current Crafton students who feel uncertain about their future, Aaron offers this advice: "Don't wait until you have everything figured out. Just start. Take risks, ask for help, and focus on who you're becoming. And don't underestimate how much the people around you can matter, the right relationships can change your whole direction."

To the mentors and faculty who supported him along the way, Aaron is full of gratitude.

"Thank you. You didn't just teach, you saw me. You challenged me, encouraged me, and helped me realize my voice mattered. That belief still fuels my work today."

When asked to sum up what Crafton means to him, Aaron didn't hesitate. "Crafton was the launchpad – the place where I found my voice, figured out my purpose, and started building the life I always hoped was possible."

## FACULTY SPOTLIGHT - DR. SAM TRUONG

# BRINGING ANATOMY TO LIFE



When students at Crafton Hills College think of anatomy and physiology, Dr. Sam Truong is often the first name that comes to mind. He teaches a wide range of anatomy courses, from introductory classes to advanced cadaver dissection. If you've taken ANAT 101 or ANAT 259, there's a good chance you've been in his classroom.

Dr. Truong is not only a professor of anatomy and physiology at Crafton but also serves as faculty chair of physical and biological sciences. He's been part of the Crafton community since 2010 and has played a steady role in helping students build the foundation they need for careers in healthcare and science.

His approach to teaching is simple and direct. He wants students to really understand the material, not just memorize it for a test.

"I focus on helping students understand the human body. Once they get the basics, then we can start thinking about how it connects to patient care," he said. "Most of them are going into healthcare, so they need to know why it matters."

Anatomy can be an intimidating subject, especially for students who are just starting out in healthcare. At Crafton, many don't know what to expect going in. Dr. Truong understands that and works to meet students where they are. His goal is to help them push through the tough parts while keeping their eyes on the bigger picture and where they're headed.

"I want them to do well in the course, of course. But even more than that, I want them to see the bigger picture," Dr. Truong said. "Healthcare isn't just a job. It's about helping people at some of the hardest moments of their lives. I hope that message stays with them."

For many of his students, that connection between classroom learning and real-world work makes all the difference. Dr. Truong isn't just teaching muscle groups or organ systems. He's helping future nurses, rad techs, and others prepare for careers where they'll be trusted with people's lives.

"I want them to leave my class with knowledge but also with a sense of responsibility," he said. "This work is important. Helping people is an honor, and it comes with a lot of weight."

He always encourages his students to take their preparation seriously, especially those planning to apply to competitive healthcare programs. One piece of advice he often shares: learn as much as you can in your prerequisite courses. "Build a strong foundation now," he says. "Don't take shortcuts. If you do, it will catch up to you later, especially when it comes time to sit for board exams."

Over the years, he's seen countless students move on to nursing school, rad tech programs, and clinical roles. He still hears from many of them – a text, an email, sometimes a note at graduation.

"It's a great feeling. I've been to a lot of graduations and pinning ceremonies. It's hard to describe how proud I feel when I see them walk across the stage," he said. "Some of them were really nervous about anatomy when they first started. And now they're out there helping real people."

Teaching wasn't Dr. Truong's first plan, though. When he started college, he was actually an art major.

"I liked to draw, and I still do," he said. "But during undergrad, I worked as a teacher's aide in an elementary school. It ended up being one of the most rewarding things I've ever done."

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That experience stayed with him. He eventually shifted to science, earning a Bachelor of Science in Biology from California State University, Los Angeles, and he went on to complete his medical degree from Spartan Health Sciences University, School of Medicine. After working in the clinical field in Illinois, he returned to California to be closer to his aging parents. That's when the opportunity at Crafton came up.

Since joining Crafton, Dr. Truong has been proud to watch the Anatomy & Physiology program grow significantly. "When I started, we offered 12 sections of anatomy courses," he said. "At one point, we reached a peak of 24 sections, and today we're offering 19. That's only possible because of the amazing support from our dedicated ANAT team."

He's also led efforts to bring technology into the lab to improve the student experience. Through the Strong Workforce Grant, and with the support of Crafton's Dean of Career Education and Human Development, Dan Word, and his team, Dr. Truong helped secure two sets of 32 student iPads with Apple Pencils, charging carts, teaching iPads, and a lab tech iPad to enhance anatomy instruction.

Another highlight in his time at Crafton? Earning tenure in 2014 was a milestone that meant a lot to him and to the continued development of the program, he helped strengthen.

In addition to teaching, Dr. Truong advises the Health Science Club on campus and helps guide students who are figuring out how to reach their academic goals. Some are thinking about nursing. Others are looking into allied health programs or trying to decide between schools.

"Sometimes they just need someone to listen or give a little advice. I try to be available when I can," he said. "I remember what it was like trying to figure it all out."

Outside of the classroom, Dr. Truong enjoys a mix of hobbies. He still sketches when he has time, visits art galleries, builds websites, and enjoys spending time with family. Dr. Truong also has a guilty pleasure that might surprise his students. He's a fan of ghost-hunting shows, which he finds entertaining.

From his early days supporting students in elementary classrooms to leading science education at Crafton, Dr. Truong has shaped a

path grounded in compassion, curiosity, and care. And for the many students who pass through his classroom each year, he's doing more than teaching science. He's helping them believe in themselves.

## PLEASE JOIN US



**October 16, 2025 - 5:30 pm**

[Field of Dreams Fundraiser](#)



**September 19, 2025 - 1:00 pm**

[Grand Opening of the New Performing Arts Center](#)

See all of crafton's upcoming events at  
[craftonhills.edu/calendar](https://craftonhills.edu/calendar)

## CLAIM YOUR SEAT IN THE NEW PAC!

By creating an endowed fund that will support the performing arts programs in perpetuity. Even better? Your name (or a name you choose to honor) will be engraved on a seat plaque, serving as a lasting symbol of your support for the performing arts and our students for years to come.

Seats start at just \$500, and payment plans are available.

**Ready to take your seat?**

Visit [craftonhills.edu/seat](https://craftonhills.edu/seat) to get started.



# CRAFTON HILLS CELEBRATES RECORD-BREAKING CLASS OF 2025!

Crafton made history on May 23, as it honored its largest graduating class to date. More than 1,100 students received degrees and certificates this year, and 378 of them crossed the stage in the campus quad during the 2025 Commencement Ceremony.

Family members, friends, faculty, and staff filled the quad to cheer on the graduates, who received a record-breaking 878 degrees and 988 certificates. Among the many standout moments of the evening, Crafton awarded its first-ever Bachelor of Science degrees in Respiratory Care. These milestone graduates wore green caps and gowns to mark the occasion.

President Dr. Kevin Horan welcomed the crowd with words that perfectly captured the spirit of the event.

"Group projects are a practical example of how life works," he said. "No one achieves anything without the help of others. Life is a group project."

Individual achievements were also celebrated at the ceremony. Eleven-year-old Alisa Perales received two associate degrees, becoming the youngest graduate in Crafton's history. 402 graduates finished with a 3.5 or higher GPA, and 103 students achieved a perfect 4.0 GPA

Student speaker and graduating Student Trustee Hadi Natour offered a heartfelt reflection on persistence and support, sharing stories that reflected the tight-knit spirit of the Crafton campus. Natour is set to transfer to either the University of California, Los Angeles, or the University of California, San Diego in the fall.

Chancellor Dr. Diana Rodriguez encouraged graduates to stay connected to their Crafton roots. "You belong here, and you'll always belong here," she said. "Come back anytime. Once a Roadrunner, always a Roadrunner."



Board of Trustees Chair Dr. Nathan Gonzales echoed that sentiment, highlighting the role families and loved ones played in helping graduates reach this milestone.

Vice President of Instruction Dr. Keith Wurtz officially presented the Class of 2025 to the Board of Trustees. Degrees were conferred, pins were handed out, and students turned their tassels, marking the start of their next chapter.

As confetti flew and cheers echoed across campus, Crafton closed its 2025 commencement with a simple message: The journey continues, and this community is always behind you.

It was an evening filled with pride, joy, and the unmistakable sense that the Crafton Hills community is stronger than ever.



## CAMPUS UPDATE

# NEW PERFORMING ARTS CENTER HONORS A LASTING LEGACY

Big things are happening at Crafton. After years of planning and construction, the new Finkelstein Performing Arts Center is almost finished. Located just above Lot E, the 24,000-square-foot facility will open this fall, and we couldn't be more excited to welcome alumni, students and community members inside.

This new state-of-the-art facility is a tribute not only to Crafton's bright future but also to its rich past. The original theater was completed in 1978, named for Ruben and Lester Finkelstein, two brothers who generously donated a portion of their cattle land to help establish the college. Now, nearly five decades later, a new generation of performers will take the stage in a building that reflects Crafton's ongoing commitment to the performing arts.

The new PAC features a 274-seat main theater, a black box theater, rehearsal and recording spaces, and fully equipped costume and scene shops, designed to mirror the professional environments our students will enter after graduation. With sustainable features such as solar panels, electric vehicle (EV) chargers, and drought-tolerant landscaping, it has already earned recognition from the U.S. Green Building Council.

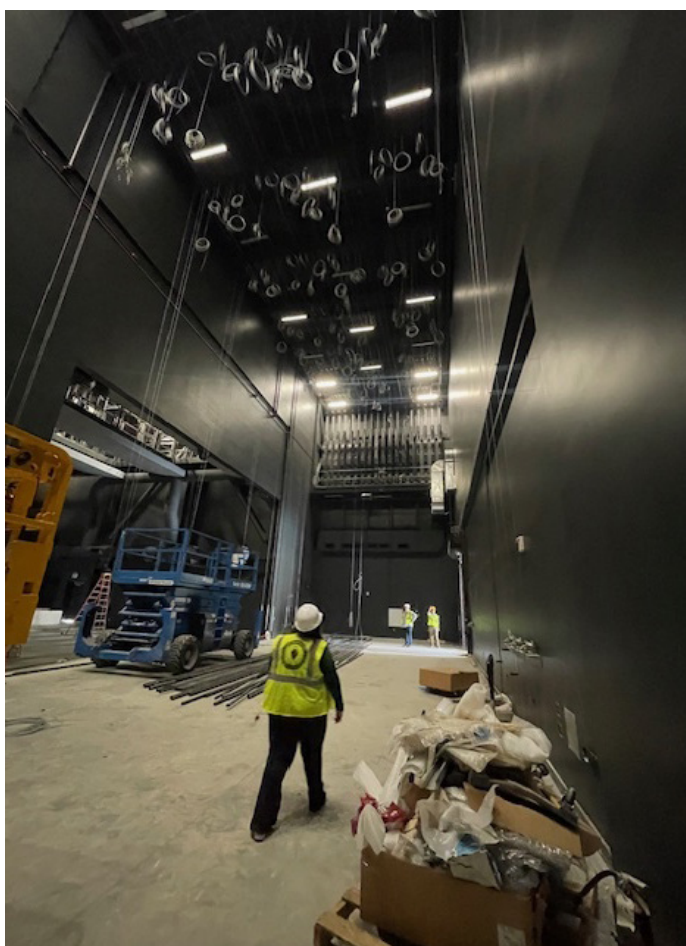
The building also carries forward the legacy of beloved founding faculty member Cliff Cabanilla, who started the theater program in the early 1970s and led it for more than 30 years. Before the original building was completed, Cliff launched a summer theater program through Crafton at a then-unused pasture in Redlands' Prospect Park, now known as the Redlands Theatre Festival, which still runs today, operated by his family. This spring, in a full-circle moment, Cliff's daughter Shannon stepped in to direct the final show in the old theater before the new PAC opens.

"Professor Cabanilla's vision created a place where students and professionals could work side-by-side to bring meaningful performances to life," said CHC President Dr. Kevin Horan. "That spirit lives on in this new space."

The Finkelstein Performing Arts Center was also made possible by the generosity of donors like Elaine Rosen, whose generous endowed gift will provide student scholarships and equipment for the theater and music programs for years to come.

**We hope you'll join us to celebrate this milestone. A ribbon-cutting ceremony and tours are planned for Friday, September 19, at 1:00 p.m., and alumni, students, and community members are invited to attend.** Want to leave your own legacy? Visit our Sponsor a Seat page to dedicate a seat in the new theater, and be sure to check out the video rendering of the PAC while you're there. It's a great way to preview the space and see what your support helps build.

Watch for more updates soon and get ready to step into Crafton's next act.



# HOW TO GIVE

For over 50 years, the Crafton Hills College Foundation has supported CHC in advancing the educational, career, and personal success of our diverse campus community through engagement and learning. The Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization; therefore, contributions to the Foundation are tax-deductible.

Your investment will make a significant difference in the life of a student.



## PRESIDENT'S CIRCLE

This elite group of donors make a \$1,000 annual commitment to support the mission of the CHC Foundation with a President's Circle Membership. This dynamic group of alumni, parents, faculty, and friends play a vital role in supporting the College, giving the President the flexibility to embrace new ideas and emerging opportunities while meeting the evolving needs of Crafton Hills College.



## ANNUAL GIVING FUND

Contributions to the Annual Fund proved the precious gift of opportunity to thousands of deserving students by supporting scholarships and promoting excellence at the College. These unrestricted gifts give the Foundation the flexibility to respond to our student's greatest needs.



## SCHOLARSHIPS

An Endowed Scholarship Fund is established through a minimum gift of cash or stock totaling \$12,500, which can be made over a period of five years. Endowment funds are invested prudently to establish a permanent fund in which the principal is held in perpetuity and only the investment income is expended annually (payout). These funds will support a scholarship forever.



## PLANNED GIVING

The Foundation for CHC offers a variety of Planned Giving options. Whether your estate is simple or complex, there is a tax-advantaged gift planning vehicle that is just right for you. Your support will help CHC students succeed and will provide a lasting legacy for future generations.



## STUDENT AND PROGRAM SUPPORT

Crafton Hills College provides quality instruction and support services that allow our students, many of whom face serious obstacles to completion, to pursue and achieve their educational goals. We are extremely proud to be the pathway to social and economic advancement for many who would otherwise not have the opportunity to pursue a college education. The college's low cost for an excellent education allows the impact of your investment to reach more students. Your gift to support CHC Students and Programs goes further at Crafton Hills College.



## NAMING OPPORTUNITIES

There are many ways you can make a lasting impact at Crafton Hills College and at the same time pay tribute to a notable and influential person or organization. The CHC Foundation is striving to secure permanent endowments to support the ever growing academic, programmatic, and student needs of the Crafton through Naming Opportunities.



## STAY CONNECTED



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Crafton Hills College Foundation & Alumni