

TENNESSEE TECH COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

# ASPIRE

2026 ISSUE



## About Our Cover

*From left to right: Charles Jones, Carter Lay and Riley Scoggins.*

**Charles Jones** is a junior majoring in finance and economics. On campus, he serves as president of the Society for Advancement of Finance and Economics (SAFE) and the National Society of Leadership and Success (NSLS). He is also a College of Business Student Ambassador and peer mentor. One of his proudest accomplishments is securing an internship with the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, where he contributes to the Survey Center's economic research.

**Carter Lay** is a senior majoring in business management. On campus, he serves as a College of Business Ambassador, a President's Ambassador, and an intern in the Professional Readiness and Leadership Center. Carter played a key role in launching Level Up for the College of Business, a digital e-portfolio platform that helps students get involved, build real world skills and showcase their experiences to employers. He recently represented Tennessee Tech's College of Business at the Pathways Conference in Philadelphia as the Student Speaker of Distinction, where he shared how experiential learning and the Level Up program shaped his college journey and prepared him for future leadership opportunities.

**Riley Scoggins** graduated in June 2025 with dual bachelor's degrees in business information technology and business management. She is currently pursuing her MBA with a graduate certificate in cybersecurity management and analytics at Tech. Riley began her Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) journey as an IT intern in May 2024 and was excited to accept a full time position as an IT developmental associate at TVA in August 2025. She is proud to be part of a company with such a strong mission and is grateful for the opportunity to continue growing her career with TVA.

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## Alumni and Friends,

On behalf of the Tennessee Tech College of Business, I am pleased to share the first edition of *Aspire* with you.

This has been a remarkable year of growth and innovation for our college, and our students and community continue to reach new heights. Thanks to the “can do” spirit of our talented faculty and staff, we launched industry certificates in a newly designed MBA program, saw our students share their research at the Federal Reserve, broke ground on the Cookeville Food Forest, began a complete transformation of Johnson Hall and much more.

In these pages, you’ll discover how alumni like Lindsey Cox are driving Tennessee’s innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem, how students like Gavin Edleson are making their mark on the national stage, and how faculty like Sid Bundy are creating lasting impact in our community. You’ll also get an inside look at our students’ global adventures and learn about the cutting edge AI insights shared at our Fall Celebration Dinner.

We also welcomed Coco Wu as our new associate dean. Coco brings a wealth of leadership experience to Tennessee Tech, having served as director of economic analysis, associate dean, and professor of strategic management at Central Washington University’s College of Business.

Coco steps into this role following the retirement of Ramachandran Natarajan after 35 years of dedicated service to our college. Nat’s quiet leadership, mentorship of junior faculty and instrumental role in our AACSB accreditation have left a lasting impact on our community. The treasured “gong” that he kept in his office may no longer ring to open faculty meetings, but his legacy of bringing people together continues to resonate throughout our halls.

As you explore these pages, I hope you are inspired and proud of the work and passion of our faculty and students. You are part of these stories, and your continued support allows us to build on this momentum as we transform the lives of students and the future of business.



***Wings Up!***

*Thomas H. Payne*

**Thomas H. Payne, Ph.D.**  
*Dean, College of Business*



## *Capturing the World Through Her Lens:*

# Meet Emily Armstrong

**E**mily Armstrong, a Cookeville native and Tennessee Tech alumna, has turned her passion for photography into opportunities on some of the world’s biggest stages. What began as a hobby—snapping photos of her own archery gear—quickly grew into a career path. As a marketing major at Tennessee Tech, she honed her skills as a student photographer for the athletics department and the Office of Communication and Marketing, where her creativity and professionalism earned her a Student of the Year nomination. She has since built an impressive portfolio, capturing action for the National Field Archery Association, World Archery and major international competitions.

In 2024, Armstrong reached a career milestone when she was selected to photograph the Olympic Games in Paris, documenting archery events and athletes she had followed for years. After completing her MBA at Tech, she returned to campus where she now works as a photographer and has contributed many of the photos in this magazine.



# Redefining the MBA: Tennessee Tech Adds Value, Flexibility and Career Focus

**L**ast year, the College of Business debuted its new Value-Enhanced MBA, a bold update to one of Tennessee Tech's most popular graduate programs. The new format expands the program from 30 to 33 credit hours, creating room for specialization and delivering greater value for both business and non-business graduates.

Students who enter with a business degree pursue a 21-hour streamlined MBA core that is supplemented by 12 hours of electives. Students may opt to use their electives to pursue one of four carefully curated 12-hour industry certificates. This allows them to graduate with an MBA and an industry-immersed certificate in hand—all within a total of 33 hours of coursework.

Students coming in without a business degree receive a comprehensive 24-hour MBA core that equips them with the fundamentals of accounting, finance, marketing, leadership and management and is supplemented by nine hours of graduate business electives. They can design their own electives to tailor

## Key MBA Student Facts

- 72% Employed Full-Time
- Top five sectors MBA grads work in:
  - Healthcare
  - Government
  - Financial Services
  - Accounting
  - Manufacturing
- Upon completion of their MBA, students earn on average **\$25,000 more**
- 61% receive tuition assistance from their employer

the MBA to their career ambitions or follow one of the certificate tracks. This way, students without an undergraduate in business can earn their MBA and an industry-relevant certificate of their choosing with a total of 36 hours of credit.

### **Certificate options include:**

#### **Banking and Financial Services:**

Offers practical expertise in bank management, financial services, risk assessment, economic policy and financial markets.

#### **Cybersecurity Management and Analytics:**

Equips students with essential knowledge in AI and analytics, data management, policy compliance, personnel and network security, risk mitigation, cyber audits and IT project management.

#### **Healthcare Informatics:**

Offers practical expertise in healthcare economics, systems management, cybersecurity, data analytics and public health policy.

#### **Agribusiness:**

Equips students with the skills needed to manage agricultural businesses, supply chains and food systems in a rapidly evolving global market.

“ This launch represents the future of graduate business education at Tennessee Tech. With the value-enhanced MBA, we are redefining what it means to earn an MBA—delivering not only a strong foundation in management but also a second credential that reflects the realities of a changing marketplace.

— Julie Pharr, Ph.D.”

# **Top Five Ways the New Value-Enhanced MBA Pays Off**

## **1. Two Credentials in One**

Earn not just an MBA but also an industry focused credential in a high demand specialty. This ensures that you don't just know the theory of management, but you also gain expertise in high demand fields.

## **2. Built for Every Background**

Whether you studied business or not, the program meets you where you are with a streamlined path for business majors and a comprehensive foundation for non business grads.

## **3. More Flexibility, More Focus**

Choose from curated certificate tracks or design your own electives to tailor your MBA to your career ambitions.

## **4. Employer-Ready Skills**

Graduate with broad management expertise plus targeted, industry immersed knowledge exactly what employers are seeking.

## **5. High Value, Smart Investment**

At just 33 hours, the program is efficient and affordable, delivering depth without added time or cost.



# Tech College of Business's Johnson Hall Slated for 21st Century Makeover

**T**ennessee Tech is a university on the move. As enrollment continues to grow, the institution is making bold investments to upgrade and modernize its campus for the Golden Eagles of tomorrow. The College of Business's longtime home of Johnson Hall is no exception.

Constructed in 1970, Johnson Hall is undergoing a total renovation to further enhance the student experience within a completely reimagined 65,000-square-foot space—all part of a \$750 million infrastructure investment the university has made during the past decade.

"The newly designed Johnson Hall is designed to accommodate the way students learn today while providing flexibility for future growth," said Tom Payne, Ph.D., dean of the College of Business, in remarks first announcing the renovation. "Innovative state-of-the-art spaces will facilitate teamwork and greater interaction among students,

faculty and business partners. And, while providing greater opportunity for collaboration and experiential learning, the renovation also leverages new and emerging technologies, mirroring those that graduates will use as they enter the professional workforce."

Building plans call for a complete reimagining of the interior spaces, including a multi-story entrance, a more open floor plan that allows greater natural sunlight, revitalized common areas for students to gather and more than 4,000 square feet of additional specialized learning spaces. The renovation will also add an accessible entrance that opens to the campus's all-new pedestrian walkway and plaza.

The renovation will include updates to existing mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems, along with updated finishes and new windows. The renovation will also expand the Heidtke Trading

Room, a learning lab that simulates the activities of an investment firm, and the Bloomberg Lab, where students can master the same platform that financial services professionals use to monitor and analyze real-time market data.

Likewise, the renovation is set to expand Tennessee's only IT Forensics Lab, where students learn steganography, cryptography, password cracking, recovery of hidden or deleted data and other skills critical to today's technology-infused business climate.

The redesigned Johnson Hall will feature a new behavioral research lab that will support

faculty, student and industry projects addressing consumer, investor, worker and other individual and group behaviors across economics, marketing, management, finance and other disciplines.

“What we're most enthusiastic about is the reworking of the entire footprint of Johnson Hall,” said Yasmine Williams, manager of marketing and partnership services for the College of Business. “We're building out something new and different. It's truly exciting.”

While College of Business students eagerly await their new facilities, the college's faculty, staff and leadership team have made sure they stay on track.





## A Revitalized Learning Environment

- Updated and flexible learning environment, including 14 classrooms, an auditorium and a multipurpose room
- Expanded areas for student and faculty collaboration
- A dedicated behavioral sciences research lab
- A renovated IT forensic lab and expanded Bloomberg lab
- A refreshed student lounge
- Improved accessibility

The college has established a temporary residence in Foundation Hall on the west side of campus, painstakingly developing the building so that each of the amenities and services students previously found in Johnson Hall are available in the college's temporary home.

"I'm very proud of the way our faculty, staff, and students have come together to accommodate the renovation," said Rene Watson, manager of fiscal and physical operations in the College of Business. "Our folks have practiced the leadership, professionalism and teamwork skills we teach, and our college has grown in more ways than one as a result. We placed over 92 percent of our classes in Foundation Hall where all faculty have offices. We have also made improvements to the building so that students enjoy being over here."

Once complete, the new Johnson Hall will be just the latest sign of growth and revitalization on Tech's campus. Tech is also set to welcome a new west side to the football stadium later this year, recently opened its first new engineering building in 50 years, broken ground on an Advanced Construction and Manufacturing Engineering Building, and is currently making renovations to Derryberry Hall, among other enhancements.

"These investments in campus facilities are critically important," said Tech President Phil Oldham in remarks to the Tech Board of Trustees in late 2024. "Investing in the future of Tennessee Tech is not an option, it's a necessity."

## **Secure Your Legacy in Johnson Hall.**

**While renovations are underway, it is the perfect time to leave your mark on Johnson Hall. Many parts of the building have not yet been named. If you are interested in learning more, contact [business@tntech.edu](mailto:business@tntech.edu).**

# ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT



# LINDSEY COX: EMPOWERING INNOVATION ACROSS TENNESSEE

**T**ennessee Tech's College of Business not only creates tomorrow's business leaders, it shapes the forces that drive positive change across the state. Lindsey Cox is a prime example of one such force.

Cox serves as the CEO of Launch Tennessee, a public-private partnership that empowers the startup ecosystem through capital, connections and commercialization. In this role, she also administers InvestTN, a \$70 million equity program that supports early-stage startups and venture capital funds located in Tennessee.

After earning her MBA from Tennessee Tech in 2010, Cox began her career in the Comptroller's Office with the Tennessee State Government. She joined Launch Tennessee in 2013, helping to build a statewide network of entrepreneurship centers and programs to support startups. Cox then served at the U.S. Department of Commerce where she led the restructuring of a major grant program to strengthen tech-based economic development and, later, led The Company Lab in Chattanooga. She returned to Launch Tennessee to bring together her experience in government, nonprofits and regional entrepreneurship to drive the state's innovation ecosystem.

**This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.**

**Q: What surprised you about returning to Launch Tennessee after spending time in these other roles?**

**A: What I learned is that Tennessee is incredibly well-positioned in tech-based economic development. Many of my counterparts in other states are still trying to create the structures we've had for years. Our statewide network of entrepreneur centers is unique. It operates as a true community of practice, where centers can share what's working and avoid duplicating efforts. At the end of the day, founders don't care where support comes from. They just need it. In Tennessee, they can get mentorship and resources from anywhere in the state, and that's not something I've seen executed as well elsewhere.**

**Q: What led you to work in the startup and innovation space?**

**A: My interest in innovation grew from seeing firsthand the power of public-private partnerships during my time in the Comptroller's Office. I realized that being part of a small, agile team in a large organization could have a big impact. That led me to Launch Tennessee, where I helped build a statewide network of entrepreneur centers and explore how investing in startups could drive real change. Experiences at the Department of Commerce and leading the Company Lab in Chattanooga deepened my understanding of tech-based economic development and showed me how innovation can transform communities. That ultimately drew me back to Launch Tennessee to help strengthen our state's startup ecosystem.**



work with school taught me how to balance competing priorities, which has been invaluable in my career.

**Q: What advice would you give to students?**

**A: Try new things!** It's so easy to believe that everything is permanent. When you're just starting out, it can feel like your first job is the only job you'll ever have, but it's not.

It's temporary. You'll learn a lot and move on, and each step builds your career.

Also, remember you are always building a network, whether you realize it or not. At Tech, that includes your peers, your faculty, your advisors and even extracurriculars. Be mindful and intentional about building and maintaining those connections, because they'll continue to matter throughout your life.

**Q: What's next for Launch Tennessee?**

**A: We continue to actively invest in companies across the state through our \$70 million fund, InvestTN, adding more companies every day. One example is ATS Innovations, a medical device company founded by a Tennessee Tech alum. ATS Innovations is the creator of the MetaFlex glove, a wearable grip strengthener that also provides therapeutic compression. It's designed to reduce pain and improve mobility for people with arthritis, tendonitis and other conditions that affect hand strength.**

We're also working with Tennessee Tech through the Tennessee Technology Advancement Consortium. This is a pilot project to streamline commercialization of university-based innovations across Tennessee. In other words, we're working with faculty to explore how their innovative work could lead to spinout companies. It's exciting to see the potential for new technologies and businesses coming out of Tech.



**Q: How did your time at Tennessee Tech prepare you for your role today?**

**A: I look back really fondly on my time at Tennessee Tech. I got an excellent education at an affordable price. As someone from a working-class background, that was extremely important to me. One of the highlights of my time there was getting to participate in a combined pitch and case study competition in Washington, D.C. We ended up placing fourth out of 40 schools. That was such a validating experience for me and really highlighted the quality of the education I was getting.**

I also built close friendships with my fellow students that I still maintain today. And juggling

# Aspire To Do More

Throughout this magazine, you see the exceptional: curious, adaptable, sharp graduates who rise above the commonplace.

With your support, their aspirations become reality.

## Your gift creates:

- **Global Experiences:** immersive study-abroad courses that broaden students' perspectives and take them into international business, cultural sites and economic centers.
- **Professional Development & Leadership Excellence:** leadership retreats, professional training and industry conferences that connect students with real-world practitioners and build essential communication and technical skills.
- **Career Readiness:** internships, class site visits to companies around the state, entrepreneurship competitions and small business projects that kickstart students' careers.
- **Scholarships & Student Support:** funding that ensures cost is not a barrier to global experiences, leadership programs and career-launching opportunities.

*And so much more.*

Your gift changes lives.

You can be part of what makes our College and our students truly exceptional.

## Be Part of Their Success Story

**GIVE NOW**

<https://www.tntech.edu/business/alumni/giving.php>



# EXCELLENCE WORTH CELEBRATING

## FACULTY & STAFF AWARDS

### Triple Crown of Excellence: Chelsea Dowell's Record-Breaking Year

**Chelsea Dowell, Ph.D.**, lecturer of economics, earned three major faculty awards that span the full spectrum of academic excellence. Her sweep of the Outstanding Faculty Award for Teaching, General Education Award for Outstanding Teaching and Tech Togetherness Award represents a rare

triple crown showcasing exceptional teaching and transformative community impact.

Known for her teamwork, dedication to student success, and willingness to go above and beyond, Dowell creates a respectful, judgment-free environment where students feel empowered to engage in meaningful discussions. Through the use of innovative technologies, she helps students explore global issues with depth and relevance. Her commitment to experiential learning is clear. Connecting theory with practice, her students analyze real-world economic data to forecast performance. Homework becomes creative expression as students create podcasts, music videos and case studies that bring classroom concepts to life.

Dowell is a champion of interdisciplinary collaboration and community engagement. She launched the College of Business Journal for Societal Impact, led student consulting projects with the college's iCube Center and Tech Athletics, and developed partnerships with local

nonprofits and campus departments. Her "Faith and Finances" literacy program and pro bono consulting reflect her commitment to service. She was twice invited as keynote speaker for Indiana Wesleyan University's DBA Residency and mentors six students globally. Her applied research in healthcare economics also led to a consulting role with WindRose Health Network.

### Course Design Innovation: Rachel Mannahan

**Rachel Mannahan, Ph.D.**, assistant professor of economics, earned the Excellence in Course Design Award for her Managerial Economics course in the MBA program. Her innovative "Watch It, Practice It and Do It Yourself" format serves students from diverse academic and professional backgrounds, allowing them to engage with content at their own pace while maintaining intellectual rigor.

Students apply economic theory to real-world companies through weekly discussions, building toward final projects tailored to their career interests. Mannahan brings expertise in experimental design and A/B testing directly into the classroom, fostering analytical thinking and career readiness for both recent graduates and seasoned professionals returning to school.

# COLLEGE AWARDS

**Allison Toth, Ph.D.**, assistant professor of management, received the 2025 Jordan Wagner Excellence in Research Award for her exceptional scholarly contributions. Over the past year, she published five peer-reviewed articles in highly ranked journals, including *The Journal of Organizational Behavior* and *The Leadership Quarterly*. Three of Toth's recent articles were in journals are classified as "A" on the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) list, the premier benchmark for business-related publications.



**Jaime Williams, Ph.D.**, assistant professor of management, earned the Kinslow Award for Excellence in Teaching for her innovative and experiential teaching style. Colleagues praised her commitment to creating dynamic, interactive and globally aware learning environments that enrich the educational experience for students.



**Chelsea Dowell, Ph.D.**, lecturer of economics, was one of the college's two Excellence in Overall Performance Award recipients. Dowell was honored for her remarkable year of teaching, research and service to the profession and community. Her accomplishments included mentoring 29 students, publishing impactful research, coordinating financial literacy workshops, securing an AI Tech Trendsetter Grant and transforming a class to center around the National College Fed Challenge Competition – a first for Tennessee Tech.



**Steve Garner, Ph.D.**, associate professor of accounting, also received the Excellence in Overall Performance Award. Garner was recognized for his extensive research and professional leadership, particularly his service with the Tennessee Society of Accounting Educators, where he currently serves as Vice President and will soon assume the role of President.

**Ann Davis, Ph.D.**, professor of accounting, received the 2025 Excellence in Service Faculty Award. Under her leadership and guidance, Tennessee Tech's Master of Accountancy (MACC) program achieved an 80% CPA exam pass rate in 2024 and a 100% job placement rate for graduates.



**Julie Galloway**, director of the College of Business Student Success Center, was presented with the Staff Excellence in Service Award. Her dedication to student success and mentorship has made her a trusted advisor and role model within the college.

**Melissa Creek**, Student Success Center advisor, won the Outstanding Staff Award for her problem-solving skills, leadership and commitment to student success. Creek has earned admiration from colleagues across the college and the university.



# STUDENT AWARDS

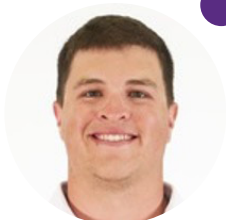
## OVC Female Athlete of the Year



**Madolyn Isringhausen** is a student-athlete who majored in marketing and competed in volleyball. She graduated in May 2025 with an MBA.

## OVC Community Service Award

**Haden Maxwell** is a student-athlete majoring in business management and competes in golf.



## OVC Medal of Honor Award

**Zaely Tilt** is a student-athlete majoring in accounting and competes in Women's Cross Country and Track.

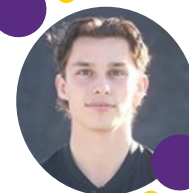
**Anna Baker** is a student-athlete majoring in finance and competes in soccer.



## Alex Alvarez

is a student-athlete majoring in finance and competes in tennis.

**Lucas Bitzer** is a student-athlete who majors in business management and competes in tennis.



## Murilo Buckhardt

is a student-athlete who majors in business management and competes in tennis. He received two awards, including the OVC Medal of Honor Award and the President's Award.

## President's Award

**Drew Bolton** is a student-athlete who majors in finance and competes in golf.



## Armed Forces

### Second Lieutenant Scott Andrew Campbell

graduated in May 2025 with a major in business information and technology and a minor in social Science, leadership, and military science. He received

his commission in the TN Army National Guard Field Artillery Branch on May 14, 2025. As a cadet, 2LT Campbell attended Basic Camp and Advanced Camp at Fort Knox, KY. Campbell's duty assignment is 35th DSB, Chattanooga, Tennessee.

## Student Leadership and Academics



**Abbie Maffett** is a senior in operations, logistics and supply chain management. She received the Spirit of Tennessee Tech Award, the top honor of the Student Leadership Awards. Maffett also received the

Unsung Heroes award for creating a cheerful and welcoming environment for others, serving as an example to other students, helping her peers succeed and more.

**Alana Brown** is a senior in marketing. She received the Student of the Year award from the Office of Communications and Marketing, where she has worked as a student worker for the last two years.





**Gavin Edleson** is a senior in economics. He received the Research Excellence Award from the Tennessee Eta Chapter of Omicron Delta Epsilon. His research, conducted with classmates Gretchen McGuire, Trent Bilbrey and Malak “Angel” Faisal, was selected for presentation at the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland’s Economics Scholars Program.



**College of Business Student Hall of Fame Mahalah Boone** (business management ’25, MBA ’26) is the 2025 inductee to the College of Business Student Hall of Fame. Established in 2015 during Tennessee Tech’s Centennial Celebration, the Hall of Fame honors one outstanding student each year who demonstrates excellence in academics, leadership, campus and community engagement, professional development and grit. Nominees are submitted by faculty and staff, then evaluated through a blind review process.

As part of the nomination, students reflect on how their experiences in the College of Business shape their future goals and success. Boone’s submission distinguished her among her peers and earned her a place on the permanent list of Hall of Fame honorees.

**Jacob Bruce** is a senior in marketing and was one of the recipients of the Outstanding Student Leader Award.



**2025 Derryberry Award Chance Hale**, a finance major from McMinnville, Tennessee, has been named the 2025 recipient of Tennessee Tech University’s prestigious Derryberry Award, the university’s highest student honor.



The Derryberry Award, named in memory of longtime university president Everett Derryberry, is presented annually to a graduating senior who has exhibited outstanding leadership, academic excellence and sincere contributions to the university and the wider community.

A first-generation college student with deep rural roots, Hale credits his family’s encouragement for choosing Tech, where he quickly became a leader across campus. From serving as a resident assistant and Student Government Association president to conducting undergraduate research and engaging in numerous student organizations, Hale’s college experience has been marked by growth, grit and gratitude.

“There is no better place than Tech for community,” Hale said. “The faculty truly care here, and the students are some of the most intelligent, passionate and supportive people I’ve ever met. That energy is infectious.”

### Past College of Business Hall of Fame Recipients

- 2024** Jalisa Johnson  
*Business Management*
- 2023** Dawson Lane  
*Finance*
- 2022** Marissa Sewell  
*Business Management and Human Resources Management*
- 2021** Nia Buntin  
*Accounting and Business and Information Technology*
- 2020** Not awarded
- 2019** Forrest Allard  
*Accounting and Economics*
- 2018** Alexis McWilliams  
*Business Management and Human Resources Management*
- 2017** Daniel Sherfey  
*Accounting and Business Management*
- 2016** Karen Warren  
*Accounting*
- 2015** Jesse Welch  
*International Business and Cultures*



# The Ollie Otter Movie Premier: Expanding Reach with Collaboration and Creativity

**IN** 2026, the Ollie Otter Booster Seat and Seat Belt Safety Program—a statewide campaign for child passenger safety—will celebrate its 20th anniversary. Created at the College of Business’s iCube, then known as the Business Media Center, the Ollie Otter program has evolved over the years. While remaining true to its namesake and with Ollie still making personal appearances across Tennessee, the program now utilizes the latest technologies to spread the program’s message of “Under 4’9”, it’s booster time!” The biggest challenge, however, hasn’t changed: travel.

With Tennessee Tech as Ollie’s home, the program is situated in the center of the state. The need to keep talented iCube team members on campus to directly engage Tech students in projects, combined with new technologies available to disseminate Ollie’s message, led to the development of the Ollie Otter Movie.

A team of iCube staff and students collaborated to create a 15-minute, interactive film blending live-action storytelling with colorful animated shorts. Maelybeth Young, iCube’s Ollie Otter program coordinator and marketing instructor in the College of Business, is the star of the show. This show features three alternate endings to allow a seamless transition between the video

and her “guest appearance” at schools across the state. Behind the scenes, the iCube team included Associate Director of Education Mack Lunn, Business and Information Technology student Matthew Peterson and Communications Manager Alexis MacAllister—a driving force of the endeavor, acting as both project leader and movie director.

Community and industry partners for the movie and its premiere event at Safety City in Knoxville included the Tennessee Highway Safety Office, the Tennessee Road Builders Association, the Tennessee Highway Patrol, the Ollie Otter Child Safety Foundation, Mid-State Construction Company and the Epilepsy Foundation of East Tennessee. A partnership with Middle Tennessee State University’s IMAGINE Animation Studio resulted in animated sequences utilized throughout the film, as well as the title theme song.

Thanks to these private and public partnerships—and the continued dedication of the iCube team—Ollie Otter can now be present in every school and classroom, even when he can’t physically be there to give the students a high five, Ollie’s signature move, other than buckling up, of course!



## Bella Garrett: A Recent Graduate with a Lasting Impact

**C**ollege of Business graduate Isabella “Bella” Garrett worked at iCube for two years while pursuing her marketing degree. Her drive and professionalism immediately set her apart from other talented students. As she began her internship with Associate Director of Marketing Sydney Kiser, Garrett was tasked with working on statewide campaigns for the Tennessee Highway Safety Office, investing \$1.5 million a year on digital, radio, social, TV, out-of-home and streaming service ad creation placement for 12–14 safety campaigns a year.

Creating jingles became a fun, creative way to deliver effective content during Garrett’s time at iCube. In a friendly “competition” across the iCube office, Garrett’s parodies of the songs “On the Road Again” and “Say My Name” won the vote and her renditions were streamed on radio and Spotify during iCube “Click It or Ticket” and Thanksgiving campaigns. Garrett also played a role in the creation of iCube’s second animated commercial targeting distracted drivers. Her ideas—and her

likeness—are weaved throughout the video, with the lead character demonstrating the dangers of reading text messages while driving during a statewide Hands Free Tennessee campaign.

Garrett’s final contribution before graduation was the concept for a new animated commercial based on the “Three Little Pigs.” Marking our third animated commercial with Elastic Pictures in Knoxville, Tennessee, the spot was featured in 2025’s \$75,000 Halloween “Booze it and Lose It” campaign. This new commercial premiered in October 2025 across digital platforms and streaming services such as YouTube TV, Disney+ and Hulu, targeting men ages 21–44 and demonstrating the consequences of drinking and driving.

Garrett’s innovation, drive and professionalism have left a void in the office that will be hard to fill. Still, we are incredibly proud of all she accomplished and wish her continued success as she pursues her law degree.

# **The Symbol That Binds:** Challenge Coins and the Legacy of Ken Wiant at Tennessee Tech



**W**alk into Tennessee Tech University's College of Business, and you will find in our classrooms and hallways stories of innovation, perseverance and tradition. At the heart of many of these tales is a man whose impact is as lasting as the traditions he helped shape: Ken Wiant, Ph.D. Known for his passion for finance, forward-thinking leadership and ability to inspire students, Wiant has left an enduring mark on the college and the lives of its students.

One of his most recognized contributions is the challenge coin tradition, introduced during his tenure as interim dean in 2014. The challenge coin, a symbol rooted in military camaraderie, became Wiant's way of forging a lasting bond among College of Business graduates.

"The challenge coin is a symbol of membership," he explained. "It's a tangible reminder that our graduates are part of something bigger—a family that extends beyond the walls of the university."

The idea came to him through his son, who served in the military. In the military, challenge coins symbolize belonging and shared purpose. Dr. Wiant saw the potential for the same symbolism at Tennessee Tech.

"It struck me as a meaningful way to celebrate our students' achievements and to give them something enduring that connects them back to the college," he shared.

### ***Bridging Theory with Practice***

Wiant's journey to Tech's College of Business was anything but conventional. Before academia, he served as a U.S. Air Force crew chief for F-4 Phantom II fighter jets, worked as a commercial lender and managed banking operations. These experiences laid the groundwork for a teaching philosophy centered on real-world application and student engagement.

"I've always believed that students learn best when they see how concepts play out in real life," Wiant said.

Whether teaching corporate finance or entrepreneurship, he consistently emphasized

bridging theory with practice, inspiring countless students to aim high and push boundaries. His dedication to innovative teaching earned him Tech's prestigious Leighton E. Sissom Innovation and Creativity Award in 2012, recognizing his ability to make complex financial principles accessible and engaging.

Beyond the classroom, Wiant held numerous leadership roles, including director of the Technology Institute (now the Center for Innovation in Teaching and Learning) and interim dean of the College of Business. He also served as chief financial officer for Bethanamist, a pharmaceutical startup.

"I've always believed in learning by doing, and my work outside the classroom has helped me bring practical insights to my students," he reflected.

### ***Creating a Lasting Tradition***

The challenge coin tradition began with a collaborative effort between Wiant, faculty, staff and student ambassadors. The first coin, designed in 2014, featured an eagle, symbolizing strength and tradition. It also paid homage to Charlie Hawkins, a beloved alumnus who championed the eagle as an emblem of excellence.

"We wanted the students to feel involved in the process," Wiant recalled. "The eagle resonated because of its significance to the college and the university."

Since its inception, the coin has evolved annually, with each graduating class leaving its mark on the design. It is distributed during graduation, marking the transition from student to alumnus while reinforcing lifelong membership in the College of Business family.

"It's a handshake and a promise," Wiant said. "It says, 'You've graduated, but you're always part of this group.'"

For alumni, the coin is not just a keepsake—it's a badge of honor.

"I've seen alumni pull out their coins at events, proud to show they're part of the College of



Business family,” Wiant shared. “It mirrors the military tradition—you may be out of uniform, but you always carry that connection.”

The tradition’s influence has extended beyond the College of Business, inspiring other departments at Tennessee Tech, including the College of Engineering, to adopt similar initiatives.

“It’s fascinating how these ideas emerged independently but simultaneously,” Wiant noted. “It speaks to the shared values of pride and connection across the university.”

### ***Continuing Impact***

In retirement, Wiant remains as energetic as ever. A master restorer of vintage cars, he recently completed a 1937 Chevy that won best in class at a national show.

“I enjoy staying engaged and learning new skills,” he said, reflecting on his current project—a 1962 Chevy Nova.

In addition to his hobbies, Wiant continues to share his expertise in the business world. He has been instrumental in guiding a pharmaceutical startup through the complexities of FDA approval and has helped small businesses navigate challenges.

“I quit using the word retired because my time is as valuable as it’s ever been,” he quipped.

### ***Leaving a Lasting Legacy***

For students, colleagues and alumni, Wiant is more than a professor or administrator—he’s a

mentor, innovator and the embodiment of Tech’s values of excellence and connection. The challenge coin, like Wiant’s impact, represents a legacy that transcends generations. It’s a symbol of the traditions he helped create and the inspiration he continues to provide.

“The coin is a testament to our graduates’ achievements, but also a reminder that they’ll always have a place here,” Wiant said. “It’s about belonging, about family and about never forgetting where you came from.”

For the countless students who carry that coin into their futures, and for those who have had the privilege of learning from Wiant, it’s clear that his legacy is one of enduring innovation, leadership and connection—qualities that will forever define the College of Business at Tennessee Tech.





# Golden Eagle Takes Flight at the Federal Reserve

Last spring, Tennessee Tech's College of Business soared to new heights when junior economics major Gavin Edleson of Pingree Grove, Illinois, was selected to present his research at the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland's prestigious Economic Scholars Program.

"It was incredibly eye-opening," Edleson recalled. "I gained valuable insight into professional economics and learned how to better prepare for graduate school, particularly in terms of which undergraduate courses to prioritize. The chance to chat with research assistants and full-time economists was especially exciting—it's the very career path I'm aiming for."

Edleson's presentation stemmed from work he began in Chelsea Dowell's business statistics course. There, he collaborated with classmates Gretchen McGuire, Trent Bilbrey and Malak "Angel" Faisal to consult for iCube, a College of Business Center that provides state, federal and private marketing campaigns focused on traffic safety, public health and other societally impactful initiatives. Edleson's research paper evaluated iCube's "Reduce TN Crashes" initiative, showing that the campaign decreased car crashes across Tennessee. His research also suggested that expanding efforts beyond high schools to locations like community colleges could further improve safety statewide.

While Edleson represented Tech on stage, Dowell

brought six other students to experience life as working economists and network with Federal Reserve board members and research economists. The group included Turner Eades, Emily Green, Jordan Hayenga, Charles Jones, Karis Kane and Emma Tolley.

"This experiential learning opportunity is one that the students will never forget," Dowell remarked.

For freshman Karis Kane, the conference reinforced her passion for economics.

"The conference confirmed to me that I am in the right place and that economics is certainly what I want to pursue," she said. "I have become even more excited to learn and grow with our amazing professors, and I cannot wait to go back and compare how much I learn in the coming years."

The event capped off a standout semester for Edleson, who was inducted into Omicron Delta Epsilon, the international economics honor society, and received the Tennessee chapter's Research Excellence Award for his Federal Reserve presentation. This fall, he has stepped into an inaugural role as student editor of the college's new Journal for Societal Impact.

"These experiences have deepened my passion for economics," Edleson said. "They've strengthened my motivation—not just through undergrad, but as I prepare for graduate studies and beyond."



**“Something I Can Give  
to My Community.”**

## Tennessee Tech Accounting Professor Launches Cookeville Food Forest

**C**ookeville may not have its own Hundred Acre Wood of children’s storybook fame, but it could soon be home to the largest public food forest in the country, thanks in part to the efforts of a determined Tennessee Tech College of Business professor.

The Cookeville Food Forest and Foraging Path broke ground in December 2024 and, once fully realized, will be home to a sprawling woodland that produces 10,000 pounds of edible crops per year to be enjoyed by the community.

Sid Bundy, Ph.D., associate professor of accounting, joined forces with the City of Cookeville to bring the concept to life—and is the first to admit she was an unlikely candidate to spearhead the charge.

“I teach accounting, not agriculture or biology, but I know how to write grant requests,” said Bundy.

Inspired by her upbringing on a working farm and her mother’s example of leading a church “gleaning” program—which involves collecting excess fresh foods from gardens and farms to share with those in need—Bundy set out to make Cookeville’s food forest a reality; quickly carving out the ideal space adjacent to Cookeville’s Cane Creek Park and securing a sizable federal grant to get the project off the ground.

Food forests, sometimes called “forest gardens,” involve planting edible crops in ways that mimic the structure and function of natural forest ecosystems. The environmentally friendly approach is popping up in cities across the country as a way to address challenges from climate change to food insecurity while connecting communities to nature.

“It’s not agriculture, it’s permaculture,” explained Bundy. “You plant trees, bushes, shrubs and it’s a



While the food forest's edible crops are the top priority, Bundy and her team of dedicated volunteers also have plans for public art installations to further beautify the space and enhance its communal feel. The federal grant she secured will also pay for a part-time program director to work with the park service and interact with visitors. A Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation grant secured by the city will pave the way for a pavilion area and ADA-accessible walking path.

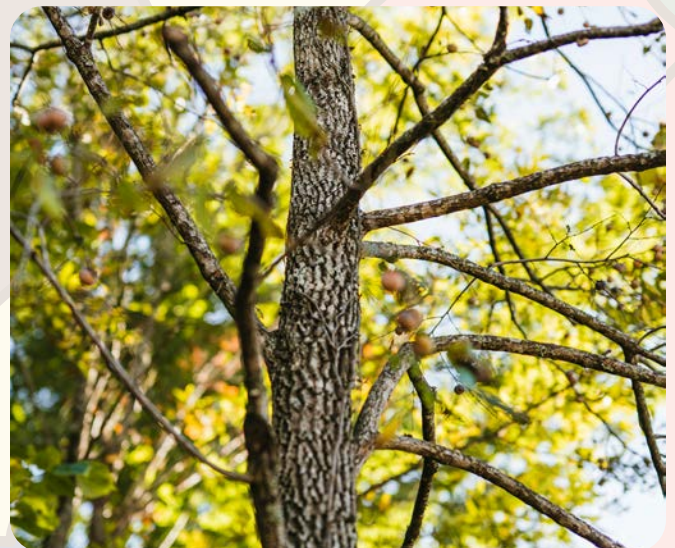
As the forest takes shape, Bundy adds that Tech's College of Business, along with other areas of campus, such as Tech's Center for Rural Innovation, will remain closely engaged, working hand in hand with city officials, whom Bundy says deserve the utmost credit for their vision and leadership.

"Our marketing students will definitely be involved," said Bundy. "For my courses, I hope to use this as a real-world, experiential opportunity for students to learn about grant accounting and budgeting."

If all goes according to plan, the food forest will welcome its first public harvest in 2027, with plans to partner with local nonprofits to distribute food to vulnerable populations in the region.

"That's what it's about—something I can give to my community," concluded Bundy.

Learn more about the Cookeville Food Forest and Foraging Path and follow its progress at [www.cookevilleforaging.com](http://www.cookevilleforaging.com).



group of plants that work together called a 'guild.' We hope to have 25 guilds altogether. We'll do a planting each spring and fall, and the trees we planted last fall will produce 50,000 pounds of food over their lifetime."

At present, the food forest occupies about six acres, with work on a more densely planted forest area slated to start this year. Food forests in many areas often occupy a single city block, but Bundy and her City of Cookeville partners envisioned something more. Once complete, the total land area designated for this forest will set a record.

"We will be the nation's largest," said Bundy. "That's pretty incredible for a city our size, but the thing we have that is scarcer in big cities is land. There's a lot of eyes on this project from around the country."

As Bundy looks ahead to their next planting season, she says the focus will be on low-maintenance edible plants that are known to grow well in the region.

"We're working to get back some version of an American chestnut tree," said Bundy. "We also aim to have hickory, persimmons, pecan and peach trees."

All told, Bundy hopes to offer 60 to 70 varieties of trees, including plenty of pickable fruits such as blackberries, raspberries, cherries, crab apples, plums and pears.



# *A Resonating Impact:*

## **Nat's Legacy at Tennessee Tech**

**IN** the office of the associate dean of Tennessee Tech's College of Business sits a small gong. A hand-span wide, the gong sits discreetly on a bookshelf. It's understated, but its sound leaves a resonating impact. Much like newly retired associate dean Ramachandran Natarajan, Ph.D.

Natarajan—more affectionately known as “Dr. Nat”—would use the gong to start and close every faculty meeting. It was a simple, effective way to get everyone focused on the work in front of them.

When Nat first arrived at Tennessee Tech 37 years ago, he filled a crucial gap in the College of Business's operations management program. But his impact went far beyond his academic specialty. Bob Bell, Ph.D., recognized his potential immediately. Bell served as dean of the College of Business while Nat was a professor, and the two continued to work closely together after Bell became Tennessee Tech's eighth president.

“I think Nat is a born leader; he's very quiet; he's got a wonderful personality and great sense of humor,” Bell said. “He just works really well and makes everyone with him more comfortable.”

Nat quickly integrated with existing faculty and became known across campus for his triple contribution as an excellent teacher, prolific researcher and dedicated service contributor. His natural leadership abilities, combined with his collaborative approach, made him an obvious choice when administrative opportunities arose.

“I earned my MBWA—management by walking around,” Nat joked. “Building trust takes time, so I've always made a point to be proactive and reach out to students and colleagues.”

Nat said he knew his approach was working when he sifted through that year's course evaluations.

“One of the students left a comment that said ‘He's a pretty good ol' boy,’” Nat said. “I still have that evaluation! I saved it.”

Tom Payne, dean of the College of Business, echoes that praise.

“Nat has an unparalleled ability to get the most out of people's strengths,” said Dean Payne. After joining the College as dean in 2015, Dean Payne quickly realized he needed a full-time associate dean to take the College to the next level. Nat was the perfect person for the role.

“Right away we had a great partnership,” Dean Payne said. “Nat was always focused on solving problems. He's never flustered; he just really cares about helping the school and what is best for our students.”

Dean Payne laughed as he recalled having to work what he described as many “night shifts” with Nat.

“When we were working on the College's AACSB accreditation, we would finish our ‘day jobs’ and then get together to start working on accreditation and other projects,” he said. Both fascinated by history, their informal conversations would meander from Churchill to funny stories to AACSB and back again.

“He was instrumental behind the scenes,” said Dean Payne. “Everyone knew he was a driving force, but they didn't really see all the hard work he put in.”

For Nat, rolling up his sleeves and diving into AACSB came naturally; it was the only course of his

action in his mind. He was seeing AACSB evolve. No longer was this an every five-six year compliance check; it was now a holistic process focused on continuous improvement.

“AACSB accreditation is always evolving, and it can be extremely overwhelming if you never went through that,” Nat said. With this hard-earned knowledge in hand, he now takes his expertise on the road, advising universities in India undergoing their first accreditation.

Julie Pharr, Ph.D., head of the college’s graduate business programs, worked alongside Nat for more than three decades. She witnessed this steady leadership firsthand.

“What I will remember most is his calm demeanor, unwavering encouragement and gift for lightening heavy conversations with his pithy humor,” Pharr said. “He was, in the best sense, both cheerleader and steady hand. I’ll never forget the time he urged us through a thorny accreditation process with a well-timed nod to Larry the Cable Guy: ‘Git ‘er done.’ It was classic Nat. The College is better for his service, and I am grateful for the example he set.”

His focus and attention weren’t limited to administrative tasks. Multiple people said Nat’s mentorship skills are his greatest strength.

“Nat wasn’t just our associate dean; he was a mentor to every junior professor at the college,” said Hyewon Park, Ph.D., who joined Tennessee Tech as an assistant professor of marketing in 2020.

“It was at the height of COVID, and I had no chance to really meet with anyone in person,” she said.

Park, who has a Ph.D. from Korea University in Seoul and a Ph.D. in marketing from the University of California Irvine, admitted that she had been nervous about adjusting to life at Tennessee Tech. As COVID waned, Nat reached out to Park and invited her to lunch.

“It’s very unusual to have an associate dean reach out like that just to get to know junior faculty,” she said. “It just shows how caring he is. He deeply cares about junior faculty and wants to make sure they feel at home.”

This impromptu lunch evolved into an informal junior faculty lunch club. Nat would take junior

faculty out to eat weekly. He would listen to any concerns they had, serve as a sounding board for their research ideas, and advise them on how to navigate the tenure process.

“The lunches were so fun,” Park said, smiling. “He would gather people to our table from across the university. I had the chance to meet and befriend faculty from many different areas. He really made this place very warm.”

Nat is quick to point out that he never served as an “official” mentor. Instead, he wanted to carry forward the same friendliness that welcomed him to Tennessee Tech.

“When I first came here, I reached out to another professor for advice on making tenure; that professor told me to publish more and to come to his Super Bowl party,” Nat said. “I thought ‘how many Super Bowl parties do I attend to get tenure? Do I need a checklist?’”

He quickly realized, however, that it wasn’t about the game; it was about the community he could build.

“I met faculty from other departments, I met former faculty, alumni, people in the community,” he said. “These were people who became my friends, who I could go to if I had a question or problem. And as newer, more junior faculty joined, I wanted to build that same community for them too.”

Nat sees retirement as a “next chapter” rather than an end to his teaching career. Even though he no longer carries the associate dean role, he continues to support and guide those around him. He’s advising business schools across India—not only on accreditation but on their curriculum development at large—and sharing advice with former colleagues back at Tennessee Tech.

“That’s the great thing about retirement,” he said. “You don’t stop; you just have more time to do what you love.”

As for the gong? It still sits in the associate dean’s office. A lasting reminder of the legacy Nat leaves on the College of Business and everyone who has walked through its doors.

# Global Experience, Real-World Impact:

## *How Tech's Study Abroad Courses Build Future Business Leaders*

**F**rom the bustling streets of London to the vineyards of South Africa, Tennessee Tech business students are stepping outside the classroom and into the world to gain hands-on experience that prepares them for a career in the global economy.

“Today, business is inherently global,” said Jaime Williams, Ph.D., assistant professor of management. “Whether they are multinational corporations, serve customers around the world or collaborate with international suppliers, most companies operate on a global scale. That’s why a solid understanding of international business practices is essential for our students.”

That is also why the College of Business has designed study abroad programs that immerse students in different cultures, academic and social environments. Travel study classes require students to spend weeks before their trips researching the cultures, economies and companies they will connect with when they arrive.







### **Tourism in Focus: Learning Global Business in South Africa**

Last spring, 16 students spent 12 days exploring South Africa’s tourism, mining and agricultural industries. Tourism alone contributes nearly nine percent to South Africa’s GDP and supports 1.68 million jobs. While intracontinental travelers remain the top driver of South Africa’s tourism, tourist arrivals from the Americas and Europe are continuing to grow.

One of Cape Town’s major selling points is the wine industry. Not only do the vineyards represent a tourist attraction, but South Africa is the eighth-largest wine-producing market. Hundreds of thousands of jobs in South Africa depend on the wine value chain.

“The wine industry can be so vulnerable to fluctuations,” said Williams. “Climate change can have a catastrophic impact on wineries’ revenue streams. We deliberately chose to visit wineries that are taking a diversified approach to their business so that students can see firsthand how these businesses weather these challenges.” For example, students visited Delaire Graff, a winery and resort in South Africa, for an in-depth conversation with their management team. The team outlined how they’ve deliberately chosen to lean into new sectors, including art,

accommodations and events—offering what Williams described as “a masterclass in vertical integration and hospitality synergy.”

“It was fascinating to hear how these vineyards are looking beyond wine to market an entire experience,” said Natalie Halfacre, a senior marketing student. “It’s one thing to study that in the classroom; it was an entirely different experience to see it in action and talk through why they made the decisions they did and how it’s affecting their marketing approach.”

Given that South Africa’s environmental resources and natural beauty serve as the bedrock of its tourism industry, students ended their trip exploring how to manage and mitigate risks to that environment. They joined park rangers for an in-depth talk about eco-tourism in South Africa and how it supports wildlife conservation. This also opened the door to a larger conversation about how economic development and environmental stewardship go hand in hand.

“We heard throughout this trip how important tourism is for South Africa’s economy,” said Halfacre. “It was eye-opening to hear how park rangers are using tourism revenue to support conservation efforts, which can keep tourism growing for years to come.”

### **Alumni Spotlight: Melisa Cansado ('08 MBA).**

Melisa Cansado co-owns Trailblazer Safaris, a tour company that specializes in custom safari experiences. She met the MBA students right off the plane in Cape Town and her colleague Andre gave the delegation an in-depth tour of Cape Town.

“Tech gave me the foundations to run a business more professionally and be more organized,” she said. “I learned about market research, basic accounting, finance, marketing and many more tools that I can apply to my own business. At Tech, I felt the faculty genuinely cared. I wasn’t just another student.”

## ***Accounting in Action: A Spring Break in the United Kingdom***

While some business students explored South Africa, accounting majors had the chance to broaden their global perspective in the United Kingdom. As part of a three-credit-hour travel study course, students spent eight days over spring break immersed in the world of international accounting and business.

Led by two rotating accounting faculty members, the program combined classroom preparation with hands-on learning. Students toured manufacturing facilities, visited university campuses and engaged with accounting firms to see firsthand how international accounting standards operate in a global marketplace. These site visits offered an invaluable perspective on how cultural and regulatory differences shape the profession.

“It’s one thing to learn about the history of commerce in a textbook; it’s another to stand in Lloyd’s of London and explore how marine insurance accelerated international trade,” said Sid Bundy, Ph.D., associate professor of accounting. “When we do these United Kingdom trips, students gain a better understanding of the innovations that allowed business to become what it is today and where it’s going in the future.”





### **Equipped for Success**

Each of the College of Business' study abroad experiences are unique. They cover different countries and different sectors. However, they have a common thread—they give students a chance to see classroom theory come alive in practice. And, they come away more inspired and better prepared for their future careers.

“Studying abroad made me a more well-rounded candidate,” said Halfacre, who currently works as a marketing coordinator with WCTE PBS while finishing her last year of classes. “Employers really do value candidates who can work with people from every background.”



# Tech College of Business Students Get an Inside Look at the Future of AI

**A**rtificial intelligence is transforming the way we work, learn and engage with others, and that is something to be celebrated, not feared.

That was the message that students in Tennessee Tech's College of Business heard at the college's Fall Celebration Dinner and Albrecht Lecture Series featuring AI futurist Zack Kass.

The former head of Go-To-Market at OpenAI—the company behind ChatGPT—Kass is a sought-after speaker and consultant who spent the last 14 years leading the evolving AI landscape and advising entities ranging from Coca-Cola and Boeing to the White House on AI strategy.

“Zack really is a technological optimist when it comes to AI,” said Dean Tom Payne in remarks at the annual dinner. “He is acting to ensure that businesses and governments are participants in the AI future by demystifying AI and making it more accessible and understandable for everyone.”

Dean Payne added that, “While risks are inherent to any major technological breakthrough, AI adoption and associated productivity gains will provide economic tailwinds for the foreseeable future.”

Kass spent the evening sharing expertise gained from his work inside the highest levels of the AI transformation. Kass first met with students and responded to their questions at a pre-dinner reception and later delivered the keynote address for over 300 students, faculty, staff, alumni and community members gathered at Cookeville's Leslie Town Centre.

Kass told the audience that, with adoption of AI growing daily, “We are on the verge of the most profound industrial revolution in human history.”

Calling the coming era of AI “the next renaissance,” Kass predicted that the embrace of its capabilities can “reduce suffering and increase joy” but warned that businesses and individuals must be adequately prepared, explaining that “the transition [to AI] will be determined by our ability to balance technological and societal thresholds.”

For Kass, part of that preparation means devoting greater attention to the things AI cannot do.

“We need to be super deliberate about some of these things—investing in physical communities, parks, symphonies and so forth,” he explained. “Physical infrastructure matters a lot.”



Kass's appearance at the Fall Celebration Dinner was part of the College of Business's Albrecht Distinguished Lecture Series, which gives Tech students an audience with the top names in business—all thanks to a generous endowment from the late Joe Albrecht, a longtime College of Business trustee, newspaper publisher and community leader.

For Dean Payne, whose own insights on the future of AI have been published in the pages of the Nashville Business Journal, the selection of Kass as the dinner's keynote speaker was a natural extension of the college's work to ensure students graduate with the right preparation and skill to enter an AI-augmented workforce.

"As a leader in the application of technology, the College of Business is at the forefront of ensuring that our graduates effectively leverage AI to benefit their organizations and communities," Dean Payne said.

Students in the college expressed appreciation for Kass's insights.

"All of us use AI a lot, we think about it a lot, and it's the future—so educating us at such a young age about it is super important," said Madelyn Lamb, a junior pursuing a double major in business

information systems and data analytics.

Talia Story, a senior pursuing a business management degree, added, "I've recently been trying to learn more about AI ... through the software I use on my laptop, even the apps on my phone. I think it's incredible that we're getting awareness."

And while Kass's remarks were the main event of the gathering, Dean Payne also took time to reflect on all that the College of Business had accomplished over the previous year.

"Our marketing students—some of them are with us tonight—not only graduate with the lowest debt of any major on our campus, but any major of any university in the state of Tennessee," said Dean Payne.

He continued, "Some of our business information technology graduates have received starting salaries in the \$80,000 to \$90,000 range and many accounting internships are paying \$30 an hour."

Dean Payne added that 92 percent of College of Business students are employed in their field of study immediately following graduation, and that the college was recently recognized as having the top finance degree program among all public universities in the state.

While Dean Payne noted that "none of us have experienced what the power of AI is going to be for us in just the next few years," he, like Kass, expressed confidence that Tennessee Tech graduates will be well equipped to meet the challenges and opportunities ahead.

"The future is great," concluded Kass in his keynote remarks. "But only if we imagine and build it together."

**The Albrecht Lecture Series brings to campus business executives, government and thought leaders, authors and entrepreneurs for an open exchange of ideas and current issues. The 2026 lecture will feature Walter Isaacson, a noted biographer and historian. He is a professor of history at Tulane University and an advisory partner at Perella Weinberg, a financial services firm based in New York City. He has been the CEO of the Aspen Institute, the CEO of CNN, and the editor of Time magazine.**



# Celebrate Excellence: Nominate a Leader for the Louis Johnson Outstanding Alumnus Award

The College of Business at Tennessee Tech has long taken pride in producing graduates who make a difference—not only in their careers, but also in their communities. Since 1980, the Louis Johnson Outstanding Alumnus Award has recognized those exceptional alumni who embody the values of leadership, service and impact that Dean Louis Johnson championed throughout his career.

This prestigious award honors graduates of the College of Business who have distinguished themselves through professional success, civic engagement and meaningful contributions to society. Whether through groundbreaking achievements in business, leadership in a professional field or dedicated service in civic, cultural, educational or political arenas, recipients of this award represent the very best of Tennessee Tech.

Do you know a fellow graduate whose accomplishments deserve recognition? We invite you to nominate them for this honor. Nominations may be submitted by any College of Business alumnus or advisory board member. Candidates should demonstrate strong leadership, a proven record of professional achievement and a commitment to making a positive impact beyond their careers.

Help us celebrate and share the stories of alumni who continue to carry forward the legacy of Dean Louis Johnson.

To nominate someone, please email [business@tntech.edu](mailto:business@tntech.edu).

# Meet Sara Pierce Ramey

## *Director of Development College of Business*



**M**ore than 20 years ago, a first-generation college student from Powell, Tennessee stepped onto Tennessee Tech's campus with a hot pink L.L.Bean backpack and a nervous smile that was hiding pure terror. Today that same girl, a two-time graduate of Tennessee Tech, is sitting in front of a computer writing a letter to tell you about her role as the director of development for the College of Business. In many ways it is just as exciting, but slightly less scary, as the first day of school.

Since leaving Tech, I have worn different (yet similar) hats. I served large congregations as a full time director of youth and young adult ministries. I have worked in youth camping programs in local, regional, national and international capacities. I even founded a non-profit legal service in East Tennessee, which I am so proud to write is still operating and impacting that community to this day. When an opportunity presented itself to return to Tennessee Tech, however, my husband told me that I had to see where it would lead. My love of this campus and community have never been hidden, and I am so thankful that my family was willing to pack up our life in East Tennessee so that I could return to this place and be a part of its future.

As director of development for the College of Business, it is my privilege to spend time with our alumni and friends listening to stories, sharing memories, laughing about the good ol' days when grades were posted in list form in the hallways of Johnson Hall and learning how Tech has elevated so many people to achieve things they never imagined. The College of Business at Tech has been a springboard, a lifeline and a home away from home for so many people, and I am lucky enough to hear about it every single day as a job. Can you imagine a job so rewarding?! While most of what I do looks at the past, the goals are always facing the future. Turning stories into scholarships that last for generations, memories into memorials that hold the heart of those who came before us, and square footage into safe space that will nurture learning and friendship.

As I walk around campus, I am awestruck at the changes. I thought it was amazing then, but just look at it today! Now, however, I can see it through new eyes. Eyes that can see not only the physical changes, but the enduring heart and soul poured into this place by our alumni, faculty, parents, students, friends, community and state. Our campus is full of generosity, selflessness, vision, energy and legacy. Tennessee Tech donors are like no others. They are special. They are committed. They are the best of us. If you have ever wondered if you could be a part of that legacy but were not sure where to start—reach out. I would love to talk to you about your love for Tech and your heart for helping. If you just want to know more about what the Development office even does—reach out. I would enjoy talking to you about my passion. If you don't know where to start—reach out. I would be happy to help you plant your feet on the path to leaving YOUR legacy at Tennessee Tech.

### **Wings Up!**

**Sara Pierce Ramey**  
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Phone: 931-372-6187



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