

momentum

Updates from the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing

June 2026

DEAN'S WELCOME



From the Dean

This spring, we celebrated another graduating class of nurses, nurse practitioners, physician assistants and nurse scientists — individuals who will carry the mission of the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing into communities across California and beyond. [Commencement](#) reminds us that a school's mission comes to life through its graduates and the impact they make.

That theme runs throughout this issue.

As part of our 15th anniversary series, 15 Years: Shaping What's Next in Health Care, we explore how the school has expanded its influence beyond the classroom. What began with a focus on research, leadership and bold system change has grown into a school that is helping address workforce needs, advance innovation and improve care through partnerships that reach into communities and health systems.

You will see that impact reflected in the first long-term U.S. study led by nurses examining the role of [humanoid robots in dementia care](#), a collaboration that brings together research, technology and aging services to explore new possibilities for supporting older adults.

Impact takes many forms. In this issue, you will also read about faculty-led innovations, including a newly funded trauma-informed chatbot designed to connect survivors with critical support services and research aimed at improving outcomes for older adults living with cancer.

We celebrate the generosity of donors whose investments in students continue to create opportunities for future healthcare leaders, helping reduce barriers and expand access to education. And we highlight how the Betty Irene Moore Fellowship for Nurse Leaders and Innovators continues to extend its reach through [new grant funding](#) that supports fellows advancing research, leadership and innovation across the country. Together, these stories demonstrate how ideas, partnerships and philanthropy create lasting change.

The issue also celebrates the accomplishments of our students and alumni. From national recognition earned by our physician assistant students and faculty to the inspiring journey of a doctoral graduate returning to [serve her tribal community](#), these stories demonstrate what becomes possible when education, purpose and opportunity come together.

As we look toward the future, I am grateful for the faculty, staff, alumni, students, donors and partners who make this work possible. Together, we are not only preparing the next generation of health professionals — we are helping shape the future of healthcare itself.

Thank you for being part of that journey.

— **Stephen J. Cavanagh, Ph.D., M.P.A., R.N., F.A.C.H.E., F.A.A.N.**

Dean, Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing

FEATURE STORY



UC Davis launches first long-term U.S. study led by nurses

on humanoid robots in dementia care

Professors Shelly Fritz and Shu-Fen Wung are leading a first-of-its-kind U.S. study examining how a humanoid companion robot named Abi may support social connection for people living with dementia.

The study, conducted in partnership with Eskaton and Andromeda Robotics, explores how residents, staff and families interact with the technology inside a real-world memory care setting.

[Read about the robot research](#)

STUDENT NEWS



School of Nursing honors graduates and certificate recipients at commencement

The Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing at UC Davis celebrated the Classes of 2025 and 2026 during commencement June 11 at the Mondavi Center. The ceremony honored master's nursing and physician assistant, DNP-FNP, PhD and psychiatric mental health nurse practitioner certificate graduates who are entering health care at a time of workforce shortages, unequal access to care, rising complexity and rapid technological change. As the school marks its 15th anniversary, Dean Stephen Cavanagh reminded graduates that their leadership, collaboration and commitment to people-centered care are needed now more than ever.

[Read more about the ceremony](#)



PA program students and faculty excel at national conference

Students and faculty represented the School of Nursing's physician assistant (PA) program at the annual American Academy of Physician Associates (AAPA) conference in New Orleans, presenting scholarly work, competing nationally and contributing to continuing medical education sessions.

Students presented posters on artificial intelligence in nonmelanoma malignancy outcomes, point-of-care ultrasound for early identification of ACL injury and pediatric hypertriglyceridemia. Two UC Davis teams competed in the iScan 2026 Point of Care Ultrasound Competition, with one team placing fourth out of 47 schools and 196 students.

Faculty members Rebecca Gibson and Kathleen Schneider volunteered at cardiac ultrasound stations, where they taught and quizzed students during the competition. Kathleen also presented two CME sessions: "Intro to Ventilators" and "Mind on the Move: Recognizing Acute Delirium."

15 YEAR ANNIVERSARY

*Shaping
what's next in
health care*



Scaling the school's impact: From research roots to real-world change

Fifteen years ago, the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing at UC Davis was founded on a vision of leadership, research and bold system change. Today, that vision reaches far beyond the classroom.

In the latest installment of the school's 15th anniversary series, discover how the school has expanded its impact through innovative learning environments, statewide workforce development and research partnerships that are improving lives across California and beyond.

From simulation experiences that have grown from 30 classes to more than 210 annually, to a statewide clinical training network spanning tribal health centers, rural communities and mobile clinics, students are preparing for the realities of modern healthcare in the places where care is needed most.

The story also highlights how faculty research has evolved into real-world solutions — from a first-of-its-kind study exploring humanoid robots in dementia care to community partnerships that bring healthcare directly into underserved neighborhoods.

What began as a bold idea has become a catalyst for change, strengthening the healthcare workforce, advancing discovery and helping shape the future of care.

[Read the full story](#)

Look for more 15 Years news in the next Momentum

RESEARCH NEWS

Fauer receives UC award to advance cancer care for older

Assistant Professor Alex Fauer of the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing at UC Davis received an Early Career Faculty Research Excellence Award from the University of California Office of the President to support research focused on improving cancer care for older adults.

The \$50,000 award supports Fauer's research examining whether geriatric assessment-guided supportive care can improve survival, reduce hospitalizations and strengthen quality of life for aging patients with cancer.

The award recognizes promising early career faculty whose research has the potential to shape health care delivery, policy and patient outcomes.

[Read about Fauer's research](#)



Betty Irene Moore Fellowship awards six Next Steps Grants to support nurse leaders' research

The Betty Irene Moore Fellowship for Nurse Leaders and Innovators is advancing a national network of early- to mid-career nursing scholars poised to transform health care. Through leadership development, mentorship and innovation-focused projects, fellows build the skills and confidence to improve care delivery, strengthen nursing science and shape policy, education, practice and entrepreneurship. The program's latest stories highlight how fellows are extending their impact, from new grant-supported research to work that supports caregivers and communities.

[Read about the new funding and its future impact](#)

RESEARCH BRIEFS

Draughon Moret awarded grant for trauma-informed chatbot

Jessica Draughon Moret, an associate professor at the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing at UC Davis, was awarded \$50,000 from the [Center for Information Technology Research in the Interest of Society](#)

(CITRIS) through its AI and Health Seed Funding Program. She is leading an interdisciplinary project with Joshua McCoy, assistant professor of computer science, to develop CARE-COMPASS (Community Assistance and Resource Engagement) — a secure, trauma-informed chatbot designed to connect survivors with mental, physical and social support services. The project will generate preliminary data and a validated prototype to support future funding from the National Institutes of Health and broader implementation. CITRIS and the Banatao Institute facilitate interdisciplinary work among hundreds of University of California faculty members, students, corporate partners and international institutions.

Keeton wins first in thesis competition

Victoria Keeton, an assistant professor at the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing at UC Davis, placed 1st at the [Association for Clinical and Translational Science \(ACTS\) 3 Minute Thesis](#) competition in the Early Career Scholars Section. Competing against 9 faculty, she presented “Associations between prenatal social & environmental exposures and infant rapid weight gain.” The study explored whether adverse prenatal exposures in mothers are associated with epigenetic changes and rapid weight gain in their infants. Preliminary findings, supported by the CTSC KL2 program, show positive associations between epigenetic changes and infant weight gain in pathways tied to appetite regulation and metabolism. She also presented the study in a poster session at the ACTS annual meeting. She hopes these associations found in the study will help understand pathways to metabolic disease and develop more effective interventions for children from communities experiencing adversity.

Young delivers state of science address on future of nursing education

Heather M. Young, a professor at the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing at UC Davis, delivered the State of the Science Address in Education, “From Disruption to Design: Strengthening the Future of Nursing Education,” at the [2026 annual conference of the Western Institute of Nursing](#). The presentation explored how nursing education must evolve in response to rapid changes across health care, technology, workforce demands and student expectations. Drawing on decades of leadership in nursing education and leadership development, Young challenged educators to move beyond reacting to disruption and instead intentionally design systems that prepare nurses to thrive in increasingly complex care environments. The address highlighted the importance of innovation, flexibility and partnership in preparing the next generation of nurses and nurse leaders. Young challenged assumptions about nursing education and urged nurse leaders to examine and address professional structures that limit our future possibilities. Young emphasized the need for academic programs that integrate emerging technologies, strengthen pathways into the profession, and support learners across diverse communities and practice settings. She also underscored the role of nursing schools in addressing workforce shortages, advancing health equity and preparing graduates equipped to lead system transformation.

Esquer publishes review on social support inventory

Edna Esquer, an assistant professor at the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing at UC Davis, published [Review of the ENRICH Social Support Inventory Psychometric Instrument](#) in the [International Journal of Studies in Nursing](#). The review examines the ENRICH Social Support

Inventory (ESSI) and evaluates its psychometric quality using the COSMIN framework to guide researchers measuring social support in health contexts. It finds that while the ESSI's concept and construct are reasonably defined, inconsistencies in administration and scoring across studies — and various adaptations — create confusion and threaten validity. The impact is a call for stricter psychometric rigor and the development of linguistically and culturally appropriate versions to better support diverse populations and improve research and patient outcomes.

ALUMNI



UC Davis nursing graduate hopes to bring trust, dignity and lasting care back to her rural tribal community

At 8 years old, Cecilli Gonzales watched her great-grandmother, a respected tribal medicine woman, struggle through the final days of her life and wished someone knew how to help. That moment sparked a lifelong mission that would carry Gonzales from a remote Northern California community near the Oregon border to earning a Doctor of Nursing Practice degree from the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing at UC Davis.

A first-generation college student, Native American leader and mother of six, Gonzales faced obstacles that might have ended someone else's dream. Instead, she advanced from LVN to RN to nurse practitioner while remaining rooted in the rural community she calls home.

Now, she returns with a doctorate, a commitment to improving health outcomes for tribal communities and a deep understanding of the challenges rural residents face. Read how one childhood promise became a career dedicated to trust, healing and service—and why Gonzales hopes her great-grandmother would be proud.

[Read more about Cecili's journey and hopes](#)

DEVELOPMENT



Thank you Sandy Smoley

Through the Sandy Smoley Endowed Award, her philanthropy has supported 10 students as they worked toward their dreams of becoming health care professionals. Several recipients attended the luncheon, offering a powerful reminder of her lasting impact.

A retired nurse, Smoley built a career grounded in service. She later became a longtime Sacramento County supervisor and served as California's secretary of health and welfare, helping shape health policy across the state.

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Employee donor appreciation coffee break celebrates a culture of giving

On April 28, the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing welcomed more than 20 employee donors to a special coffee break celebrating the generosity of faculty, staff, retirees and alumni who support the school through philanthropy. The gathering provided an opportunity for colleagues to connect and be thanked for the meaningful impact their giving has on students, faculty, programs, research and the broader community.

The event highlighted the school's strong culture of philanthropy and the collective generosity that helps advance its mission. We are grateful to all employee donors — past and present — whose support continues to strengthen nursing education, research and healthcare innovation for future generations.

ADMISSIONS

Applications are open now

- **MHS–Physician Assistant program** – [Apply by August 1](#) to join the June 2027 cohort

Coming soon: Applications open August 6

- [DNP–Nurse Anesthesia program](#)
- [MSN–Master’s Entry Program in Nursing](#)
- [UC Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner Certificate Program](#)

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