

# WCPE Briefing

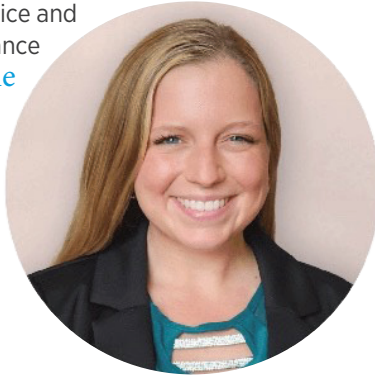
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## The Bluejay Connection

Thanks to the Elmhurst alumni network, Gracie Savio is testing out a career in law.

With a major in criminal justice and triple minors in history, dance education and sociology, **Gracie Savio '23** is determined to pursue a career where she can make a difference.



"I knew I wanted to be in a field where I could help people or at least try to make a change, whether big or small," Savio explains. "I wanted to study something that pertains to the real world and what's currently going on."

A career in law seemed like it might be a good fit, so she got involved in the University's pre-law program and reached out to Lisa Woods, Elmhurst's pre-law advisor at the time, to learn more about career opportunities in the legal profession.

"During J-Term, Lisa Woods let me know that an Evanston law firm founded by an Elmhurst alumna was hiring," Savio says. "I knew I wanted to work at a law firm to gain that initial experience and decide whether law school was right for me. So within 10 minutes of getting that email, I emailed back to say I was interested."

Several interviews and less than two weeks later, Savio was hired. Shortly after graduation, she started a full-time position with Jackson LLP Healthcare Lawyers, a firm founded by **Erin Jackson '07**, the firm's managing partner and attorney.

"I began my own career as a legal assistant, and it's so exciting to have Grace, a fellow Bluejay, working at my firm now as a legal assistant," Jackson says. "Grace has been such a valuable addition to our firm. The attorneys have come to rely on her, and she has adapted quickly to a fast-paced environment."

During her first month on the job, Savio worked primarily on corporate filings, proofreading and engagement agreements. Recently, though, she earned a promotion that involves more hands-on work with the firm's attorneys.

Savio says the job is giving her valuable experience and insights into an area of law she didn't know much about. "It's definitely given me a better understanding of the legal process in a whole different realm, which is really cool," she notes.

Looking back, Savio says her education and opportunities at Elmhurst gave her a valuable leg up in the field of law. She highlights the class sizes as a particular advantage.

"When I was a tour guide at Elmhurst, I always talked about the smaller campus community and how I was able to make better connections—not only with friends and peers, but with faculty and people in the 'real world,'" she says. "With Elmhurst being smaller, it's a lot easier to meet more staff and faculty who can help you post undergrad."

## A Perfect Match

**Marissa Mussatto '24** has always been interested in a medical career, but she wasn't sure which particular pathway was right for her. Then she toured Elmhurst as a prospective student and met Erica Ashauer, Elmhurst's pre-professional advisor.



Continued inside

### ABOUT THE WCPE

The mission of the Russell G. Weigand Center for Professional Excellence is to prepare Elmhurst University students and alumni for a rapidly evolving world by igniting their professional curiosity, competencies and purpose. Through career guidance, mentoring, internships and more, the WCPE readies students for a successful launch into their careers and to become effective contributors to society.

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“Erica was super energetic, and I got this vibe that she wants everybody to succeed,” Mussatto recalls. “That’s when I decided I wanted to go to Elmhurst. Partially because I wanted to play basketball, but also because I really believed that Erica was going to help me succeed.”

Soon after enrolling at Elmhurst, Mussatto scheduled a meeting with Ashauer to talk about careers in health care. Hearing that Mussatto was particularly interested in hands-on patient care, Ashauer suggested that a career as a physician assistant might be a good fit.

“I started looking into it, and I realized it would be perfect for me,” Mussatto says. “I would still be able to assist on surgeries, but I would also be able to spend time with patients.”

Next, Ashauer set Mussatto up for a shadowing experience with [Chris Orvino '97](#), a local orthopedic physician assistant. Over the course of 15 hours, Mussatto followed Orvino throughout the work day, watching him meet with patients, give injections and assist during surgery.

“Chris had the mindset I wanted, because he was teaching me all along the way,” Mussatto says. “He’d show me MRIs and X-rays of shoulders, hips and knees, and explain things like why they were doing a knee replacement on someone.”

The shadowing experience was so successful that when it ended, Orvino invited Mussatto to return anytime to continue learning. She’s taken him up on that offer, shadowing him during surgeries and getting a better understanding of a PA’s role. She plans to continue meeting with him throughout the upcoming school year.

“I’ve learned so much about the medical field from shadowing Chris,” she says. “It’s super cool to see him interact with patients, because they come in with a list of questions and he answers every single one with patience and care.”

The experience was a valuable learning opportunity for Orvino as well. “Being able to give back to students who are working through the same things I did as a student is very fulfilling,” Orvino says. “I truly enjoy mentoring Marissa, and I plan on continuing to help guide her as she continues her application process for school.”

Marissa says the individualized attention she received from Erica and Chris was made possible through the WCPE’s robust support system. “The WCPE offers so much for us,” she says. “It’s amazing to be able to attend Elmhurst—they have set me up for success completely.”

## Top Prize

Two biology majors turned a parking problem into a prize-winning concept.

A biology major and commuter student at Elmhurst, [Aaliya Khaja '24](#) has had more than her fair share of parking problems at the Schaible Science Center. “Schaible’s parking lot is very small, so every day I would go on a scavenger hunt to find parking,” she says. “If I couldn’t find space at Schaible, I would have to park back by the residence halls or all the way by the railroad.”



So when Khaja and her friend [Miftha Syed '24](#), a fellow biology student, heard about Elmhurst’s Bluejay Tank pitch competition, they decided to enter the contest with an app that would solve the science center’s parking issues. “Parking was one of the first things we thought about,” she says. “If that could be fixed, it would make our lives so much easier.”

After some initial brainstorming, Khaja and Syed drafted a business proposal for InstaPark, an app that would use geolocation to help college students find parking spots on campus. In October, they presented their concept to a panel of Elmhurst faculty and working entrepreneurs at Bluejay Tank, a business pitch competition designed to foster students’ entrepreneurial skills.

At that first competition, Khaja and Syed won third place and \$500 for Instapark. Happy to have won a prize but determined to do even better, they continued to work on their presentation and entered the competition again in the spring, this time winning \$1,000 and second prize.

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But they still wanted to win an even bigger prize. So when they heard about the Big Idea Pitch Contest, a Bluejay Tank–like competition hosted by Innovation DuPage and the College of DuPage, they knew they had to enter.



“I really thought our idea was spectacular,” Khaja says. “So we thought we really needed to go out there and shoot our shot.”

For the Big Idea Pitch Contest, Khaja and Syed worked hard to polish their presentation, condense it to five minutes or less, and memorize it. After three rounds of intensive presentations in front of a panel of judges, they beat nearly 40 other applicants to win the \$5,000 first prize.

In addition to the prize money, Syed and Khaja received access to expert and mentoring resources and a six-month membership in Innovation DuPage to help them refine their idea.

The InstaPark team credits Patrick Yanahan '94, MBA '10, the University's entrepreneur in residence, with helping them take their idea from initial concept to viable business plan.

“We knew we had a good idea, but we knew nothing about business proposals or how models work,” Khaja recalls. “Patrick helped us set up a pricing model and turn our idea into the nonprofit that we were hoping it would be.”

Today, Khaja and Syed are looking forward to getting their app into development, allocating some of the prize money to invest in its launch. Once the app is launched, Khaja is certain that it can streamline the parking situation for students across Elmhurst and other universities, saving vast amounts of time and resources.

## Jump-Starting a Career

When [Nolan Fraaza '23](#) started college in fall 2020, he knew exactly what he wanted to do with his life. He planned a career as a physical therapist, and he wanted to get started as quickly as possible.

So one of the first things he did when he arrived at Elmhurst was to schedule an appointment with Erica Ashauer, director of pre-professional advising.

“I started meeting with Erica to lay out my schedule right away,” recalls Fraaza, an exercise science major at Elmhurst. “She helped me organize things so that I could graduate a semester early.”

But Ashauer didn't stop there. When college expenses began to add up, Fraaza reapproached her with the goal of shaving an additional semester off of his college career. Together, the two came up with a plan that allowed him to graduate in just three years.

“Erica was so creative and worked so hard to make it happen,” he says. “She helped me get out of college with a year less debt, which is huge.”

Next, Fraaza worked closely with Ashauer and other WCPE resources to apply to physical therapy schools.

“First Erica helped me figure out what schools were looking for and what I needed to work on,” Fraaza says. “She also helped me with interviews, which I had no idea how to do, especially in the online format. She gave me ideas on what I should talk about, what to avoid and what I should wear. I asked her, do I need to wear nice pants? Do I have to wear shoes?”

In addition to Ashauer's support, Fraaza is also grateful to his faculty members at Elmhurst, especially in the kinesiology program. “It felt like the professors really cared about me,” he says. “They were people I could go to anytime—I had Zoom calls with professors at 11:00 at night and they would go over problems or concepts with me when I needed it.”

Fraaza credits the special attention he enjoyed to the small class sizes and faculty-to-student ratio at Elmhurst, a luxury he wouldn't have experienced at larger universities. “My biggest class was maybe 25 students in all three years,” he recalls. “It was so cool to know my fellow peers and work with them week in and week out.”

At Elmhurst, Fraaza won the Frank Mittermeyer Award, which provides financial support to students pursuing graduate or professional studies in health care. After getting married earlier this summer and honeymooning in Alaska, Fraaza moved back to Michigan, where he grew up. Now he's getting ready to start physical therapy studies at the University of Michigan in Flint.

“My professors at Elmhurst really helped me feel prepared for a career in physical therapy,” he says. “And Erica was my lifeline all the way through the process of organizing my schedule and applying to schools.”





## On Track for Dental School

**Nevin Brittain '21** was working in a candy store a few summers ago when he ran into a camper from the wrestling camp where he was coaching.

"I saw this kid come in and said hello to him," Brittain recalls. "Then his dad introduced himself to me and said, 'You're my son's wrestling coach. Have you ever thought about being a dentist?'"

Brittain, a biochemistry major at Elmhurst, admitted that he hadn't considered dentistry but said he was open to checking it out. The father, a dentist himself, gave Brittain his phone number, and the two stayed in touch.



"I literally called him the next day, and we had a wonderful conversation," Brittain says. "He talked about how dentistry is a way to serve people, and that stood out to me. One thing I really want to do in my career is make people smile, so dentistry definitely seemed like a career I'd be interested in."

Brittain set out to learn more about careers in dentistry. His first step was to schedule a meeting with Erica Ashauer, director of pre-professional advising, who helped him line up shadowing hours with a local dentist.

"The shadowing hours were very helpful because they kept me accountable and prioritized getting that experience," he says. "You really want to know what you're getting into before you decide to pursue a profession for the rest of your life."

Once Brittain had confirmed his interest in dentistry through the shadowing experience, he worked with Ashauer to sign up for the dental school exam, compile a list of target schools, and start planning his application. "She helped me with so many things that I wouldn't have been aware of otherwise," he says.

In the end, Brittain got accepted to six dental schools, including the University of Illinois Chicago, where he'll start classes in August. He also won a scholarship from the Armed Forces Health Professions Scholarship Program (HPSP), which provides full tuition support in exchange for service in the Army, the Navy or the Air Force. Commissioned this year as a second lieutenant in the Army, Brittain says he's looking forward to serving as an Army dentist after graduating from UIC.

"I have had family members in the armed services, and I felt a calling to serve," Brittain says. "It's also an opportunity that it would be crazy to pass up. The military will pay for my entire dental school and give a stipend and a bonus on top of that too—saving me close to half a million dollars."

As Brittain moves into the professional world, he remains grateful for Elmhurst's guidance throughout his undergraduate career. "What makes Elmhurst such a valuable place is the people," he reflects. "I've never met anyone at Elmhurst who doesn't want to give me their time or help me with whatever I need."

### WCPE STAFF

**Martin Gahbauer, M.Ed.**

Executive Director  
(630) 617-3625

[martin.gahbauer@elmhurst.edu](mailto:martin.gahbauer@elmhurst.edu)

**Erica Ashauer, M.A.**

Director, Pre-Professional Advising,  
Health Professions Advising  
(630) 617-6482

[ashauere@elmhurst.edu](mailto:ashauere@elmhurst.edu)

**Alfie Chelette, MBA '19**

Coordinator, Data Systems and Analysis  
(630) 617-3190

[alfie.chelette@elmhurst.edu](mailto:alfie.chelette@elmhurst.edu)

**Christina Danno, MBA**

Assistant Director, Career Experiences  
(630) 617-3188

[christina.danno@elmhurst.edu](mailto:christina.danno@elmhurst.edu)

**Laina Krisik**

Advisor, Career Education  
(630) 617-3186

[laina.krisik@elmhurst.edu](mailto:laina.krisik@elmhurst.edu)

**Akaash Khusal**

Graduate Assistant  
[wcpe.ga@elmhurst.edu](mailto:wcpe.ga@elmhurst.edu)

**Emily Korkowski**

Senior Coordinator, Career Experiences  
(630) 617-6457

[emily.korkowski@elmhurst.edu](mailto:emily.korkowski@elmhurst.edu)

**Julie Nosal, M.A. '03**

Director, Career Education  
(630) 617-3440

[julien@elmhurst.edu](mailto:julien@elmhurst.edu)

**Patrick Yanahan, M.B.A.**

Entrepreneur in Residence  
(630) 765-5887

[patrick.yanahan@elmhurst.edu](mailto:patrick.yanahan@elmhurst.edu)



RUSSELL G. WEIGAND  
Center for Professional Excellence