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OPSU.edu



**A SEASON OF GIVING
AND SACRIFICE**



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OPSU RECOGNIZED AMONG TOP

INSTITUTIONS IN THE WEST BY U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT



Oklahoma Panhandle State University has once again earned national recognition for its excellence in higher education, securing multiple rankings in the U.S. News & World Report's 2025 Best Colleges list. OPSU was ranked 13th in Top Public Schools – Regional Colleges West, 32nd in Top Performers on Social Mobility – Regional Colleges West, and 36th overall in the Regional Colleges West category.

The rankings, which serve as a resource for students searching for the best educational fit, highlight schools that excel in classroom resources, graduation rates, and the overall return on investment for graduates. According to U.S. News, this year's methodology prioritized graduation rates and the success of Pell Grant recipients over other factors. First-generation student metrics were excluded from the 2025 rankings, while emphasis was placed on measurable outcomes such as graduate debt and initial post-graduation earnings.

"It's always encouraging to see OPSU recognized in these rankings. Our focus remains on creating the best possible outcomes for our students," stated University President Dr. Julie Dinger. "We are committed to providing an education that is not only affordable but also delivers a strong return on investment. Our success is measured by the opportunities our graduates find and their impact on their communities."

In addition to the U.S. News recognition, OPSU earned accolades in other rankings. Research.com ranked OPSU among the Most Popular Nursing Degree Programs in Oklahoma for 2024. This recognition is based on a thorough analysis of data from various sources, including Peterson's, IPEDS, and College Scorecard. Key criteria focus on program

quality, affordability, and time to degree completion. Further affirming its affordability and value, OPSU was ranked 18th on Intelligent.com Best Online Colleges with Lowest Out-of-State Tuition for 2025. Intelligent.com used a data-driven approach to evaluate institutions based on academic quality, graduation rates, cost, and return on investment.

"We are committed to providing an education that is not only affordable but also delivers a strong return on investment. Our success is measured by the opportunities our graduates find and their impact on their communities."

— Dr. Julie Dinger, University President

OPSU is the Most Affordable College in Oklahoma according to Nasdaq and ranked #1 in the state for economic mobility by Thirdway.org in 2024. Consistently recognized in national rankings, OPSU remains dedicated to delivering high-quality education and preparing students for successful careers. These honors highlight OPSU's commitment to accessible, affordable, and impactful educational opportunities for students across the region. **P**

PAYTON LANKFORD'S

STORY OF BALANCING DUTY, STUDIES, AND SERVICE



As the holiday season approaches, thoughts of giving and sacrifice are at the forefront. For US Army Specialist Payton Lankford, a sophomore majoring in Health and Physical Education at Oklahoma Panhandle State University, these values are a constant part of his life. SPC Layton embodies what it means to serve others by balancing his academic responsibilities with his duties as a member of the Army National Guard's 11-B Infantry and caretaker at the Methodist Student Center.

SPC Lankford is committed to selflessness and personal growth in his military and academic roles. "In the military, you're expected to help your comrades and build each other up to complete a mission," SPC Lankford shared. "The same values apply here at OPSU, where I support my peers and give back to the community, whether through my role at the Student Center or my daily interactions with others."

Lankford's military service, including a deployment in Kenya, Africa, shaped his perspective on life. "It caused a lot of personal growth and changed me," he explained. Although transitioning between the military mindset and civilian life wasn't always easy, he said, "Since returning from my deployment, it doesn't impact me like it used to. My friends crack jokes when my military side comes out."


SPC Lankford's commitment to giving back extends beyond his studies. In the future, he hopes to become a teacher and coach at Goodwell Public Schools. He aims to help kids develop the grit,

toughness, and confidence they need to succeed while teaching them humility and kindness. "I want the younger generations to succeed," SPC Lankford said. "I want to teach them values that will propel them in their careers and life."

"In the military, you're expected to help your comrades and build each other up to complete a mission. The same values apply here at OPSU, where I support my peers and give back to the community, whether through my role at the Student Center or my daily interactions with others"

— Specialist Lankford, OPSU Student

During a recent Veterans Day Program at Goodwell Public Schools, SPC Lankford shared a powerful message of gratitude, urging students to appreciate the opportunities they have in America. "God has blessed you with many opportunities here in America. Not everyone gets the same opportunities as us. Be grateful and thank God for all He has done for you."

As the season of giving reminds us of the importance of service and sacrifice, SPC Lankford's example shows how one person's dedication can positively impact a community. His commitment to serving others through his military service and role at OPSU reminds us to give back and be grateful for our opportunities to help those around us. 



DR. CHARLA LEWIS

NAMED VICE PRESIDENT OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS AT OPSU

Oklahoma Panhandle State University proudly announces the appointment of Dr. Charla Lewis as Vice President of Academic Affairs. With her dedication to academic excellence and recent service as Dean of the College of Arts and Education, Dr. Lewis has been instrumental in shaping the academic landscape at OPSU.

“Dr. Lewis has a proven track record of leadership and a deep commitment to the mission of OPSU. Throughout her years here, she has demonstrated unwavering dedication to our university, continually growing and evolving as a leader.” stated Dr. Julie Dinger, University President. “Dr. Lewis is a lifelong student who embraces opportunities to strengthen her skills, deepen her connections across campus, and foster engaged collaboration. I am confident that her loyalty to OPSU and her passion for learning will guide us forward as we work together to achieve our mission.”

Dr. Lewis’s journey at OPSU began with her role as Dean, followed by her time as Interim Vice President of Academic Affairs, where she demonstrated her commitment to driving academic innovation and faculty development. She earned a Bachelor of Music Education with a vocal emphasis and an instrumental endorsement from OPSU, a Master of Music Education from Emporia State University, and a Doctor of Education from Bradley University focused on Educational Leadership in Higher Education.

“I am truly honored to serve in this role and continue to work alongside the incredible faculty and staff at OPSU. Together, we are building an academic environment that fosters growth, innovation, and opportunities for our students,” said Dr. Lewis.

Dr. Lewis’s vision is rooted in a goal of overt academic excellence, which includes updating degree plans, improving transparency in course descriptions, and adding internships as required courses to bridge the gap between academic theory and real-world application. Her work will focus on facilitating quality teaching workshops, expanding access to online programs, and increasing collaboration opportunities with industry experts. She will spearhead curriculum changes in her leadership role, ensuring that OPSU’s degree programs remain competitive and aligned with industry needs. She will also submit curriculum updates to the Oklahoma A&M Regents, the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, and other accreditation bodies to ensure continuous academic growth.

Dr. Lewis also emphasizes the importance of research and scholarly activities for students and faculty. By promoting research projects, supporting faculty in publishing articles, and presenting at conferences, she aims to cultivate a thriving academic community at OPSU.

Under her leadership, faculty recruitment and retention will be key priorities. Dr. Lewis is committed to attracting top talent by promoting OPSU’s unique culture and mission. She plans to establish a faculty recruitment plan with comprehensive onboarding processes and timely communication throughout the hiring journey. Additionally, faculty will have access to continuous professional development opportunities, focusing on career advancement, work-life balance, and wellness programs.

Dr. Lewis’s appointment as Vice President of Academic Affairs signifies OPSU’s commitment to academic excellence. Her strategic vision will undoubtedly shape the university’s future as she embarks on this next career chapter. “I am excited about the journey ahead,” she stated. “Change can be good. If we are not changing and evolving, we are not growing. My commitment to OPSU is to make it a collaborative environment where students, faculty, and staff can thrive and achieve their full potential.” **P**

OMAR LIRA NAMED

DIRECTOR OF RECRUITMENT AT OPSU, AIMS TO DRIVE ENROLLMENT GROWTH AND EXPAND OUTREACH

Oklahoma Panhandle State University is pleased to announce the appointment of Omar Lira as the Director of Recruitment. In his new role, Lira will focus on growing and sustaining OPSU's recruitment strategy and establishing stronger partnerships with educational institutions throughout the region.

The restructuring of OPSU's admissions into a dedicated Office of Recruitment marks a strategic shift toward a more focused and proactive approach to engaging prospective students. Under the Office of Recruitment, efforts are streamlined to prioritize outreach, personalized engagement, and targeted support for students from diverse backgrounds, from initial contact through enrollment.

"This shift allows OPSU to better align recruitment initiatives with its goals of growth and regional impact, ensuring that resources are directed toward actively attracting new students and fostering connections with OPSU and our programs," said Dr. Ryan Blanton, Vice President of Advancement. "By integrating recruitment within the Office of Advancement, OPSU reinforces its commitment to creating a cohesive student experience that begins long before students set foot on campus, establishing a foundation for stronger relationships that benefit the University community."

"Expanding OPSU's outreach efforts to reach underrepresented regions and demographics is key," said Lira, emphasizing his goal to increase awareness of OPSU in areas where it has great potential to attract new students. "By strengthening our relationships with high schools and community colleges, I aim to make OPSU more accessible to students from all backgrounds."

Among his strategies, Lira plans to implement a highly personalized approach to recruitment, emphasizing individual connections to the University and its many departments and



programs. This focused engagement aims to guide students through the decision-making process, helping them feel connected to OPSU and making it easier for them to envision themselves as part of the university community.

Lira is also committed to enhancing the international admissions process by collaborating closely with OPSU Registrar, Erin Moore, who has led OPSU's international recruitment efforts. "Ensuring that our international students receive consistent communication and support throughout their admissions journey is essential. We want to make OPSU a welcoming and supportive environment for students from all over the world," he shared.

Furthermore, Lira is developing recruitment strategies with academic departments to highlight each program's strengths, from faculty to unique courses and hands-on opportunities. By connecting prospective students directly with faculty and staff during recruiting events, Lira aims to provide insights into academic experience and foster relationships that support students' academic and professional goals.

Lira also plans to improve support for transfer and non-traditional students, establishing networks that bring together faculty, advisors, and resources tailored to their unique needs. By understanding and addressing these students' specific challenges, OPSU hopes to increase retention and success rates across diverse student populations.

As part of his outreach, Lira prioritizes strengthening OPSU's ties with high schools and community colleges. "Building connections with counselors and providing them with the tools they need to guide students will be crucial. For community colleges, we aim to streamline the transfer process by creating clear pathways and ensuring smooth credit transfer." **P**



OPSU WOMEN IN AG

LEAD THE WAY WITH AG CONFERENCE

The OPSU Women in Ag, in collaboration with the OSU Extension Office of Texas County, successfully hosted the inaugural PanhandHER Ag Conference, welcoming over 100 women of all ages from across the region. The conference, aimed at empowering women in the agriculture industry, provided opportunities for learning, networking, and mentorship.

Keynote speaker Emma Alexander, Field Representative for U.S. Senator Markwayne Mullin, delivered an inspiring speech about leadership and the crucial role of women in agriculture. Guest speakers Ashlynn Remington and Venessa Wood also shared their personal experiences, offering valuable advice to attendees.

Alongside the speakers, thirteen mentors from various industries facilitated discussions on career development, leadership, and overcoming challenges unique to women in agriculture.

Rylin Baker, President of Women in Ag, reflected on the significance of the event, saying, "The most impactful part of the conference for me was seeing the diversity of each woman there. We all came from different backgrounds but were still able to relate to each other and had many shared experiences." She added, "Ashlyn Remington was very relatable. It felt like she was talking to us as friends. She shared her struggles about finding a job, and it fit what a lot of women in the room have struggled with."

Kaylee Woolman, Vice President of Women in Ag, echoed the sentiment, noting how inspired she was by the collaborative atmosphere. "The most impactful part of this conference to me was seeing all these strong, powerful women come together because they want to help each other and continue to watch agriculture succeed. The mentors were so willing to help us succeed, and that support meant everything," Woolman said. She also shared how the conference encouraged her to face her fears and step out into the world. "It inspired me not to worry about stepping out into the world on my own at a young age."

Advisor Chyanna Black, Executive Director of the Foundation expressed, "The girls exceeded my expectations. It was a large turnout with over 100 women in attendance, and for their first year, it went smoothly. The meaningful conversations that happened at the mentor tables were a standout. The ladies got to meet and talk with several women in different industries, giving them confidence in areas where many young women struggle," Black said. She added that the team is already preparing to improve next year's event by refining their marketing strategies and strengthening sponsor relations.

Tracy Kincannon, Dean of the College of Agriculture, Science, and Nursing stated, "I was very blessed with the turn out. It showed the area the great ag leaders OPSU has and the leaders we are developing. I am very excited about future leadership opportunities that Women In Ag will bring to the OPSU campus."

The conference was made possible with support from sponsors, including Western Equipment, Plus One Cattle Co., Guymon Nutrition and Energy, Bar Double Diamond Seed, Five State Spray, Farm Credit, and Anchor D Bank.

With a successful first event behind them, the OPSU Women in Ag are already looking ahead to next year, determined to continue empowering women in agriculture and providing more opportunities for growth and learning. **P**

LARGEST FFA CONTEST TO DATE

BRINGS TOGETHER 58 SCHOOLS FROM
FIVE STATES AT OPSU INTERSCHOLASTICS



OPSU held its largest Interscholastics contest to date, an impressive event that saw participation from 58 schools across five states. This year's contest, spread over two days, featured 34 FFA contests with more than 1,400 entries, marking a milestone in OPSU's commitment to agricultural education and outreach. Supported by over 90 volunteers, including 70 dedicated OPSU students, the event successfully highlighted the hard work and dedication of the university's College of Agriculture, Science, and Nursing.

A collaborative highlight of this year's contest was the involvement of the Lamar Community College Livestock Judging Team, led by the head of the Lamar Animal Science Department, Dr. Brian Gauck. Together, they played a significant role in organizing and overseeing the livestock judging contest, one of the event's marquee competitions.

Tracy Kincannon, Dean of the College of Agriculture, Science, and Nursing, praised the event's participants and leaders, saying, "I'm very proud of everyone's hard work. The growth of our contest is a testament to all the great leadership within the College of Agriculture Science and Nursing. From first-semester freshmen to 25-year professors, everyone approaches this monumental endeavor with excitement and enthusiasm, and it shows in the connections they're making each year."

OPSU President Dr. Julie Dinger echoed the excitement, emphasizing the event's impact on agricultural education in the region. "At OPSU, we're committed to providing opportunities to advance agricultural education and create lasting connections with our local FFA chapters," she said. "This event embodies our mission of 'one university, one mission,' bringing together students, faculty, and future leaders in agriculture. We're honored to serve as our region's cornerstone for agricultural education."

The 2024 Interscholastics contest not only showcased the growth of the FFA program but also reinforced OPSU's dedication to nurturing the next generation of agricultural professionals. The success of this event reflects the university's ongoing commitment to fostering relationships that benefit students, communities, and the agricultural industry alike. **P**

FUTURE EDUCATORS DAY AT OPSU

EMPOWERING TOMORROW'S LEADERS

Oklahoma Panhandle State University hosted its Future Educators Day, inviting prospective students to experience what it's like to be an education major at OPSU while showcasing the university's commitment to building Oklahoma's workforce. This event offered a firsthand look at OPSU's education program, designed to inspire future teachers and equip them with the knowledge, support, and resources essential for a successful career in education.

"We want to show students how great our teacher preparation program is and why OPSU is the best place to pursue their education degree," said Dr. Kimberly Conyers, Director of Education at OPSU. "With the insights and experience from our first event last spring, we were excited to make this year's Future Educators Day even more impactful for prospective students."

Dr. Conyers shared that the idea for Future Educators Day came from OPSU President Dr. Julie Dinger, who was enthusiastic about hosting an event to connect with aspiring teachers. The Education Department, armed with new ideas and a greater understanding of what students are looking for, created an engaging event that showcased OPSU's commitment to future educators.

For many students, the day was an exciting introduction to the program. "I have been wanting to be an educator for a long time," said one attendee. "My teacher, Mrs. Ely, went to OPSU, and something drew me to signing up for this experience."

Another student shared how Future Educators Day helped solidify their career choice: "I definitely know I want to be a teacher for sure."

A key component of Future Educators Day was the chance for high school students to interact with current OPSU education majors, giving them a genuine look into the program. For the incoming students, the opportunity to ask questions and hear personal experiences provided a clear view of what life at OPSU is like.

"I am grateful to our dedicated faculty and staff who went above and beyond to make Future Educators Day a success. Their commitment to guiding and inspiring the next generation of educators is evident in every interaction, and this passion sets OPSU apart," shared Dr. Charla Lewis, Vice President of Academic Affairs at OPSU.

"It gives incoming students a look into everything OPSU and the education department have to offer," shared one current OPSU student. "They get to spend time with those who are currently in the program, and there's no one better to inform them than those who are going through the process right now."

Throughout the day, OPSU students shared invaluable advice with prospective teachers. One student encouraged them to get plenty of hands-on experience with children before beginning their education path: "Get as much experience with kids as possible before pursuing education. Thinking



you want to work with kids is way different than having the capabilities and patience to do it. Go into classrooms, summer camps, daycares—anything where you're with multiple children at one time. It will set you up for success."

Future Educators Day reflects OPSU's mission of "Progress Through Knowledge," a dedication that runs deeply within the Education Department. Dr. Conyers explained that their commitment goes beyond academics; it's about helping students find purpose and meaning. "We are always striving to help students grow, not just as educators but as individuals," Conyers shared. "We want to produce the best teachers in the nation, but more importantly, we want to help students find purpose in their journey."

During the event, attendees learned about the variety of scholarships available to students pursuing an education degree at OPSU, such as the Panhandle Promise and other education-specific scholarships. Prospective students were encouraged to explore these scholarships to support their academic and career goals, knowing that OPSU is invested in their success.

OPSU is known for its personalized learning experience, small class sizes, and faculty support. With scholarship opportunities, hands-on teaching experiences, and community partnerships, OPSU stands out as a top choice for future educators. Current students and faculty alike emphasize the welcoming and nurturing environment that prepares students to become skilled, compassionate teachers. **P**

A CHRISTMAS TALE

OF LEGACY AND GIVING BACK: CASSIDY TOLLE'S CONNECTION TO OPSU



The air is filled with reflection and gratitude as the holiday season envelops Goodwell in its festive embrace. For Cassidy Tolle, OPSU has a deep connection between her family and Oklahoma Panhandle State University that spans over six decades. Cassidy's journey with OPSU is more than just a chapter in her life; it's a story steeped in tradition and heritage. Her great-grandparents, Don and Bonnie Shepherd, were instrumental in shaping the university's agricultural program. Graduating in 1961, the Shepherds were entrusted with caring for the sheep and dairy barn—a role that saw them tending to the livestock and making the barn their home. In what was then a modest apartment within the sheep barn, the Shepherds' commitment to their work was symbolized by a sign that still hangs on the original door: "The Shepherds." It was a clever nod to their last name and their shepherding duties.

This past summer, Cassidy had the chance to care for sheep in that very barn where her great-grandparents once worked. As she tended to the flock, she couldn't help but feel a profound connection to her family's legacy. The sight of the barn, unchanged in many ways, was a vivid reminder of her family's historical bond with OPSU.

Moved by this sense of history, Cassidy shared her reflections with her grandmother. She spoke of the barn's significance and legacy to her and how honored she felt to continue the work her great-grandparents had started. Understanding Cassidy's connection to the barn, her grandmother created something special: a detailed replica of the barn, complete with a miniature sign reading "The Shepherds."

This replica now holds a place of honor in Cassidy's office, serving as a testament to her family's enduring ties to OPSU. Each time she looks at it, she is reminded of the values of dedication and service that her great-grandparents exemplified and how she, as the third generation of Aggies, is part of a living tradition.

For Cassidy, the values passed down through generations remain at the core of her teaching and coaching at OPSU. "I teach animal science and crop and soil science classes, as well as coach the Livestock Show Team," she shares. "The lessons I learned from

my great-grandparents through their work at the OPSU College Farm are centered around hard work, respect, and the importance of education. From them, I learned that dedication and persistence are key to success, whether in agriculture or any other field."



Cassidy's connection to OPSU as a third-generation Aggie adds a deep sense of purpose to her role. "Being a third-generation Aggie holds a special meaning to me, especially since I attended OPSU and now work here. It's a unique feeling to be part of a legacy that spans generations in my family," she reflects. Her family's influence at the university shaped her commitment to education and her desire to give back. "Working at OPSU allows me to give back in a way that feels personal. I see the impact of the education I received here every day in my work, and it reminds me of how important it is to invest in future generations."

Dean of the College of Agriculture, Science, and Nursing Tracy Kincannon, who also has deep family ties to OPSU, resonates with this shared legacy. "Our university is built on the dedication and hard work of those who came before us, and it's inspiring to see individuals like Cassidy continue that tradition," Kincannon shares. "As someone whose family has also been a part of this institution for generations, I understand the pride and commitment that comes from being an Aggie. It's a legacy of resilience, community, and a steadfast belief in the power of education to transform lives."

The holiday season, emphasizing giving and remembering those who came before us, is the perfect time to celebrate Cassidy's story. It reminds us of the importance of legacy and the joy of giving back to a place that has given so much. For Cassidy Tolle, Christmas is not just a time for celebration but also for honoring the past and continuing a family tradition that has enriched the lives of many.

In this season of reflection and gratitude, Cassidy's story illuminates the spirit of OPSU—a place where past and present come together and where the legacy of those who came before us continues to inspire and guide the next generation. **P**



OPSU FOCUSES

ON SHARED GOVERNANCE FOR STRONGER INSTITUTIONAL ALIGNMENT

In alignment with best practices in higher education, Oklahoma Panhandle State University has embarked on a path toward establishing a system of shared governance. Rooted in “Progress through Knowledge,” OPSU is committed to promoting excellence in the preparation of students for success in a global community. Guided by the principles outlined by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), OPSU’s efforts in shared governance aim to enhance collaboration, transparency, and strategic decision-making among key stakeholders— faculty, staff, administrators, and students. The process is spearheaded by the newly established OPSU Shared Governance Task Force, which has committed to creating a shared governance statement to reflect the institution’s mission of fostering academic excellence and community responsibility.

On October 21, the university held a workshop led by Dr. Steve Bahls, an expert in shared governance and who has consulted with numerous colleges and universities on governance structures. He led the workshop with insight on transforming traditional models of shared governance into engines for institutional agility and sustainability. His key message emphasized moving from “constituency-based thinking” to “institutional thinking”—a shift that requires collaboration, mutual trust, and a focus on the long-term mission of the university.

“From my experience in consulting with dozens of colleges and universities over the past ten years, I have seen, firsthand, that shared governance, when properly conceived, structured, and fostered, is an effective engine of change to help colleges and universities with institutional thriving,” said Dr. Steve Bahls in *Trusteeship Magazine*.

At the heart of shared governance is the need for a culture of transparency and open communication. In practice, this will mean more timely and well-informed decisions for OPSU, fostering a sense of mutual investment in the university’s strategic direction. According to the AAUP, shared governance is not merely a series of checks and balances but an active, collaborative process that involves ongoing dialogue between faculty, staff, and administration.

OPSU President, Dr. Julie Dinger, expressed her enthusiasm for the task force’s progress and the impact shared governance will have on the institution. “At OPSU, our commitment to shared governance aligns with our vision of ‘One University, One Mission,’” Dr. Dinger said. “We are creating an inclusive space where faculty and staff work together, ensuring that all voices contribute to decisions that guide our future. This process is key to achieving long-term sustainability and growth for our university.”

Through the task force’s efforts, OPSU is set to draft a comprehensive shared governance statement in the coming months. This statement will formalize the institution’s commitment to transparency, timely decision-making, and shared responsibility. As the university continues to evolve, shared governance will play an essential role in strengthening its strategic initiatives and ensuring that all constituencies work together toward a common goal: the long-term success and prosperity of OPSU. **P**



SGA PRESIDENT

CONNER PRITCHETT AIMS TO MAKE A LASTING IMPACT AT OPSU

Conner Pritchett, Oklahoma Panhandle State University's Student Government Association President, has hit the ground running this academic year with a vision of leadership and service. Encouraged by friends to take on this role, Conner has embraced the opportunity to make a meaningful impact on campus, sharing his commitment to creating a positive experience for all OPSU students.

When asked about his motivation for running for office, Conner highlighted the encouragement he received from close friends and the belief in his ability to lead. "Really, it was the inspiration and encouragement from some of my friends that made me decide to run for office," he shared. Now at the helm of the SGA, he's focused on supporting students and fostering an environment where they can truly thrive. "My goal this year is to be the best leader I can be in this new role as well as finding ways to ultimately help others thrive here at OPSU," Conner explained.

Conner is excited about the potential for change. "As I'm still learning my role, we haven't made any big changes or initiatives yet, but we will start to mend or mold as the year goes on," he said. His approach is one of thoughtful growth, ensuring that every action taken today leaves a lasting impact. "I'm hoping that all the work we put in now will carry on into the future," he emphasized, showing his dedication to building a legacy that future students can benefit from.

Dean of Student Affairs Laura Hutchinson stated, "Conner's dedication to the OPSU community and his commitment to positively impacting campus is truly inspiring. His approach to leadership—focused on growth, inclusivity, and lasting change—will resonate with students for years to come. I especially value his humility and genuine care for students' well-being."

Beyond his SGA involvement, Conner is active in multiple campus organizations. He serves on the College of Agriculture, Science, and Nursing Leadership Council and is a member of the Livestock Show Team, the Crops Judging Team, and the Baptist Collegiate Ministry. This involvement has enriched his college experience and allowed him to build connections across campus. "Your college experience is what you make of it," Conner shared, "becoming involved in anything on campus allows you to learn, grow, and meet an abundance of new people."

Driven by the desire to make a difference, Conner Pritchett is focused on creating a brighter future for OPSU. "What motivates me is knowing that all I'm doing now is going to leave an impact in the future," he said. With his genuine passion for service, Conner is well-positioned to leave a legacy that will inspire OPSU students for years to come. **P**

OPSU LEADERSHIP

ADVANCES HISPANIC INITIATIVES

Oklahoma Panhandle State University's

Hispanic Student Center and the Hispanic American Leadership Organization wrapped up their celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month. The month-long celebration, guided by Connie Owens, Director of the Hispanic Student Center, and Omar Lira, HALO Advisor, highlighted the cultural significance of Hispanic heritage, both nationally and in the Midwest.

Throughout the month, Owens and her team worked alongside HALO to organize a series of engaging events designed to honor Hispanic culture and create an inclusive environment for all students. "Hispanic Heritage Month is an opportunity for us to come together as a community to celebrate who we are," said Regina Mejia Medina, HALO President. "It's also a chance to inspire others, especially younger students, to take pride in their culture and pursue their dreams."

Omar Lira, who has been advising HALO for a year, reflected on the growth and success of the organization during his tenure. "When I started, we had eight members. This year, we have 19 active members, making it our largest group yet. We've worked hard to build partnerships with organizations like Northwest Domestic Crisis Services, which has been beneficial to OPSU," Lira shared.

He also praised the dedication of the HALO officers, especially President Regina Mejia Medina and Vice President Denise Corral, for their leadership. "I'm incredibly proud of all our HALO officers, especially Regina and Denise, for creating a sense of community and inclusivity. They work tirelessly to make every event meaningful, and they set a powerful example of leadership,



particularly for our female students."

The university's commitment to supporting Hispanic students was further demonstrated through its participation in the annual Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) conference. "As an HSI, our mission is to provide every student with the resources they need to succeed," said OPSU President Dr. Julie Dinger. "Attending the HACU conference reaffirmed our dedication to leveraging our HSI status to foster a sense of belonging and offer innovative programs."

HALO hosted the annual event, the Noche de Gala, which served as the grand finale of the month's festivities. The administration, deans, and students came together to celebrate the achievements of the Hispanic community.

OPSU plans to continue building on these successes by strengthening partnerships and expanding resources that enhance the student experience. With a focus on student retention, academic tools, and community-building, the university remains committed to empowering students to thrive, demonstrating the transformative power of an HSI to shape brighter futures. **P**

OPSU ANIMAL SCIENCE STUDENT

NOXIE IBARRA SECURES INTERNSHIP AT ARIZONA NATIONAL LIVESTOCK



Noxie Ibarra, a sophomore majoring in Animal Science with a pre-veterinary focus at Oklahoma Panhandle State University, has earned an opportunity to intern with the veterinary team at the Arizona National Livestock Show. This internship marks a significant step in Ibarra's academic journey, reflecting her dedication to animal care and her passion for veterinary medicine.

The Arizona National Livestock Show, one of the Southwest's most prominent agricultural events, draws thousands of exhibitors and attendees each year. Scheduled from December 26-31, 2024, the event will feature a variety of livestock, including cattle, pigs, sheep, and goats. Ibarra will collaborate with experienced veterinarians and veterinary students from Midwestern University, assisting with animal identification and health checks throughout the event.

"I'm incredibly excited and grateful for this opportunity," Ibarra said. "It's a dream come true to work alongside professionals in the field and gain hands-on experience in veterinary medicine. I've always been passionate about animals, and this internship allows me to apply what I've learned in the classroom to real-world situations."

Originally from Guymon, OK, Ibarra's interest in animal science began at an early age. Her experience working at Compassionate

Care Veterinary Clinic and participating in her local FFA Chapter provided a solid foundation in veterinary care. Ibarra's commitment to her studies and proactive pursuit of practical experience garnered attention from the Arizona National Livestock Show's internship coordinators.

During the internship, Ibarra will take on a variety of responsibilities, including monitoring animal health, assisting with substance test sampling, and providing educational support to exhibitors and visitors on proper animal care. She looks forward to learning from the professionals around her and plans to attend veterinary school after completing her undergraduate degree.

Ibarra encourages her fellow students to seek out similar opportunities. "Every experience counts, and it's important to get involved and network with professionals who can help you grow," she advised.

Dr. Tolle, head of the OPSU Animal Science Department, commended Ibarra's achievement. "Noxie embodies the spirit of our program. Her dedication and hard work have set her apart, and this internship is a fantastic opportunity for her to expand her knowledge and skills in a real-world setting. We are incredibly proud of her."

The OPSU Animal Science Department places a strong emphasis on hands-on learning, recognizing the value of practical experience in preparing students for successful careers. Internships like Ibarra's provide invaluable opportunities for students to apply classroom knowledge to real-world situations, deepening their understanding of animal care, management, and veterinary practices. Such experiences foster critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and professional connections that are essential in the dynamic field of animal science. **P**

OPSU MATH AND SCIENCE CLUB

HOSTS INAUGURAL ROBOTICS COMPETITION



The OPSU Math and Science Club hosted its inaugural Robotics Competition event, welcoming high school teams from Boise City, Merritt, Altus, Mooreland, and Freedom. The event, part of For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology (FIRST) Robotics, a leading youth organization focused on advancing STEM education, brought together students and faculty to celebrate innovation, teamwork, and a shared passion for science and technology.

This year's theme, Into the Deep, challenged teams to design and build robots capable of "diving" into the depths of the ocean and exploring the mysteries below. Each team displayed their engineering skills, strategic thinking, and collaborative spirit as they showcased robots built to navigate the intricacies of underwater exploration.

The Science and Math Club advisors, Sarah Green and Hannah Martin expressed their enthusiasm for hosting the event, saying,

"The Science and Math Club was excited to help with the robotics competition and visit with all the high school students. It was a great experience for both their students and ours."

The event drew praise from the College of Agriculture, Science, and Nursing, with Dean Tracy Kincannon noting the importance of hands-on learning. "Hosting events like these is a great way for OPSU to support the experiential learning that STEM programs provide," stated Kincannon.

The competition provided an opportunity for local students to engage in STEM-based activities and fostered connections between high school students and OPSU's academic community. As the university continues to promote STEM initiatives and community engagement, events like the FIRST Robotics Competition are becoming vital platforms for encouraging the next generation of innovators. **P**

TRAILBLAZERS OF 1976:

PANHANDLE STATE WOMEN'S BASKETBALL PIONEERS




In the winter of 1976, Oklahoma Panhandle State University's first-ever women's basketball team took to the court, making history and setting a foundation for future generations of Aggie athletes. This pioneering group of women, led by Coach Rich Collins, who balanced roles as the assistant football coach and head track coach, overcame the challenges of a debut season to establish themselves as a formidable force in Panhandle State's athletic landscape.

The roster boasted a blend of talent and tenacity, featuring Shirley Huddleston, Kandy Briant, Kay Robins, Becky Burkett, Deborah Hinds, Karen Cornelson, Nelda Richards, Beth Hamlin, Cindy Shepherd, Joyce Fleming, Mary Ann Hill, and Precilla Helms. Together, these athletes embraced a vision of success that culminated in a season remembered for its teamwork, resilience, and unyielding Aggie spirit.

At the heart of the team's strategy and strength was the starting five lineup, a group of players whose unique skill sets and game IQ propelled the team to victory repeatedly. Nelda Richards, a freshman then, was the playmaker whose passing and court vision earned her a place as the leader in directing plays. Karen Cornelson, hailed by Coach Collins as the team's best shooter, was a scoring threat on every possession, her accuracy and range anchoring the team's offensive efforts. Kandy Briant, a thinker on the court, brought strategic depth and composure under pressure, often making critical decisions that kept the Aggies competitive. Becky Burkett provided consistency at the free-throw line, her reliable shooting making her indispensable in close games. Shirley Huddleston, lauded as an all-around player, contributed across all aspects of the game, embodying the drive and versatility that defined the team.

This team started their season off on such a high note, winning their first five games and bouncing back to win the next game after their first loss of the season. The team ended their season with a record of 15-5. Each game showcased determination and grit, with Coach Collins instilling each athlete a strong sense of purpose. Beyond individual talent, the unity and unbreakable bond on and off the court set this team apart. The Aggie women played with heart, proving that a newly formed team could achieve greatness through perseverance and dedication.

As the Panhandle State women's basketball team heads into another season nearly five decades later, we celebrate the legacy of the 1976 team—a group of trailblazers who forever changed the course of Aggie history. They weren't just players but pioneers who paved the way for generations, showing us all what it means to be an Aggie.

OPSU invites you to join us in honoring the first Aggie Women's Basketball Team on November 23, 2024, at Anchor D Arena. They will be honored during halftime of the women's game against University of North Texas (UNT-Dallas). 



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Aggie Wonderland

DECEMBER 1 - 30

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