

SCHOOL

A Special Supplement to the Sullivan County Democrat

SCENE

A look at activities
at SUNY Sullivan
Community College



Bringing college into the classroom

BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

Since stepping into his new role nine months ago, SUNY Sullivan President Dr. David Potash has been busy laying down roots and strengthening ties with local schools. One key initiative that's seeing major growth is the College in the High School program—a collaboration that gives high school students a jumpstart on college while still sitting in their usual classrooms.

"We work with all eight Sullivan County public high schools, the Homestead School, and two in Orange County — Pine Bush and Middletown," said Potash during a recent sit-down interview. "It's all about giving students a leg up."

The current College in the High School (CIHS) program includes nine schools within Sullivan County and two in Orange County. One of the Sullivan County schools is private—the Homestead School. As of Fall 2024 registration, the CIHS program consists of 750 students in 56 different courses (146 overall courses) being taught by 79 CIHS-approved teachers.

The program allows high schoolers to take college-level courses right at their schools. These aren't watered-down versions either—each course follows the same syllabus, standards, and expectations as those taught on the SUNY Sullivan campus.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

SUNY Sullivan President Dr. David Potash has been actively building connections and deepening relationships with local schools.

The most popular courses currently offered include:

1. English Composition I (12 sections)
2. Elementary Statistics and Spanish III (8 sections each)
3. U.S. History I, Precalculus, and Fundamentals of Speech (7 sections each)

4. Calculus I, College Algebra, and U.S. History II (5 sections each)

5. American Government, Business Math, Macroeconomics, Microeconomics, General Psychology, and Spanish IV (4 sections each)

Potash says the program is helping more kids see college as an achievable goal—academically and financially.

"It can really make a massive difference," he said. "Not only does it help students feel like they belong

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School Scene

'A look inside SUNY Sullivan'

Published by
Catskill-Delaware Publications, Inc.

Publishers of the

**SULLIVAN COUNTY
Democrat**

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Callicoon, NY 12723

April 22, 2025 • Vol. CXXXV, No. 92

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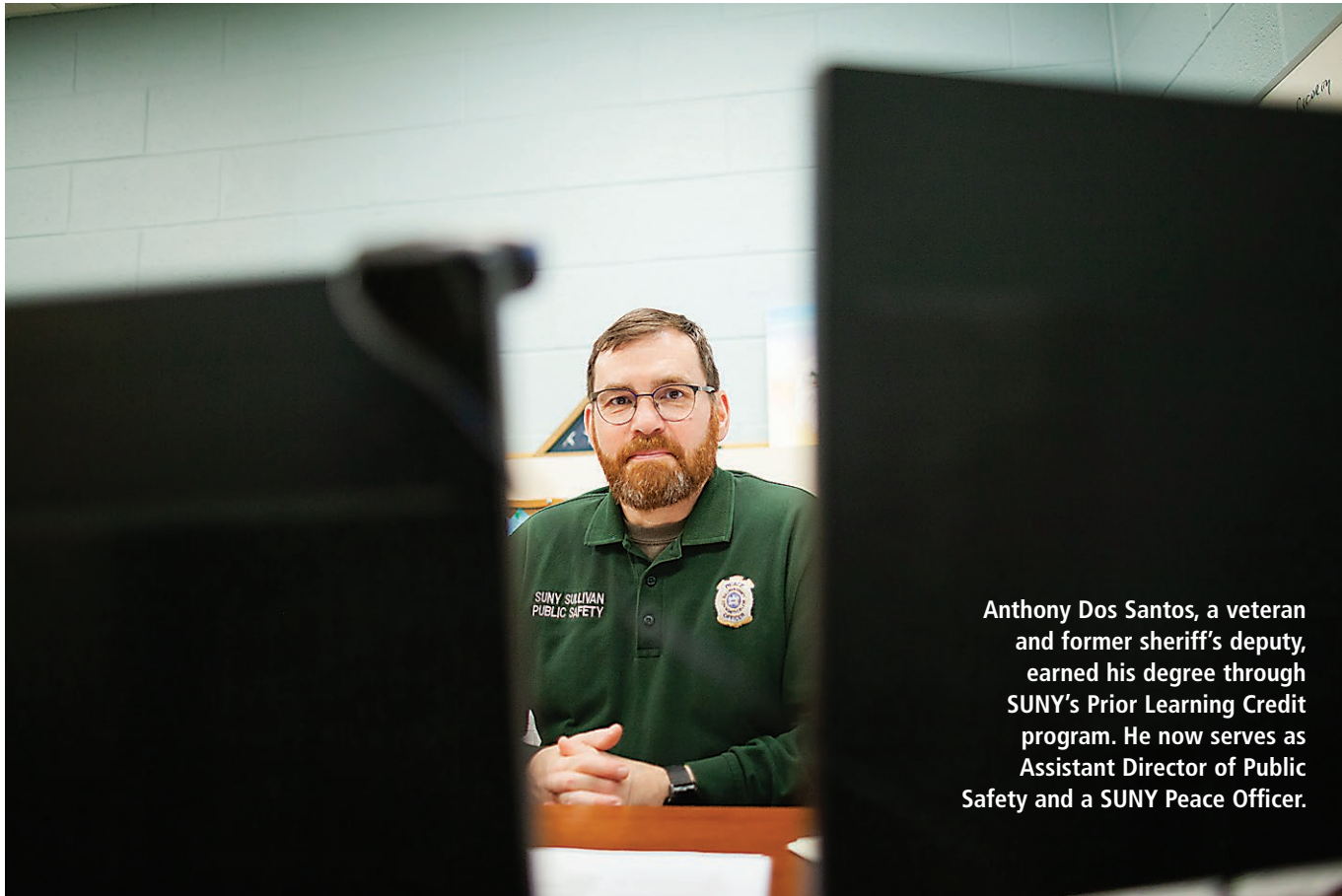
Prior learning credit program opens new doors for adult learners

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

For many adults in Sullivan County, going back to college after years away from school can feel out of reach. Between full-time jobs, raising families, and financial pressures, the idea of sitting in a classroom again seems almost impossible. But a little-known program at SUNY Sullivan is helping to change that.

The college's Prior Learning Credit (PLC) program allows students to earn academic credit for knowledge and skills they've already gained through work, military service, certifications, or other life experience.

"It's about giving people credit for their real-world experience," said Rosemarie Hanofee, Interim Vice President of Academic and Student Affairs at SUNY Sullivan. "If you've been working in a field for a long time and can show your experience matches the learning outcomes of one of our courses, you may be able to earn college credit."



Anthony Dos Santos, a veteran and former sheriff's deputy, earned his degree through SUNY's Prior Learning Credit program. He now serves as Assistant Director of Public Safety and a SUNY Peace Officer.

The program isn't new — it's been in place for years — but it's getting renewed attention now as SUNY encourages all of its cam-

pus to focus more on adult learners. Hanofee said the college revised its policy last fall and is working on clearer language and

marketing to help more people understand how it works.

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in college, it also saves them time and money."

The program has become so comprehensive that some students are graduating from high school with an associate degree already in hand. Schools like Fallsburg and Eldred have a "Pathways" program that allows students to earn a SUNY Sullivan degree when they graduate high school. There are also non-Pathways students in those schools taking CIHS courses. This spring, around 25 students are on track to graduate with both a diploma and a college degree. The classes offered cover the ba-

sics—English, math, history, psychology—and are often the same general education requirements students would face in their first two years of college. The credits are designed to transfer easily to SUNY schools and beyond.

While students typically pay a fraction of the cost for each course—roughly one-third of standard tuition—some districts, like Fallsburg, have agreements in place that allow students to take the classes at no cost. SUNY Sullivan is also working with its foundation to help cover tuition for students who can't afford it.

"The goal is to make sure money is never a barrier," said Potash.

Feedback from teachers and administrators has been positive, and Potash says he's learning a lot from visiting schools across the region.

"We're building a community of educators," he said. "When you get passionate teachers in the same room, ideas start flowing. That's what we want."

Looking ahead, Potash says the college is preparing for a broader push—not just for high schoolers, but for adults, too. If the state approves a proposed free community college plan for adults ages 25 to 55, SUNY Sullivan may open classes in the evenings and adjust schedules to meet new demand.

Meanwhile, the college is planning a bigger Kite Day in early May and gearing up for graduation on May 17—Potash's first as president.

"Graduation is what it's all about," he said. "That moment when students cross the stage, it means the world. You see all the hard work pay off."

For Potash, programs like College in the High School aren't just about credits or tuition savings. They're about helping students—and families—believe in a future where college isn't out of reach.

"We're building trust," he said. "And once you have that, you can do a lot of good."

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The effort seems to be paying off. According to Hanofee, there were 192 students between the ages of 25 and 55 enrolled at SUNY Sullivan in Fall 2024, up from 167 the year before. That group includes freshmen, transfer students, and non-matriculated students who are taking classes without pursuing a full degree.

"A lot of folks in that age group have years of experience," said Hanofee. "The Prior Learning program gives them a jumpstart. It's a way to validate what they already know and move them closer to a credential."

The process involves putting together a portfolio that includes documentation like training certificates, letters from supervisors, and a written statement explaining how their experience meets course objectives. Faculty in that field review the submission and

determine if credit is granted.

One of those success stories is Anthony Dos Santos, now Assistant Director of Public Safety and a SUNY Peace Officer. Dos Santos, a veteran of the U.S. Air Force and former sheriff's deputy, returned to college years after leaving school. With help from the PLC program, he finally earned his associate's degree.

"I started my degree many years ago but never finished it," said Dos Santos. "I always told my kids how important school was, and it didn't sit right with me that I hadn't completed mine."

Dos Santos was able to earn credit for emergency management training and other law enforcement certifications — including FEMA courses — which cut his remaining class load in half.

"There was a lot of paperwork and running around, but in the end, it was worth it," he said. "I didn't have to take classes for

things I'd already been doing for years. It made it easier to stick with it."

Hanofee said law enforcement and emergency services are common fields for prior learning credit, but the program also applies to hospitality, culinary arts, and even carpentry. Through an agreement with the North Atlantic States Carpenters Union, journeymen who complete a five-year apprenticeship can receive up to 20 credits toward a construction degree.

In total, students can earn up to 75 percent of their degree through the Prior Learning program, though most receive six to nine credits at a time.

Dos Santos, who now oversees campus safety and emergency response at the college, said the credits helped him grow into that role.

"I deal with emergency management now, so the education lined

up with what I was already doing," he said. "It gave me a broader base to work from."

For him, the most rewarding part was leading by example.

"I didn't want to be a hypocrite," Dos Santos said. "I always tell my kids education matters. Now I've done it myself."

To get started, students can contact Dean Jason Kaplan through the SUNY Sullivan website to begin the portfolio process. Advisors also help new students figure out if they qualify as part of their intake.

"Even if it's just a couple of credits, that's one less class you have to take," said Dos Santos. "You've already done the work — why not get credit for it?"

Hanofee agrees. "There are a lot of people out there with valuable experience," she said. "This program helps turn that into an opportunity."



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Graphic design students at SUNY Sullivan work on creative projects as part of their hands-on coursework.



In a brightly lit classroom at SUNY Sullivan, where digital screens glow with layers of color, animation, and typography, something more than graphic design is being taught. Under the guidance of Professor Joe Poon, students are learning to communicate, collaborate, and navigate the ever-evolving landscape of design with real-world skills and community awareness.

Now in his third year at SUNY Sullivan, Poon is building more than a curriculum—he's creating a culture that reflects the realities of today's design industry. "Gone are the days when graphic designers just sat at a desk and worked in isolation," Poon said. "Today, you need to be ready to adapt, to understand video, social media, even drone technology. Design is a moving target."

Real projects, real impact

Poon's program is based on what he calls "peer-to-peer role-playing," an approach that pairs graphic design students with students from other departments for interdisciplinary collaboration. One stand-out initiative is the "Appy Hour" project—a partnership between the Graphic Design and Culinary departments.

Each year, a design student is paired with a chef-in-training. Over the semester, the designer documents the chef's work, developing a personal brand for them. By May 1st, at a community showcase, the chefs serve appetizers while their paired designer presents branding materials, including a short video. "It's storytelling and design working hand-in-hand," Poon said. "It's about building confidence and learning to work in real-life scenarios."

Another project partners design students with the college's Respiratory Care program. Nursing students provide research on health topics, which the design students transform into brochures, posters, and presentations for an end-of-semester medical conference. "It teaches the importance of visual communication in healthcare, and

Designing futures: SUNY Sullivan's graphic design program blends art, tech and community



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STORY AND PHOTOS BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

it's work they can show to future employers," Poon added.

Keeping Up with the Times

Recognizing that the industry is evolving, Poon has updated the curriculum to include motion graphics, social media content creation, and AI tools. Students learn to create Instagram reels and promotional videos—skills that five years ago might not have been part of a graphic design course.

"I recently added a Motion Media for Designers class," Poon said. "We're learning how to make short form content, because that's where so much of the work is now."

He's also planning to add drone videography to the program. "I'm working on my drone certification. It's another tool I want my students to have," he said.

When it comes to artificial intelligence, Poon takes a practical approach. "It's already integrated into the tools we use—Photoshop, Canva, even writing software. So, I teach students how to use it responsibly, not avoid it," he said. "They still do the design work, but maybe they generate background images with AI or use it to help brainstorm layouts."

A student's perspective

For Adrienne Lee, a second-year graphic design student and student trustee on SUNY Sullivan's Board of Trustees, the program has been transformational.

"I actually started out in engineering," said Lee. "But it wasn't clicking. I always loved art, so I gave graphic design a try, and it felt right. Professor Poon gives us the freedom to explore our own style while still guiding us."

Lee is also an active member of



Professor Joe Poon teaches SUNY Sullivan students real-world graphic design skills rooted in communication, collaboration and community awareness.

the Student Government Association and a campus muralist. She's created three murals on campus so far—one in the student union, another for the food pantry, and one in the Board of Trustees room.

Her mural work came about through connections on campus. "Once people saw the first mural, they started asking for more," she said. "It's a great feeling to contribute something permanent to the school."

Lee has been accepted into the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, one of the country's top design schools. "I'm hoping to keep building my skills and get into a steady design job after graduation," she said.

Despite the anxiety around AI in creative industries, Lee shares Poon's optimism. "AI can't match the human touch," she said. "People still want to work with real designers

who bring emotion and experience into their work. AI is just a tool—we use it to enhance our ideas, not replace them."

Connecting design to community

Poon is passionate about keeping the program grounded in the local community. His students have participated in Earth Day celebrations, where they used QR codes and design materials to promote local hiking trails and raise awareness about the college's sustainability efforts.

"If you can go through two years here and not know we have a geothermal energy system or a Hope Farm that grows food for local families, then we haven't done our job," he said.

By requiring students to engage with their surroundings, Poon believes they walk away with more than a degree. "I want them to un-

derstand where they live, not just what they study. That's how you build a community, and that's what makes their design work meaningful."

Looking ahead

SUNY Sullivan's graphic design program is small, but it's preparing students for a big world. Whether they're moving on to four-year schools, starting freelance careers, or working with local businesses, graduates leave with real-world experience, a strong portfolio, and the confidence to keep learning.

"We're not just learning software," Lee said. "We're learning how to think like designers."

And thanks to faculty like Poon, they're also learning how to adapt, communicate, and make a difference—on campus, in their communities, and beyond.



Adrienne Lee, a second-year graphic design student and student trustee, stands beside her student union mural—one of three she's painted across the SUNY Sullivan campus.

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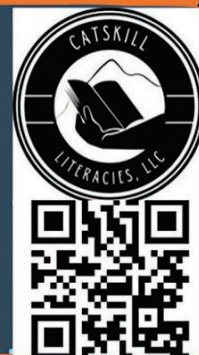
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SUNY Sullivan's programs tackle addiction and support services head-on



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BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

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With the opioid crisis hitting Sullivan County harder than nearly anywhere else in the state, SUNY Sullivan is leaning into education as a frontline defense by training a new generation of human services professionals and addiction counselors.

At the heart of this initiative is the college's Human Services degree and the Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counseling program, which are seeing renewed interest – and support – from both the state and local community.

"The need is here, the jobs are here, and now the education is being offered – for free, in some cases," said Jason Kaplan, Interim Dean of Liberal Arts, Science, and Health Sciences at SUNY Sullivan.

Two paths, one purpose

The Human Services program is a two-year Associate of Science degree geared toward students interested in entering counseling or social work fields. "It's designed to be flexible because every four-year college has different requirements," Kaplan said, explaining that students get a mix of foundational education and courses in

Jason Kaplan, Interim Dean at SUNY Sullivan, highlights growing support for the college's Human Services and Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counseling programs.

psychology, counseling, and behavioral studies.

"They take abnormal psychology, child psychology, general psych—so they're getting the groundwork," Kaplan said.

Graduates often continue on to four-year schools in social work or psychology, but Kaplan said some enter the workforce immediately in supportive roles across residential and community-based services.

Then there's the Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counseling program — a 61-credit Associate of Applied Science degree tied directly to New York State's effort to expand the number of Credentialed Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Counselors (CASACs). What makes this program unique is that it's currently fully funded for qualifying students thanks to the state's opioid settlement money.

Opioid money funds futures

"That program is completely scholarship right now," Kaplan explained. "First students apply for financial aid, and anything not covered — tuition, fees, even the CASAC exam — the state picks up the rest. That's a big deal."

The funding comes from the New York State Office of Addiction Services and Supports (OASAS), which manages the scholarships created out of billions in opioid settlement funds.

It's a critical pipeline, especially for a region like Sullivan County. According to the NYS Overdose Death Dashboard, the county had a staggering opioid overdose death rate of 63.7 per 100,000 residents in 2020 — nearly triple the statewide average.

"That's why we have nine OASAS-approved treatment centers in just this one county," Kaplan said. "And our students can do their internships there — 150 hours of field work and additional practicum hours where they work directly with patients."

A comeback program for a community in need

Just a few years ago, the Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counseling program was on the verge of being shut down. "We were going to deactivate it," Kaplan admitted. "But then the state came in with this opportunity. They're not just funding students. They're covering our program costs too."

Since its relaunch, the program has drawn students from across the region and beyond — even from New York City, where scholarship slots fill up fast at larger colleges.

Kaplan says the program attracts a wide mix of students: "Some have personally struggled with addiction and are now clean and want to help others. Some have family members affected. Others just want to do something meaningful."

Not Just a Degree, But a Career Path

The AAS degree also puts students on track to become CASAC-Trainees. From there, they

can enter the workforce directly, helping individuals in treatment centers, hospitals, and community programs — or they can continue their education.

"We're offering a real pathway here," Kaplan said. "Some go straight into jobs, some go for their bachelor's, and some go even further. I did. I started here. I went to SUNY Sullivan, then a four year university, and then to law school"

Local impact

For Kaplan, who grew up in Fallsburg and served as a local police officer, the opioid crisis isn't abstract.

"When the resort hotels collapsed, a lot of people lost stable jobs. That was the beginning of a long spiral," he said. "Addiction became a generational issue. This program is a way to break that cycle."

And it's not just talk. Every student who completes the Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counseling degree leaves SUNY Sullivan with real-world experience in local treatment centers — ready to step

into jobs that exist now.

"We're still building the program back," Kaplan said. "Some of the final semester classes haven't even run yet because the cohorts haven't reached that point. But we're getting there."

He also emphasized that the school is listening. "Students want night classes, they want online options, and we're trying to accommodate that while keeping the quality intact."

Open Door, Open Minds

As the programs continue to grow, SUNY Sullivan is making sure students know the support is there — not just academically, but personally.

"Whether it's helping people who've battled addiction, or helping students figure out what's next, we're meeting them where they are," said Kaplan. "And if that leads to them helping our community heal, that's a win for everyone."

For more information on the CASAC scholarships and program eligibility, visit sunysullivan.edu/casac-scholarships.



The collapse of the hotel industry was a catalyst for Sullivan County's spiral into substance use issues, but the efforts of SUNY Sullivan's education, as well as the Sullivan Catskills Visitors Association's (SCVA) push to boost tourism, look to correct that.

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