



Photo by Theresa Danna-Douglass

## Two decades of growth

### Nutrition department celebrates 20th year

*Chris Pritos, chair of the Department of Nutrition, stands in a state-of-the-art nutrition lab, where senior-level students and faculty conduct research addressing the healthcare needs of northern Nevadans.*

While the traditional gift for a 20th anniversary celebration is china, students in Nevada's Department of Nutrition, which is celebrating the notable milestone this year,

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have received something significantly more valuable—and far less fragile. “My classes and the entire experience really set me up for success,” said Yolanda Ortega-Gammill, the “Yo” in Yo’s Kitchen Counter, a nutritional counseling business. She graduated in 1999 with a bachelor of science degree with a major in nutrition from the College of Agriculture, Biotechnology and Natural Resources. “The faculty were amazing in their support and the work was

relevant to my goals.”

Ortega-Gammill’s goals included starting her own business, which became Yo’s Kitchen Counter, [www.yoskc.com](http://www.yoskc.com).

“We all deserve to be happy in the body we have today, and my hope is to allow clients to adopt a philosophy of healthy and happy choices leading to the best life possible,” she said.

Twenty years after Nevada’s first nutrition students declared their major, the department continues to see phenomenal growth. In the early parts of this decade, it saw more than a 650 percent increase in research funding, and its student population more than doubled between 2001 and 2008.

Department Chair Chris Pritos believes a cultural shift is driving growth.

“Nevadans and Americans as a whole are

becoming more and more health conscious,” he said. “People now recognize the critical role nutrition plays in maintaining good health, and they want to learn more about it. With an emphasis being placed on preventative medicine, students see nutrition as an excellent major in preparing them for careers in the health professions such as medicine, dentistry, pharmacy and more.”

Career preparation is a fundamental philosophy of the department, reflected through many of the program’s core courses. One example takes place in Associate Professor Jamie Benedict’s community nutrition class, where students contribute time and knowledge to local agencies like St. Vincents, Casa de Vida, Safe Embrace and area hospitals, including Saint Mary’s and Renown.

“Our students appreciate the opportunity

to work with the public, to see how these programs operate and to benefit the community by applying knowledge from their classes,” Benedict said. “Last semester alone, our students contributed more than 600 hours in assistance. These are real-world experiences allowing students to see real-world problems.”

The nutrition major offers students two specializations—one in nutritional science and one in dietetics. Students completing the nutritional science specialization typically are interested in graduate work in nutrition or are seeking entry to a professional school in health care such as medicine, dentistry or pharmacy.

“Our program has been highly successful sending recent graduates to prestigious dental schools, for example, such as University of California, San Francisco and University of Pennsylvania,” Pritsos said.

The dietetics track provides students with a

background in nutritional health, but students also are prepared for the next step in becoming a registered dietitian, a dietetic internship.

After completing an internship, students take a national examination to become registered.

“We’re attracting people from all over the country to our program,” said Karon Felten, director of the internship program. “Whereas internship opportunities throughout the U.S. are diminishing, our program is continuing to grow.”

With such growth comes competition for admission: The department receives about 60 applications for six internships per semester. The department currently works with six training sites throughout the state, placing interns at locations where they work rigorous schedules to complete a 1,200-hour commitment.


“It’s a fast-paced program, but we hear

wonderful feedback from the students,” Felten said. “They appreciate the ability to work diligently and focus on their passions.”

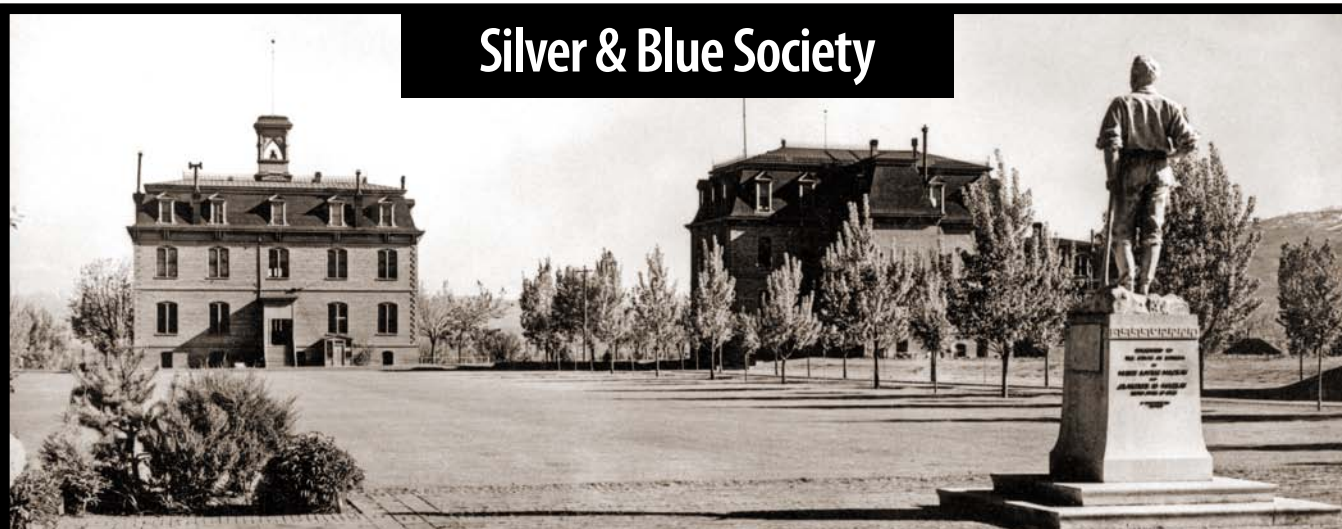
Ortega-Gammill notes passion is the underpinning of her company.

“I wanted to find something where my passions for food, family and friends could exist synergistically,” she said. “People are always gathering in the kitchen; nourishing your body and your relationships is a common theme.”

As for the common themes learned through the Department of Nutrition, she says personal faculty relationships provide a foundation of support.

“I always felt like I had a cheering section,” she said. “Here it is 10 years later, and I’m still getting emails and messages of encouragement. I don’t think many people can say that about their college professors.” 

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To learn more about the Silver & Blue Society contact Crystal Parrish at (775) 784-1352 or [cparrish@unr.edu](mailto:cparrish@unr.edu).