

# ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT



**Nicole Pinaire, Ph.D.**

Associate Professor and Chair  
Department of Biology  
St. Charles Community College  
Cottleville, Missouri

## Keep your love of learning

---

As the daughter of a retired teacher, Nicole Pinaire, Ph.D., always had an admiration for educators, but it wasn't until a chance encounter with fellow graduates of The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center UTHealth Houston Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences that she realized teaching should be her destiny, too.

"I have had some amazing teachers and coaches in my life – that, combined with my passion for genetics, is what inspired me to pursue my graduate studies and led me to become a faculty member in a subject I truly love," Pinaire says.

Pinaire's interest in genetics sprouted during a high school biology course and intensified while she was completing an undergraduate cytogenetics internship at St. Louis University Hospital.

"I was fascinated by cancer genetics and learning about chromosome translocations that could cause cancer and knew that was something I wanted to focus on during graduate school," Pinaire says. "So, I searched for genetics programs in cancer research – that is how I ended up in Houston!"

Shortly after Pinaire earned her Bachelor of Science in 2003 from St. Louis University, she began her graduate studies at the MD Anderson Cancer Center UTHealth Houston Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences.

"At MD Anderson, I was in an environment where I was taught to be an independent, curious researcher. The skills I gained in the lab and out of the lab, such as writing, thinking and developing projects, have been invaluable as an undergraduate college faculty member," Pinaire says.

One of her most memorable learning experiences as a graduate student was serving as a teaching assistant, which gave her the opportunity to teach and write and grade exam questions.

## ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

“Knowing how to break down difficult content and processes into something understandable has been critical to my success as a community college science professor,” she says.

After earning her Doctor of Philosophy in Molecular and Cancer Biology from the MD Anderson Cancer Center UTHealth Houston Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences in 2009, Pinaire decided to focus on her interest in health law. She applied and was accepted into law school, but fate had other plans.

“I was encouraged to apply for an adjunct instructor position after meeting a few MD Anderson Cancer Center UTHealth Houston Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences alumni at a networking event through the graduate school,” Pinaire says. “After helping Houston Christian University for a semester, I knew that teaching was a definite option for a long-term career.”

Eventually, she decided to defer her admission to law school to teach full-time at Houston Christian University.

“That year was awesome for me. I enjoyed teaching so much that I never looked back on going to law school,” Pinaire says. “It was a challenging but very rewarding and transformative year.”

She’s since served as a faculty member at both two- and four-year institutions and applied for grants, performed bench research and taught courses on molecular biology techniques and research.

Today, Pinaire serves as an associate professor and chair of the department of Biology at St. Charles Community College, where she teaches human anatomy and physiology courses and conducts research on pedagogy. She is currently working on publishing results from a project aimed at building a sense of belonging and community in the classroom using evidence-based instructional practices. She is also a mentor for a National Science Foundation grant for the Community College Anatomy and Physiology Education Research (CAPER) project, which focuses on implementing new teaching strategies in anatomy and physiology courses at community colleges.

## ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

“Genetics, biomedical sciences and physiology are subjects I am fascinated by, so my job as a biology teacher at the college level combines the best of everything! I learn new things all the time, and that is just awesome,” Pinaire says.

And while the material she teaches is not as comprehensive as her graduate studies, Pinaire relies on her experiences as a collegiate athlete and graduate student to facilitate deeper learning for her students.

“I have been told I teach like a coach might coach – helping students work through materials rather than teach ‘at’ them,” Pinaire says.

She also leans on her personal experiences to encourage students interested in pursuing a similar career path.

“Take it one day at a time and focus on the small things and wins,” Pinaire says. “A wise faculty member at the graduate school gave me this advice, and I use it even now: ‘The big picture and end goal are important, and you can keep them in your eyesight, but making progress by climbing the ladder incrementally is how you can get there.’”

Pinaire primarily spends her free time at ball fields, soccer matches, hockey rinks and basketball courts watching her children play sports. She also enjoys reading, working out and surfing behind the family boat.

---

Want your spotlight to be featured?  
[Complete our questionnaire.](#)

Not a member of the MD Anderson Alumni portal?  
[Join the portal.](#)