

This month's alumni spotlight is Rebecca Padnos Altamirano, MA '01 (STEP)

I build sustainable systems that expand access to opportunity, often at the intersection of education, health, technology, and policy. I founded Tangelo Technologies, a Silicon Valley-based digital venture studio that helps mission-driven organizations and large brands design and scale products with real-world impact. Through Tangelo, I've led digital transformations and growth strategies for organizations including Intel, Intuit, and LeanIn, helping teams align technology, partnerships, and advocacy to drive sustainable change.

Earlier in my career, I helped launch East Palo Alto Academy. As a founding teacher and administrator, I worked closely with educators and families to design programs like the Early College initiative that expanded college access for students in underserved communities. I coauthored *Be the Change: Reinventing School for Student Success* with Linda Darling-Hammond and currently serve as an advisor to initiatives such as the Chef Ann Foundation's Michigan Healthy School Food Pathway, focused on transforming school food systems statewide. I also helped create the Stanford Graduate School of Education's Alumni Excellence in Education Awards and later served as chair of the nominating committee.

As a longtime committee member, Rebecca shares tips for anyone thinking about **nominating an alum for this year's Alumni Excellence in Education Award**.

What led you to become involved with the Alumni Award Nominating Committee?

I helped create the Alumni Excellence in Education Award because I saw how much meaningful work GSE alumni were doing across sectors — classrooms, health systems, policy, technology, and community organizations — without a clear mechanism to recognize that impact. Alumni were building schools, influencing public systems, launching ventures, and improving outcomes at scale, often quietly. The committee formed to ensure that breadth of leadership and impact had visibility and recognition within the GSE community.

What was your motivation for participating in this committee?

My motivation comes directly from my professional journey. I've spent my career working inside institutions and alongside communities, where progress depends on persistence, collaboration, and long-term thinking. Whether redesigning schools, supporting founders, or advising public-private partnerships, I've seen how difficult — and how essential — sustained impact can be. Serving on the committee allows me to help elevate alumni whose work reflects those same values and realities.

In your experience, what are the standout qualities of a competitive Alumni Award nomination?

The strongest nominations lead with impact and clarity. They explain the problem the nominee addressed, the role they personally played, and the outcomes that followed. Competitive nominations also situate the work within a broader context — who benefited, at what scale,

and over what period of time — so reviewers can clearly understand significance without needing insider knowledge.

What elements have impressed you most about past nominations?

What consistently stands out is sustained leadership. The most compelling nominations don't focus on a single moment or title; they show how someone builds, adapts, and leads over time. I'm especially impressed when nominations demonstrate how a nominee works across sectors — education, health, policy, or technology — to create durable change.

What specific achievements or contributions should nominees highlight?

Nominees should highlight contributions that demonstrate meaningful educational or systems-level impact. That can include building or strengthening programs, improving student or community outcomes, supporting educators, influencing policy, advancing research, or creating tools that expand access. Clear examples of how the work affected people's lives make nominations far more compelling.

Through your review of past nominations, what achievements do you believe deserve special emphasis and why?

I place particular emphasis on work that lasts and scales thoughtfully. Initiatives that continue beyond a single leader, adapt across contexts, or inform broader practice signal deep systems understanding. Whether the work happens in schools, public health, or technology, durability often reflects strong leadership and alignment with community needs. This is a very competitive award, and the nominations for teachers need to show the committee how the educator went above and beyond and exemplifies excellence in education.

How important are the letters of support, and what makes them effective?

Letters of support are essential because they provide independent perspective. The strongest letters come from people who have directly observed the nominee's work and can describe both impact and leadership style. Such letters go in depth with specific examples — moments of decision making, collaboration, or problem solving — to add credibility and depth.

Can you offer guidance on how to choose letter writers and what content makes these letters stand out?

Strong nominations include letter writers from different vantage points: collaborators, institutional partners, or people connected to the communities served. The most effective letters serve as storytellers and explain how the nominee builds trust, navigates complexity, and leads through challenges — not just what they accomplished.

What common pitfalls do you see in Alumni Award nominations that nominators should avoid?

Vagueness is the most common pitfall. Titles, awards, or high-level descriptions without context or storytelling make impact hard to assess. Nominations should clearly separate individual leadership from collective effort and explain the nominee's specific contribution within larger initiatives. Sometimes nominators are concerned about the quantity of the letters of

recommendation instead of the quality. These letters need to answer why the candidate qualifies for the highest award the GSE gives to its alums. They should not simply be yearbook inscriptions or listing information that is already included in the candidate's resume.

Another recurring issue is missing scale and scope. Reviewers benefit from knowing how many people were impacted, over what time frame, in what setting, how the candidate went above and beyond, and why they should receive such an esteemed award.

What is the importance of storytelling in a nomination?

Storytelling gives structure to impact. Data shows results, but stories show judgment, values, and leadership in action. A strong narrative helps reviewers understand not just what happened, but how the nominee approached the work and why it mattered.

How can nominating individuals effectively use anecdotes to illustrate the nominee's strengths and impact?

Effective anecdotes focus on a specific challenge or turning point, describe the nominee's response, and explain what changed as a result. When tied clearly to broader outcomes, these moments help reviewers see both leadership style and impact.

What advice would you give to someone who is nominating a fellow alum for the first time?

Start with impact and write for clarity. Assume the reviewer isn't familiar with your organization or sector, and explain why the work matters now. A strong opening summary helps anchor the rest of the nomination. Be sure to collect letters of recommendation from different areas of the candidate's professional life so that the committee has a full and complete understanding of the candidate.

Outline the nomination before writing. Identify the core contribution, select a few strong examples, and gather letters of support that reinforce those points. Clear structure and thoughtful detail consistently lead to stronger submissions.

In your opinion, what do these awards mean for our community, and how do they connect to the values of the GSE?

The awards reflect the GSE's commitment to improving lives through learning by recognizing alumni who apply their expertise with purpose and care. They highlight leadership across classrooms, systems, health, policy, and innovation, reinforcing values like equity, rigor, and service.

For the alumni community, the awards create a shared understanding of what meaningful impact looks like across different contexts. They connect individual achievements to the broader GSE mission by showing how learning translates into action and sustained change.

What message would you like to share with alumni who are considering submitting a nomination or supporting a fellow alum's nomination?

If you know someone whose work has made a meaningful difference through education or related systems, take the step. Nominate them or support their nomination. Recognition helps ensure that important work is seen, valued, and shared — and it strengthens the GSE community as a whole.