Imposter Syndrome? Welcome to the Club.

School and work can fuel feelings of self-doubt. Can opening up about it help?
MESSAGE FROM THE DEAN

Dear Friends,

SESP is famously Northwestern’s happiest school—a claim that resonates for us all, I hope. At the onset of the pandemic, when forced to stay physically apart, we had a hard time making that assertion. Now that I’ve returned to walking to campus, I’m seeing signs of reconnection everywhere: we’re making eye contact again, gathering at the candy bowl in the student affairs office, and thriving on the creative energy that is best generated when we’re together.

What keeps us the happiest school? I have a few theories. One hinges on SESP’s faculty, globally recognized for their expertise in improving learning at all ages and in all contexts. My colleagues represent just two percent of Northwestern’s faculty but account for more than five percent of those consistently receiving University recognition for their honors and awards. (As one example: almost two-thirds of our full professors are elected members of the national academies; read more about our NAEd members on page 6.) And since our areas of study directly relate to supporting human learning and well-being, it’s no wonder that students and staff morale has sagged elsewhere.

Staff morale has sagged elsewhere. But as an education economist who studies college outcomes, I know all too well. But we are happily adapting in ways our faculty and staff have had to improvise and develop.

Now that I’ve returned to walking to campus, I’m seeing signs of reconnection everywhere: we’re making eye contact again, gathering at the candy bowl in the student affairs office, and thriving on the creative energy that is best generated when we’re together. Perhaps it’s not you. Perhaps it’s the environment.

Imposter Syndrome

Maybe it’s not you. Maybe it’s the environment.

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SESP’s class size triples from first year to senior year as word spreads about our tight-knit community, innovative classes and programs, and devoted academic advisers, faculty, and staff. Our alumni are constantly giving back—whether it’s Alex Sims (BS10), who spoke at the annual homecoming reunion lunch, or the alumni who gave up a Friday afternoon to meet with students at our annual homecoming reunion lunch.

This year, in a way, we are all newcomers: some sophomores have never taken a course on campus, and juniors and seniors have had to improvise and adapt in ways our faculty and staff know all too well. But we are happily rebuilding SESP’s special culture. I welcome you to play a part in any way you can.

David Figlio
Orrington Lunt Professor and Dean

P.S. In October came the announcement of Northwestern’s next president, Rebecca Blank. I’m overjoyed that a decorated social policy expert—herself an elected national academy member—and a once and hopefully future SESP faculty member will be succeeding Morty Schapiro, our esteemed education economist who’s also an NAEd member.
Helping Build the Credibility Revolution
The pathbreaking work of faculty members Larry Hedges, Kirabo Jackson, and Diane Schanzenbach was cited multiple times in the scientific background document justifying this year’s recipients of the Nobel Prize in Economics. Laureates David Card, Joshua Angrist, and Guido Imbens showed that many of society’s big questions can be answered by using so-called natural experiments—real-life situations that resemble randomized controlled trials.

The empirical evidence used in natural experiments comes from work by Hedges, Jackson, Schanzenbach, and countless others—including graduate students. One of Jackson’s studies, cited in the Nobel background document, was coauthored with Claudia Persico (PhD16), who was then Jackson’s student.

Program Receives Prestigious Accreditation
SESP’s Executive Learning and Organizational Change program has been accredited by the International Accreditors for Continuing Education and Training, the top certifying body in the continuing education field.

Launched in early 2019, ELOC attracts leaders with at least 15 years’ work experience and builds on the learning and organizational change master’s degree curriculum that SESP pioneered. Professionals from the business, education, design, nonprofit, and other sectors hone their capacities to lead impactful change at both the individual and organizational levels. Course topics include coaching, leadership development, change management, and organizational design. ELOC classes in both in-person and online formats offer flexible learning opportunities to help participants quickly and efficiently build new skills.

Learn more at eloc.northwestern.edu.

Practicum Passion: Zumwalt Acres
Julia Borland (second from left), a fourth-year social policy major with a deep interest in the environment, won a $10,000 Projects for Peace award to incorporate food-justice issues into a sustainable learning project. As part of her SESP practicum, Borland cofounded the Zumwalt Acres apprenticeship program (zumwaltacres.org), which selects 10 young adults to live and work on a farm in Shalor, Illinois, for three months. Apprentices write grant applications, get their hands dirty in organic garden beds, research sustainable soil management, and more. “Material from my social policy and economics courses translates well to the work,” Borland says. “But being on the farm feels so real—the we’re really making an impact.”

Borland’s plans include offering a yearlong apprenticeship (starting in fall 2022) and adding resources and opportunities that address political, social, and cultural issues in farming. Apprentices will attend workshops such as Soul Fire Farm’s Uprooting Racism in the Food System and gain exposure to other leading forces in environmental justice and US agriculture.

From the MOUTHS OF BABES
Early childhood care and education policies could be improved by paying attention to how very young children perceive the world, according to new research by Terri J. Sabol, assistant professor of human development and social policy at SESP, and Andrea Kinhorn Busby (PhD21), assistant professor in the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University.

Their study “A Critical Gap in Early Childhood Policies: Children’s Meanings Matter” argues that major advances in psychological science and technology can enable researchers to measure the perceptions of children as young as four years old.

In the past, researchers rarely consulted children between the ages of four and eight, partly because children that young were deemed unreliable narrators. But Sabol, Busby, and their team devised an interactive, tablet-based app for measuring children’s perceptions and used it to gauge kindergarteners’ notions of a college savings account.

Their findings showed that the children could grasp what college is or what they might do in college, a “first step toward assessing young children’s meaning-making at scale using technology-assisted measurement tools,” they wrote.

The Double Bind of Multiple Identities
Tabitha Bonilla received a Daniel I. Linzer Grant for Innovation in Diversity and Equity to develop a new undergraduate course framed around the idea that overlapping identities—or intersectionality—can contribute to discrimination or disadvantage.

In a TED Talk shown on the first day of class, pioneer of critical race theory Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw defines intersectionality and discusses the double bind facing victims of simultaneous racial and gender prejudice. Black women, for example, experience both racism and sexism that are expressed differently than either the racism experienced by Black men or the sexism experienced by white women.

Researchers are grappling with the meaning of intersectionality and its impact on everything from environmental and reproductive policy to COVID-19, says Bonilla, assistant professor of human development and social policy. “Mounting research underscores how important it is to think about identity more comprehensively and completely,” she adds.

Keeping Leaders in the Classroom
When lawyers are promoted to partners, they don’t stop practicing law. So why should teachers have to leave the classroom to rise through the ranks?

SESP’s new Teacher Leadership Program offers educators a different way upward. Leading to a master of science in education in teacher leadership or a certificate of advanced study, the program’s combination of workshops, conferences, and short courses allows talented teachers to grow as scholars and leaders while they continue to work with students.

Teachers in the program learn how to navigate today’s most pressing social and cultural issues by drawing on SESP’s expertise in the learning sciences, human development, and social policy. “We want leaders who can foster equitable and social justice-based learning environments, engage with communities, and enrich learning and development,” says program director Tim Dohrer.

Learn more about the Teacher Leadership Program at sesp.northwestern.edu/teacher-leadership.
Designing for—and with—People with Disabilities

A college design course that critically evaluates the field of “making” and partners students with people with disabilities can promote accessibility in computing, according to new research by Marcelo Worsley and David Bar-El. The Inclusive Making course is a preliminary blueprint for scholars who want to adapt it for their own accessible design classes. Worsley and Bar-El wrote in the Journal Computer Science Education.

“Making” is a form of computing that connects digital and physical technologies. Students in the course—meant for upper-level undergraduate and graduate students studying engineering, education, or both—are challenged to design a tool or activity that solves an accessibly problem. “By including critical discussions of the field and authentically collaborating with the community, we can develop better designs and change perceptions about what a valuable computing experience is,” says Worsley, assistant professor of computer science and learning sciences.

Use These Guides to Help Fight Misinformation

Professor David Rapp and graduate student Michael Spikes have lent their expertise to efforts to build critical-thinking skills around COVID-19 and media literacy issues. Rapp, professor of psychology and learning sciences, was among more than two dozen scientists from around the world who contributed to the COVID-19 Vaccine Communication Handbook. The user-friendly resource, which links to a wiki, demystifies COVID-19 vaccines and offers advice on how to accurately challenge misinformation. Spikes served as a national adviser for the American Library Association’s Media Literacy in the Library, a guide that helps library staffers respond to misinformation and other media literacy issues.

"If all you know about Black folx is our pain and our trauma, you can’t do social justice work... because our history does not start with this pain, and we do not fight and find our way out of it because of it. It comes from a joy, a love, creativity, and ingenuity."

Bettina L. Love | Georgia Athletic Association Professor in Education at the University of Georgia

"Change must be purposeful and intentional. It must be rooted in freedom and sovereignty, with the goals of creating the conditions for all children to learn, free of systems that limit, hinder, surveil, and control."

Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy | President’s Professor in the School of Social Transformation at Arizona State University

Equity Book Club Hosts Innovative Thinkers

The SESP Equity Book Club features speakers who have studied and written about justice or equity issues. During 2020–21, the club hosted Bettina L. Love, author of We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom, and Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy, whose scholarship focuses on the role of race and diversity in higher education. The club arose in 2019 from student and staff conversations spearheaded by Claire Mackevius, a human development and social policy doctoral student, and Shelana Johnson, a former senior academic adviser. The club’s speakers series “challenges us to be a better version of ourselves and to be more consequential in our communities,” Dean David Figlio says.
SESFP Faculty Elected to the National Academy of Education

In 2021, Northwestern University professors Megan Bang, Jonathan Guryan, and Brian Reiser were elected to the prestigious National Academy of Education for their stellar contributions to education scholarship and research. It is the first time in school history that three faculty members were elected in the same year. The School of Education and Social Policy now has 15 NAEd members.

Cynthia E. Coburn (2020), Professor of Education and Social Policy

Kirabo Jackson (2020), Abraham Harris Professor of Education and Social Policy

Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach (2019), Margaret Walker Alexander Professor of Human Development and Social Policy and Director of the Institute for Policy Research

David Figlio (2017), School Dean and Emmons-Irwin Professor of Education and Social Policy

Morton O. Schapiro (2017), Professor of Economics and President of Northwestern

James P. Spillane (2014), Spencer T. and Ann W. Olin Professor in Learning and Organizational Change

P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale (2013), Frances Willard Professor Emerita of Human Development and Social Policy

Douglas L. Medin (2012), Professor Emeritus of Psychology and of Education and Social Policy

Penelope Peterson (2011), Former School Dean and Professor Emerita of Education and Social Policy

Carol D. Lee (2007), Professor Emerita of Education and Social Policy and of African American Studies; NAEd President (2021–25)

Larry V. Hedges (1996), Board of Trustees Professor of Statistics and of Education and Social Policy

Allan Collins (1992), Professor Emeritus of Education and Social Policy
YOU’RE NOT ALONE.

Yes, imposter syndrome is real. And common.
Here’s how to make peace with it.

Imposter syndrome has been documented in both men and women, among multiple ethnic and racial groups, and in many settings from academia to medicine.

Jodi-Ann Bursy contends that the concept of imposter syndrome "took a fairly universal feeling of discomfort, second-guessing, and mild anxiety in the workplace and pathologized it, especially for women."

The self is not to blame

In the article “Contextualizing the Imposter Syndrome,” which appeared in Frontiers in Psychology in 2020, an international team of psychologists and human resource management experts argue that imposter syndrome is not a dysfunction that arises within people. It’s not a diagnosis. Instead, it’s a response to one’s surroundings.

They go on to suggest that ‘examining the role of society, culture, organizations, and institutions (in perpetuating imposter syndrome) has the potential to lead to systemic change, which will create an environment where everyone feels as though they rightly belong.’

Lower-income and first-generation college students often have to cope with not just imposter syndrome but also a related phenomenon: achievement guilt. When people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds begin to experience success and move upward, they can grow more uncertain about where they belong. Mesmin Destin, associate professor of human development and social policy at SESP, calls this destabilizing feeling “status uncertainty,” and his work suggests that, like stress, it can affect everything from motivation to physical health.

Even temporary shifts in how people construe their status-based identities predict changes in thought, affect, motivation, and behavior; he says. “The greater the uncertainty people experience, the more negatively it affects their well-being.”

Graduate student Julissa Muñiz, the first in her family to graduate from college, has wrestled with both imposter syndrome and achievement guilt. It was only after receiving two major national awards—the Paul and Daisy Soros Fellowship and the Spencer Dissertation Fellowship—that imposter syndrome began to wane, she says. “I feel like I should have really capitalized on the strength of who I am as a scholar before that,” says Muñiz, now a postdoc at the University of Texas at Austin. “Clearly, external eyes were recognizing that. So when was I going to?”

Muñiz’s daughter of Mexican immigrants, was the first teenage mother to return to her high school; two years later she became the first student at her high school to be accepted to the University of California, Berkeley. She earned a master’s at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where she was selected as her cohort’s Intellectual Contribution Award recipient. Along the way, however, imposter syndrome loomed large. Muñiz questioned whether she belonged and wondered if she was seen as a token student. “Is my story so exemplary that they feel like, ‘Yeah, OK, she’s someone we can let in’?” she asks.

“But I realized that was also unfair of me. I’m not a token, even if others try to make it out that way,” she says. “I’ve also worked really hard for a long time for these moments, the accomplishments, and the trajectory I’m on.”

At Northwestern, imposter syndrome workshops and webinars are routinely held by students, schools, and divisions, from the Feinberg School of Medicine and Counseling and Psychological Services to...
“Organizations need to take ownership of the culture and settings they create.” — Michelle Albaugh

the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color Support Circle. "Organizations need to take ownership of the culture and settings they create." says Michelle Albaugh (PhD15), associate director of coaching at Slalom, who “remind me that discomfort is a sign of growth.”

To combat imposter syndrome—whether it’s where you work or where you learn—“focus on learning over pure performance, visualize success, and have a growth mindset,” she says.

So does the feeling ever end? Fiat loves what she does at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center—providing behavioral health prevention and intervention services to young children and their families. Supplies for Dreams, the nonprofit she cofounded in her teens, is thriving, and she serves in an advisory capacity as vice president of its board of directors.

There are still times when she wonders to herself, “Do I belong here? Am I a phony? Will they realize they made a mistake in choosing me?”

To Fiat’s credit, she says she learns to regard her self-doubts not as symptoms of a chronic syndrome but as “occasional impostor thoughts.”

And it helps a great deal, she says, to have supportive colleagues and mentors who “remind me that discomfort is a sign of growth.”

STORY BY JULIE DEARDORFF
ILLUSTRATED BY ÖZGE SAMANCI

Institutional and social contexts matter

Everyday racial microaggressions, such as the presumption that one is less intelligent or accomplished, can play a role in impostor syndrome, says SESP professor Emma Adam, a developmental psychologist whose research suggests stress associated with racial discrimination adversely affects both physical and mental health in adolescents and young adults.

Helping adolescents develop positive feelings about their identities can reduce the stress from discrimination and improve both their health and their success in school. “A strong ethnic or racial identity may be an important source of feelings of social acceptance and belonging,” Adam says. Institutions that help young people recognize their backgrounds as strengths rather than liabilities encourage more equitable student experiences, according to research by SESP’s Mesmin Destin and Shirin Vossoughi, associate professor of learning sciences. Their study, “Elevating the Objectives of Higher Education to Effectively Serve Students from Diverse Socioeconomic Backgrounds” appeared in Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences.

When Kirabo “Bo” Jackson first heard the axiom that school spending doesn’t matter, he was a young PhD student in economics at Harvard. It was the early 2000s, and the conventional wisdom was that money played a minor role in a student’s success. Jackson wasn’t so sure. Over the next decade, as he applied new research methods to dig deeper and question long-held assumptions, he began to show that money can matter, reigniting a national debate on school finance.

“School spending really can affect a child’s future,” says Jackson, the Abraham Harris Professor of Human Development and Social Policy at SESP. “It’s no panacea, but investing in children early and often pays off during adulthood, especially for kids from low-income families.”

A labor economist, Jackson has long been interested in how people are affected by systems. In addition to public school funding, his work largely explores how college prep programs, ability tracking, single-sex education, and other practices can benefit or hurt students long after they’ve left school.

Some of his most original and influential new research tackles the question of what makes someone a good teacher and casts doubt on whether test scores are the best way—or only way—to assess how well students do in school.

“When people look back on their most important teachers, the social aspects of their education—learning to take risks, set goals, or simply believe in themselves—are often what they recall,” Jackson says. “I want to know what skills students need to become productive adults and which teachers can build these traits.”

Roots around the globe

As for his own most important teachers, Jackson could say that one of them was his upbringing on three continents. Before he earned two Ivy League graduate degrees and joined the Northwestern faculty, his education had been part Caribbean, part West African, part East African, and part British.

The youngest of June and Clement Jackson’s three children, Jackson was born in 1980 in the Chicago suburb of Hinsdale. When he was two years old, the family moved to Jamaica, where his mother taught mathematics at the University of Technology, and his father, an economist, worked as director of the Planning Institute of Jamaica. In 1989 the Jacksons moved to Sierra Leone, where his mother returned to her roots around the globe
As an undergraduate at Yale University, Jackson nearly double-majored in music and economics and even flirted with film scoring as a possible career; ultimately he earned a bachelor’s degree in ethics, politics, and economics. His next stop was Harvard, where he completed his doctorate in economics in 2007.

“Getting an education is one of the few things people can do to really improve their lives,” Jackson says. “I’ve always seen it as a vehicle through which economies and societies develop. It’s a mechanism for social justice.”

When Jackson joined the SESP faculty in 2010, he found the multidisciplinary environment of the school and the Institute for Policy Research electrifying. Exposure to the ideas and research of statisticians, sociologists, psychologists, historians, and others from different fields changed the types of questions he asked and “definitely deepened my thinking,” he says. “I wanted to learn a whole new tool kit and bring those insights into economics.”

Now 41, Jackson just became one of the youngest members of the exclusive National Academy of Education. His growing collection of accolades includes the 2020 David N. Kershaw Award and Prize, among the most prestigious and largest awards recognizing contributions to public policy and social science. He is also a National Bureau of Economic Research-affiliated scholar and is a coeditor of American Economic Journal: Economic Policy.

“Students who attend schools that emphasize social-emotional learning are more likely to attend college, a better predictor than students’ test scores of whether the students would go on to attend college, a better predictor of adult wages, and a better predictor of the social-emotional traits known as soft skills. The resulting study, published in the Journal of Political Economy, came to the attention of Paul Tough, bestselling author of How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character.

Jackson’s new index measured, in a fairly crude way, how engaged students were in school—whether they showed up, whether they misbehaved, and how hard they worked in their classes,” Tough says. “What is more, Tough continues, Jackson’s ‘noncognitive proxy was, remarkably, a better predictor than students’ test scores of whether the students would go on to attend college, a better predictor of adult wages, and a better predictor of future arrests.”

In other words, the long-term benefits of improving students’ social-emotional development tend to outweigh those linked to improving their test scores. Yet teachers who excel at raising test scores are often rewarded, while teachers who inspire students often aren’t recognized.

“Jackson’s findings are at odds with how many districts evaluate teachers,” Tough says. “But when I talk to teachers themselves about Jackson’s study, they tell me that his discovery makes perfect sense to them. They know there are things going on in their classrooms that standardized test scores can’t capture.”

Jackson also used surveys of ninth-graders in Chicago Public Schools to assess which schools best supported social-emotional development. The paper, coauthored by human development and social policy doctoral student Sebastián Kriegel and published in American Economic Review: Insights, found that some schools are better than others at helping students develop healthy social lives, community connections, and the skills and habits that promote hard work and grit.

“Students who attend schools that emphasize social-emotional learning are more likely to attend college and have a reduced chance of entering the criminal justice system,” Jackson says. “Our work shows that these surveys can be used alongside test scores to give us a more complete picture of how schools prepare students for the future.”

School funding matters

The idea that money is not directly connected to student achievement took root when it appeared in an influential government publication from 1966 known as the Coleman report. The assertion endured for decades.

But as Jackson points out, much about the Coleman report has been called into question, including the adequacy of the research that informed it.

“Spending decisions have not been grounded in enough evidence,” Jackson says. “It’s not that people in the 1960s, ’70s, ’80s, and ’90s were wrong or ignorant; it’s that they didn’t have the methodology or the computing power to do the type of research we can do now.”

When he set out to address the school funding question, Jackson went beyond examining standardized test results and instead studied school spending’s impact on students’ life trajectories.

In one study, published in the Quarterly Journal of Economics, Jackson and his coauthors—Claudia Persico (PhD’16) of American University and Rucker Johnson of the University of California, Berkeley—showed that court-ordered increases in US school funding in the 1970s were associated with lower poverty rates in the future.

Their models suggested that a 10 percent funding increase across all 12 years of schooling can raise students’ graduation rates and boost their income as adults, particularly for low-income students.

“Overall every additional dollar spent on schools generates a $2 return on investment in the form of higher earnings down the road,” Jackson says. “This means we should spend more now to benefit students and society for years to come.”

In a separate study, “Do Spending Cuts Matter? Evidence from the Great Reces­sion,” published in American Economic Journal: Economic Policy last May, Jackson and his coauthors showed that, on average, a $1,000 reduction in per-pupil spend­ing reduced average test scores in math and reading and the rate of students going to college.

Testing his own ideas

Jackson’s breakthroughs often come from approaching problems from unexpected angles and beta testing ideas on platforms like Twitter.

Another source of honest feedback: his wife, Shayna Silverstein, an ethnomusicologist and assistant professor of performance studies at Northwestern. They met while she was finishing her dissertation at the University of Chicago.

“She’ll ask me why something I’m working on is interesting,” Jackson says. “It forces me to think about whether what I’m saying makes sense to a broader audience.”

The couple have two young children and share a love of music, Jamaican curried goat, and martial arts. “I also appreciate his love for karaoke,” Silverstein says. “He takes deconstruction very seriously.”
In 1998 Karen Topham (MS’79) became the nation’s first openly transgender teacher to transition on the job. From 1983 until her retirement in 2016, she taught English and drama and directed 37 plays at suburban Chicago’s Lake Forest High School. Currently a theater critic and transgender advocate, she spoke with SESP magazine about coming out publicly and taking pedagogical risks.

What was it like to transition in the late 1990s?

In 1998 I had three little kids under age 12. The word “transgender” had basically just been invented, and most people didn’t even know the previous word, “transsexual.” Those who did know it usually had confused and negative reactions. My colleagues at the high school uniformly said, “That’s wonderful and we support you, but you can’t (transition) here.” I thought they were probably right. It was big news at the time. Oprah wanted me on her show, but I was scared that it would destroy him, that he wouldn’t be strong enough because of other emotional issues. So I said, “OK, that’s fine. You’re trans. I’ll work with that, but I’m not going to fully accept it until you’re 24.” I pulled that number out of a hat. I accepted it long before that.

What were you like as a high school teacher?

I was an experiment in the classroom. I had always been skeptical of the value of grading and spent the last two years of my career working in a gradeless classroom.

How did that work?

I gave my students a huge end-of-year project that allowed them to focus on whatever interested them, made them happy, or was part of them. Those projects—they rocked my world!

How were the projects ultimately assessed?

They told me what grade they thought they deserved at individual conferences. If they were able to justify it, that’s the grade they got. Most underevaluated themselves. But the one student who said to me, “I deserve an F,” was right. He failed himself.

Do you have a favorite classroom memory?

After my students and I watched a video of their end-of-year presentations, I asked them to talk about what they gained and to fill out class evaluations. At the end of class, when I was saying goodbye, they stood up and spontaneously applauded. That was huge to me! It told me how well that kind of classroom atmosphere, understanding, and empathy extends to students learning what they can learn—can work.

How do you identify yourself now?

I like the phrasing, “I am a woman with a transgender background,” because it was a background, something that is now over and done. I like that the prefix “trans” means moving beyond.

From SESP to Showtime

It’s no coincidence that Dan Perlman (BS’12) plays a teacher in Showtime’s off-kilter comedy series Fluff: Misdemeanors. Perlman calls the series “raw” and praised for its authenticity, the 10-episode series follows fictionalized versions of Perlman andIso as they try to carve out their place in the city.

The characters have “at least three sides” to their personality and are deliberately complicated, Perlman says. It’s a perspective that he honed while studying human development and social policy at SESP.

“People play multiple roles in seemingly unrelated worlds within their own lives,” Perlman says. “But we’re all linked in some way. SESP helps encourage that kind of thinking, understanding, and empathy.”

At Northwestern, Perlman tutored, produced shorts for Northwestern Sketch Television, and completed several independent projects with SESP professor Dan Lewis. He researched and wrote about suburban homelessness and learned to take field notes—a skill he still uses today—during his practicum.

“Dan was a great student, and now he is a funny and insightful performer,” Lewis says. “His ability to observe the human condition with grace and empathy shines through in all his work.”

In 2014, Perlman andIso, who met at a New York open mic night, started posting short YouTube videos they called “Moderately Funny.” Then, on virtually no budget, they produced three web episodes of Fluff: Misdemeanors. The first installation won the 2018 Florida Film Festival’s Grand Jury Award for best narrative short.

Perlman, who also performs stand-up comedy, released his debut stand-up album, Emergency Contact, in May 2020. He also wrote and directed the short film Cramming, which won an audience choice award at the 2020 Brooklyn Film Festival and first prize at the 2020 Rhode Island International Film Festival.

Cramming follows eighth-graders Alex and Yan Bo, whose friendship is threatened when they’re accused of cheating off each other. The film grew out of a conversation Perlman had with Alex, his tutor at the time. “I tried to go into it with the skills that SESP teacher: not being insensitive with the content you’re making, asking hard questions, doing research, and talking to people to find out the best way to be creative and still drive the story,” he says.

Perlman showed reporting chaps from an early age. As a 15-year-old, he wrote letters to famous comedians, asking them how to do stand-up and to name their favorite performers. (Bob Newhart wrote back.) Each received a different question because “I was afraid they all knew each other,” he says.

Perlman also wrote jokes, which he told to “exacty nobody” or hid under his bed. “It took years of working up the courage to try it,” he says. “But I’ve always enjoyed education and public service—the kind of stuff that makes you feel like you’re leaving something a little better than you found it.”

He feels slightly guilty for not pursuing education professionally, so “pretending to be a teacher is the next best thing,” he says. “Also, making my character a lousy teacher feels funnier and more honest, so it’s not self-congratulatory. My character’s not saving anyone. But hopefully people laugh.”
Karen Cunningham (MSED’90), an award-winning educator at suburban Chicago’s Glenbrook North High School, died on September 20 after a four-year battle with lung cancer. Even after her diagnosis, she continued to live life to its fullest, teaching, traveling, laughing, learning, and raising awareness about lung cancer among nonsmokers.

Nadine Moore (BS’89), managing director at Boston Consulting Group, was named to the board of directors of the Northern Illinois Food Group.

Jeanne M. VanBrissen (BS’89, MC’93, MC’08), the Duquesne Light Company Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering and of engineering policy at Carnegie Mellon University, was appointed to lead the chemical, biosensing, environmental, and transport systems division at the National Science Foundation.

Bryan Saltzburg (BS’82) was named chief operating officer of Aspiration, Inc., a fintech company offering sustainable banking and investing products and tools. He was previously a global president for TripAdvisor.

Richard (Rick) Settersen (PhD’82) was named University Distinguished Professor of Human Development and vice provost for faculty affairs at Oregon State University. He is the lead author of the new book Living on the Edge: An American Generation’s Journey through the 20th Century, written with Glen Elder and Lisa Pearce.

Erin Allen (BS’75), the New England Patriots’ director of football research, announced his retirement, “capping a 48-year career in football, in which he has both seen and done it all,” Sports Illustrated reported.

Lucy Levenson (BS’80, MS’83, PhD’90), a senior client partner in the firm’s organizational strategy practice. She is based in the Chicago area.

Deborah W. Brooks (BS’87), stepped back into the role of CEO of the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson’s Research. She cofounded MJFF in 2000 and served as CEO until 2007 and subsequently as executive vice chairman.

Jimmie Sanders (BS’97) is executive director of the Pre-College TRIO Programs at the University of California, Berkeley, which provide low-income, first-generation-to-college students with academic preparation and support services. Last year he received the University of Notre Dame’s inaugural Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, CSC, Distinguished Contributor Award. “My SESP education was key in making me the successful access and equity activist that I am,” he says.

Allyson L. Bear (BS’99), a global health expert, was named regional vice president for West Africa, the Middle East, and North Africa at the research company Abt Associates.

Dilara Sayeed (MSED’04), founder and CEO of peer mentoring platform PWEr, will serve on the Illinois Commission on Discrimination and Hate Crimes.

Hazeen Y. Ashby (BS’81) was appointed senior vice president for congressional and intergovernmental affairs and White House liaison at the Export-Import Bank of the United States.

Aaron Homson (BS’80, MS’87) is associate executive director for compliance and governance at the Ivy League. Previously he worked for 16 years in a variety of roles at Northwestern, including as director of compliance and ethics.

Mark Thompson (MA’03) was named interim CEO for the Gage Center of Forensic Excellence, an operation center within the state of Illinois’ Department of Social and Health Services that will provide state-of-the-art mental health services.

Bobbi Burgstone (MSED’04) was appointed executive director of Literacy DuPage, one of Illinois’s largest volunteer tutor literacy organizations.
A close this year with generous gifts to SESP during fiscal year 2021. The following alumni and friends helped bring the Henry L. Kohn ’60 MS* Gift Fund have made estate or deferred gift commitments to Northwestern. For information on making a gift to SEE P: 2021-2022 | Donors 2021 The following alumni and friends helped bring the We Will campaign to a close this year with generous gifts to SEEP during fiscal year 2021 – Fall 2022 | DONORS 2021

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March Leigh 1125 Greenview Lane ’78 and Gregory D. Lepin ’76, ’78, ’87 PhD
For her first internship—a critical piece of the MSHE program—Mendez-Rozo will work with Student Enrichment Services on programs for lower-income Northwestern students, including the Compass program, a yearlong peer-mentorship initiative for incoming first-generation, lower-income, and undocumented students.

Mendez-Rozo was herself a first-generation, lower-income student at Northwestern. Her mother, who immigrated from Colombia, worked as an elementary school clerk for Chicago Public Schools and was “[a] relentless investigator and advocate for her children,” Mendez-Rozo says. “My parents were invested in trying to give me the best education possible.” During her second internship, Mendez-Rozo worked on strategy and policy in the provost’s office. “That opportunity is a big deal for someone like me who could see themselves working in policy someday,” she says. “I wanted to make sure the dean, advisers, faculty, and staff were invested in me as a student. And it felt like they were really going to cheer me on throughout the process.”

For her senior honors thesis, she’s working on accessibility and inclusion in Fayetteville and communities, where she led efforts to make a local church accessible. She also pushed to include accessibility issues in the gerontology program at Northeastern Illinois University. Diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in her 20s, Gaetjens championed accessibility issues for both the Northwestern and Evanston communities, where she led efforts to make a local church accessible. She also pushed to include a disability studies elective in the curriculum. Later, she continued working to improve accessibility and inclusion in Fayetteville and “opened herself and her home to others, especially adolescents and young adults who needed a boost,” her obituary read.

IN MEMORIAM
Carol Adele Gaetjens (1944–2021)

IN MEMORIAM
Carol Adele Gaetjens (1944–2021)

Carol Adele Gaetjens (PhD91), a teacher, social worker, and tireless advocate for accessibility and inclusion, died on February 27 in Fayetteville, Arkansas. She was 76.

Gaetjens was among the School of Education and Social Policy’s most beloved instructors from 1983 until 2010, when she relocated to Arkansas. Students flocked to her classes on adulthood and aging, observing human behavior, and moral values in human development, which usually filled up an hour into registration.

“I’ve always been interested in the art of teaching,” she told SESP in 2009. “When it’s going well, you feel like you’re the orchestra leader and everyone is playing in tune.”

Gaetjens taught history at New Trier High School in Winnetka, Illinois, and spent a decade working as a social worker at St. Francis Hospital in Evanston. She earned her doctorate in human development and social policy with a focus on psychosocial development in later life and went on to direct the gerontology program at Northwestern Illinois University.

“Brace yourself. It’s going to be good.”

Hailey Danz

Diagnosed with bone cancer in middle school, Hailey Danz (BS13) had her leg amputated a few weeks into high school. She won her second silver medal in women’s triathlon at the Paralympic Games in Tokyo.

I don’t know if I actually enjoyed swimming, biking, and running when I first started 10 years ago. I do know I loved the Dare2tri community [of triathletes with physical disabilities], so triathlon was at first just my vehicle for spending time with cool people. Then when I crossed the finish line of my first race, that feeling was so empowering and I gained so much confidence that I knew I wanted to continue.

I pedal with one leg. My residual limb fits inside a housing attached to the top of the bike to give me more leverage and allow me to get into a more aggressive, aerodynamic position.

I ran for eight years on a prosthetic with a circumferential (circular) motion. Even though it didn’t look pretty, my way of using it was incredibly economical. When I maxed out what could do with it, I switched to a new prosthetic knee. Because it’s significantly heavier than the old prosthetic, it took a really long time for me to trust it and build up the muscular endurance I needed to fully to kick it out. Now, I’m nowhere near my limits.

People think paralympians is a participation event, that anyone can do it. Actually, you have to put so much work into it, take risks, surround yourself with a support team, show up every day whether you want to or not, have faith in yourself, and be good enough to win. The real story is in the hard training and managing the psychology, nutrition, and physiology. Paralympians work just as hard as the Olympians—and we’re doing it with a physical disadvantage.

After surviving cancer, I instinctively knew that the decision to amputate my leg would lead to something great. I told my 14-year-old self, “Brace yourself. It’s going to be good.” It wasn’t until I got to college and started meeting people who didn’t know my background that I really began to process the trauma. It was the first time that I felt different and that my disability was part of me.

At Northwestern, not only was I processing my identity as someone with a disability. I was also realizing I was gay. The disability seemed easier to work with, so I put my energy into that and put the other stuff on the back burner. There was more shame around coming out than around the disability.

I now feel a sense of confidence that I never felt before. Some of it comes from the consistency I’ve had in training to become a triathlete. But it’s also from being who I am and not having to hide any part of myself. I didn’t realize how much energy I was expending on that until I lost my voice, and cried until there was nothing left. And after the tough times we’re all had since the pandemic. I can’t think of a more powerful gift.
“I’ve always liked the idea of transparency and looking at things as if through an x-ray,” says SESP student Jordan Walker, a fashion artist studying premed and learning and organizational change. “Transferring this concept into the fashion realm, I played with the idea of the beauty of a coat being its insides rather than its exterior design. I first thought about stuffing a transparent jacket with green leaves but ultimately decided on roses.” See more of Walker’s creations on her company’s website, neour.com (pronounced “newer”).