

THE MAGAZINE OF LEARNING, LEADERSHIP, AND POLICY

SESP

SUMMER 2022

UNJUST

UNFAIR

INACCURATE

JUDGED

FALSE POSITIVE

BIASED

TARGETED

MISIDENTIFIED

WATCHED

INCONCLUSIVE

It's about Power

Wrestling with the ethics
of new technology

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ON THE COVER
Professor Sepehr Vakil invites educators to examine the ethics of new technologies—from racially biased software to the complex role surveillance technologies play during a pandemic.
ILLUSTRATION BY ÖZGE SAMANCI



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MESSAGE FROM THE DEAN

DEAR FRIENDS,
I’ve heard from so many of you since it was announced that I would be commencing my new adventure as provost of the University of Rochester. Your notes touched me deeply, especially hearing about how SESP helped shape your lives for the better.
This school—and the incredible SESP family—have had the same effect on me. For one, I am a very different kind of scholar than I was 14 years ago. My research collaborations with colleagues like Emma Adam and Uri Wilensky taught me to think about my own field of economics in a new light, and I’ve learned to apply lessons from a wide range of disciplines and perspectives, thanks to other remarkable colleagues and students.


SESP faculty, staff, and students—starting with my SESP leadership partner Coleen Coleman, winner of last year’s Jean Shedd Award for University Citizenship—have taught me a tremendous amount about how to change organizations for the better. I am in awe of SESP’s extraordinary teachers and mentors like Shirin Vossoughi, Jim Spillane, Lilah Shapiro, David Rapp, Cynthia Coburn, Mesmin Destin, and Danny M. Cohen, who helped shape my view about empowering students, inside and outside of classrooms. I am confident that I am a more competent, just, and kind leader because of their example and that of other members of the SESP family.



Transitions: Northwestern University president Morton Schapiro (left) and SESP dean David Figlio are each embarking on new adventures.

At Rochester I intend to apply, at a university-wide scale, the lessons I’ve learned here. Together, we at SESP have proven that there is no tradeoff between *doing good* in our communities and *doing excellent scholarly and educational work*. The SESP family inspires me daily through mutualistic partnerships that make our communities better and our work more successful. The University of Rochester is an enormously important member of its local community, and I am excited to infuse that relationship with a SESP mindset.
We have also proven the importance of hiring accomplished faculty members who reflect the diversity of our students and our world. Of course, SESP still has work to do! But the school should be an example that other schools and universities aspire to—and it will definitely be a role model for continued progress at the University of Rochester.

President Morty Schapiro—my mentor, friend, and collaborator—has taught me much about how to be a scholar and leader. Congratulations to him as he, too, embarks upon a new chapter. And I’m thrilled to be reuniting with another Northwestern role model and mentor, Rochester president Sarah Mangelsdorf, whom I first met when she was dean of Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences.
Until we meet again—in Chicagoland, or Rochester, or your hometown.

With SESP Love,

David



Trautvetter to Help Probe the Universe’s Deepest Mysteries

Professor **Lois Trautvetter** is part of a new cross-disciplinary fellowship program that brings astrophysicists and social scientists together to grapple with data from a massive sky survey.

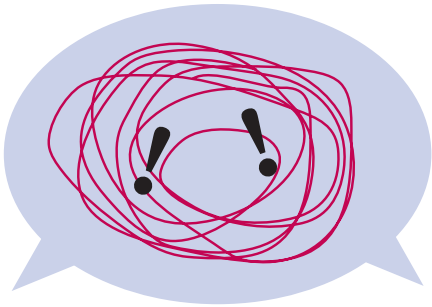
The LSST Corporation, a nonprofit consortium of approximately 30 research institutions, established the LSSTC Catalyst Fellowship with funding from the John Templeton Foundation to support early-career astrophysicists and social scientists. Starting in the fall, five astrophysics postdoctoral fellows will study big data generated from the soon-to-be-completed Vera C. Rubin Observatory in Chile.

By including social scientists, researchers can figure out “the best ways to recruit and retain a diverse scientific workforce for projects involving multiple fields and chart the course for the next decade,” says Trautvetter, professor of education and social policy and director of the Master of Science in Higher Education Administration and Policy program.

The LSSTC Catalyst Fellowship is the first of its kind. Researchers from disparate fields—including those from traditionally underrepresented groups and institutions—will converge to pursue an integrated, multidisciplinary approach to science. The Rubin Observatory will create the first-ever deep-space multicolor movie of the southern sky.

Trautvetter earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in chemistry—and patented inventions in the coatings and resins industry—before getting a doctorate in higher education administration. She researches faculty and professional development, diversifying engineering education, and holistic college student development.

Both Trautvetter (pictured) and Northwestern astrophysicist Vicky Kalogera serve on the new program’s steering committee. Kalogera is the committee cochair and Trautvetter is also a member of the program’s Senior Social Science Team with colleagues from the Universities of Washington, Arizona, and Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.



Hold Back on the Bickering

Couples who share moments of humor and affection and who sync up biologically—like the proverbial two hearts beating as one—enjoy better health prospects and live longer than their more quarrelsome counterparts, according to new research coauthored by associate professor **Claudia Haase**.

The findings, published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, are based on laboratory observations of 154 middle-aged and older married couples as each held intimate conversations about a conflict in their relationship.

“We focused on those fleeting moments when you light up together and experience sudden joy, closeness, and intimacy,” says study coauthor Robert Levenson, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley. “Having these brief shared moments, known as ‘positivity resonance,’ is a powerful predictor of how healthy we’re going to be in the future and how long we’ll live,” he adds.



Haase (above) was a postdoctoral fellow with Levenson at Berkeley before coming to Northwestern. She is part of a new generation of multidisciplinary researchers who study emotions as they happen. By using methods like facial coding, physiological monitoring, and neuroimaging, she’s emerging as a leader in the burgeoning field of affective science, where she examines the relationships between emotions and marital conflict, aging, health, and more.

Zimmer Leads ‘Cats to National Title

Undergrad **Maddie Zimmer** was named NCAA Tournament Most Outstanding Player after leading Northwestern to its first-ever national championship in field hockey last November. Zimmer had one of two goals in Northwestern’s 2–0 win over Liberty University. (Liberty is coached by **Nikki Parsley** [LOC14], who says, “I use field hockey to teach life!”)

With an NCAA title under her belt, Zimmer headed to Santiago, Chile, for January’s Pan American Cup with the US women’s national team, where she competed with and against some of the best players in the world. She comes from a family of athletes: her mom, Erin, was All-American in field hockey and lacrosse at the College of William and Mary; her dad, Scott, was an All-American soccer player at the University of Richmond.

Her favorite sports quote? “Great moments are born from great opportunities,” from Herb Brooks, the coach of the 1980 US Olympic hockey team.

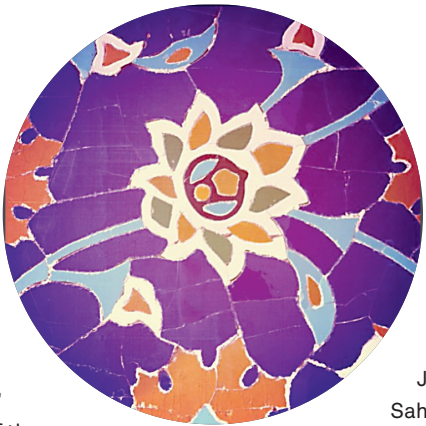


Zines for Teaching

Learning scientist **Shirin Vossoughi** recently launched bluedandelion.org, a home for zines (self-published, noncommercial online publications) that she calls “an experiment in the learning humanities” and a “sketchpad” for ideas and collaborations among teachers, researchers, and artists.

The name “Blue Dandelion”—depicted on the website (and at right) in a mosaic from Ardebil, Iran—stems from the flower that holds a special place in Vossoughi’s heart. Her late father, a teacher and political activist in Iran before he brought his family to the US, taught her to “see dandelion seeds as signs of radical hope and unpredictable possibility.”

A political and literary newsletter he developed with fellow displaced Iranians had the dandelion as its symbol. “Dandelions are sometimes thought of as weeds. Yet they grow everywhere and offer nourishment and medicine,” she says. “This is one of the ways I see learning.”



In addition to Vossoughi, the educators, artists, and researchers (including SESP graduate and undergraduate students) who cocreated the first set of zines are Gerald Daye Jr., Meg Escudé, Sarita Garcia, Silvia Inés Gonzalez, Stephanie Jones, Hyohee Kim, Sahibzada Mayed, Natalie Melo, Allen Moore, Shai Moore, Arturo Muñoz, Alexis Papak, and Michael Zang.



McAdams Takes the Helm

Dan P. McAdams, one of the first researchers to grasp the transformational power of life stories, has been named SESP’s interim dean, succeeding David Figlio, who stepped down in May to become provost of the University of Rochester.

McAdams, the Henry Wade Rogers Professor of Psychology and a professor of education and social policy, developed the life-story model of human identity, which argues that people derive meaning and purpose in their lives by creating stories or “personal myths.” The story patterns can “enhance or undermine our psychological and social well-being,” McAdams says.

From 1997 to 2019, McAdams directed the Foley Center for the Study of Lives at Northwestern, a center of research on personality development and personal biographies. The Foley Center’s mission lives on at McAdams’s current center, the Study of Lives Group.

A prolific writer and sought-after media commentator, McAdams has written cover articles for magazines such as the *Atlantic*. He has authored more than 300 scientific articles and chapters and eight books, including *The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump: A Psychological Reckoning* (2020) and *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* (2005).



Connor Bain



Megan Bang



Terri Cramer



Kavita Kapadia Matsko



Sebastián Kiguel



Eva Lam



Nikki McDaid



Miriam Sherin



Michael Spikes



Uri Wilensky

IN BRIEF

Connor Bain (PhD21) earned the nation’s first joint doctoral degree in computer science and learning sciences.

Faculty members **Megan Bang** (PhD09), **Sepehr Vakil**, and **Shirin Vossoughi** and alumna **Carrie Tzou** (PhD08) were named to a National Academy of Education (NAEd) committee addressing systemic inequalities in pre-K–12 STEM education.

Tabitha Bonilla’s new book *The Importance of Campaign Promises* explains how voters perceive pledges by politicians. Bonilla argues that promises matter, that they can be polarizing, and that voters evaluate elected officials based on promises and follow-through.

The TLC Scholarship Fund, which supports students who need financial aid to attend on-site intensive class sessions in Evanston, recognized former Master of Science in Learning and Organizational Change program associate director **Terri Cramer**, who generously opened her home to students.

Claudia Haase, director of the Life Span Development Lab, has been a faculty sponsor for 78 Office for Undergraduate Research grant applications totaling nearly \$100,000. She is particularly strong in helping students who aim to present their research at conferences. Faculty member **Lilah Shapiro** has been a leader in supporting Academic Year Undergraduate Research Grant applicants, with 13 winners out of 18 applications.

Kavita Kapadia Matsko’s research on three ways to consider new-teacher readiness for the classroom received the *Journal of Teacher Education*’s 2022 Article of the Year award.

Learning scientist **Eva Lam** and her coauthors received the Alan C. Purves Award from the National Council of Teachers of English for their research on what happens when young people tell their own immigration stories through documentary filmmaking.

Graduate students **Nikki McDaid** and **Sebastián Kiguel** received NAEd/Spencer Dissertation Fellowships to support their research and career development.

Sally Nuamah’s working paper “Public Perceptions of Black Girls and Their Punitive Consequences” won the Best Paper award from the National Conference of Black Political Scientists and the 2021 American Political Science Association’s Best Paper on Intersectionality award.

Paula Olszewski-Kubilius received the Palmarium Award for her pioneering vision of talent development and leadership in the field of gifted education.

Miriam Sherin and **Uri Wilensky** were named to the NAEd in 2021, boosting SESP’s membership to 17 overall. It’s the third consecutive time the school has had two inductees in the same year and the fourth overall. In 2020, **Megan Bang**, **Jonathan Guryan**, and **Brian Reiser** were elected, the first time in SESP history that three faculty members joined in one year.

Michael Spikes, a learning sciences doctoral student, starts a new role in the fall as lecturer and curriculum specialist at the Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications. Spikes will focus on Teach for Chicago Journalism, an initiative that connects Medill faculty and alumni with journalism programs in Chicago Public Schools.

Math Worth Doing



Jen Munson’s Multiplicity Lab uses captivating images that “make math visible” for students and teachers.

When faculty member **Jen Munson** and her team launched an ambitious new website to support local elementary school math teachers during the pandemic, they never dreamed they’d be reaching teachers from 65 countries on six continents.

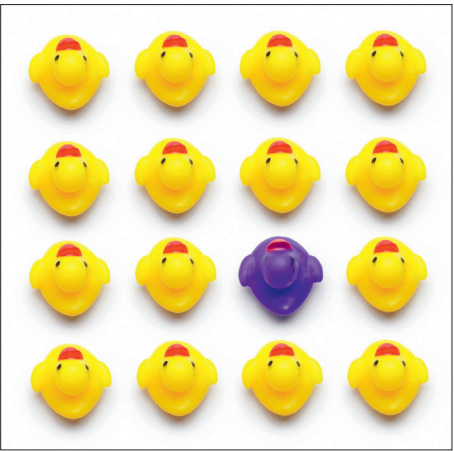
But the visually rich images featured on the site (and sampled on this page) offer a universal language, or at least tantalizing starting point. As Munson has found, when students get to talk about what they see—and can connect math to their lives—the learning unfolds.

Multiplicity Lab, as the website is called, gives students and teachers “math worth doing” and infuses teaching with learning sciences and math education. The name comes from its expansive approach: doing math involves multiple ideas, voices, and strategies and different ways of seeing, thinking, and being.

The website launched in February 2021 almost a year into the COVID-19 pandemic; today it has more than 13,000 users worldwide and more than 100,000 pageviews. The team’s YouTube channel has seven videos and counting.

Although Munson crafted the site mainly for elementary school math teachers, she soon heard from high school teachers like Brooklyn’s Thomas Rodney, who adapted the content for his 10th-grade geometry class.

Rodney hadn’t seen the faces of many of his students in his online class—just black rectangles. But when he used a Multiplicity Lab routine to discuss the concept of congruence, “like magic, the video cameras came on,” Munson says. “Rodney’s sophomores were eager to share things they’d found around their homes. It changed his year.”



How Multiplicity Lab works

The goal is to make math visible. Teachers are given two routines to kick off rich and relevant math discussions. In the one called “Look-Think-Talk,” teachers show students an intriguing image, such as a sewer cover or an aerial shot of tulip fields, and ask, “What patterns do you see? What do you wonder?”

The second routine, called “Off You Go,” uses a classroom or school scavenger hunt format to connect math ideas with the students’ lives. The students are shown an image of a familiar concept, such as a circle, the number 10, or a pattern. Then they look for other examples of it—at home, outside, in the classroom. Students might take pictures, draw sketches, bring objects to show, or make lists.



“What’s needed is the conversation about the image and what the child brings back to you,” Munson says. “You don’t have to have the mathematical expertise to just sit in a position of wonder with a child.”

The team

Munson, assistant professor of learning sciences, is a former math coach and elementary and middle school teacher. She cowrote the Mindset Mathematics K–8 curriculum series and *In the Moment: Conferring in the Elementary Math Classroom*, a professional text for teachers. Her lab members include SESP learning sciences doctoral students Sarah Larison and Mari Altshuler and undergraduates Daniel Ro and Trent Zhang.

KIRABO JACKSON ELECTED TO AAAS

C. Kirabo Jackson, the Abraham Harris Professor of Education and Social Policy, was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, one of the nation’s oldest and most prestigious honorary societies. Jackson joins previous SESP inductees **Larry Hedges**, **Carol Lee**, **Doug Medin**, and **James Spillane**.

It's about Power

Questioning the tech that shapes our lives

By David Johnson

In Sepehr Vakil's ideal world, computer science and engineering education would offer more than technical skills and "coding for all," and it wouldn't be limited to students in only those fields.

Instead, English majors might explore the connection between surveillance systems and immigration. Drama students could act out how social media platforms and search engines can reinforce racism and sexism. And even young children would be able to understand, analyze, and thoughtfully question the technologies that profoundly shape their lives.

"Students would have the space to imagine the socially transformative possibilities of tech," says Vakil, assistant professor of learning sciences at SESP. "They'd be cultivating a sense of moral responsibility to each other and to the world around them."

New technology has created many social benefits—think advances in healthcare and expanded access to education. But the same technology that makes it possible to unlock an iPhone also has dark consequences, such as law enforcement's misidentification of innocent individuals. As schools around the nation increasingly incorporate computer science and engineering education into

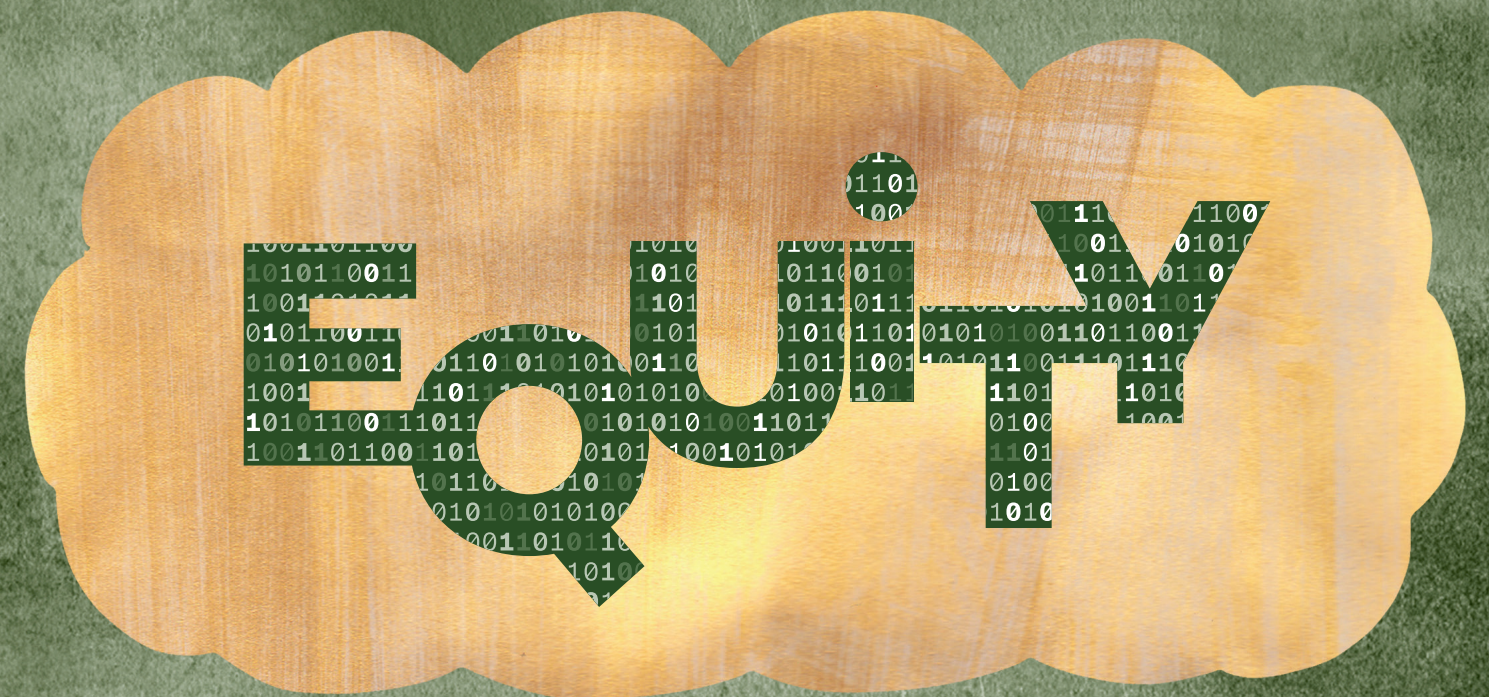
their curricula, Vakil is urging educators to prioritize an often overlooked aspect of technology: its intersections with ethics, culture, and power.

Lacking savvy, a generation of students may not recognize or understand the damage new technologies can inflict—from biased facial recognition software used to identify suspects to deeply flawed policing databases that target communities of color.

To date, much of the conversation over equity in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education has focused on inclusivity: increasing opportunities for students of color and women to enter the field. What's often missing—and it's a glaring hole, Vakil says—is any discussion of STEM equity as it relates to ethics, power, and civic democracy.

"Diversifying the field isn't just to get more diverse faces and different kinds of people working for tech companies, but to get their ideas, identities, and experiences to shift the possibilities of what can be created," Vakil said in conversation with the Harvard EdCast. "That's where the power comes in."

Without a more diverse workforce, advances in technology will continue to be developed from a narrow perspective, something currently playing out in the field of



Within computer science and tech education, equity is often narrowly framed as inclusion.



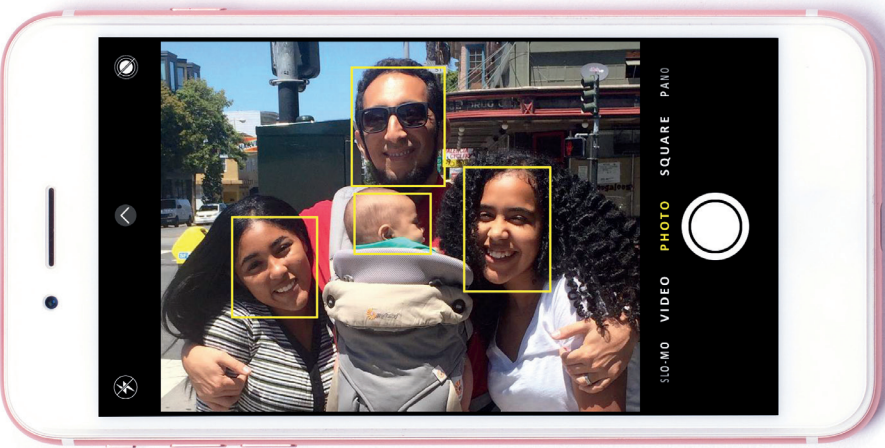
facial recognition. Research on facial analysis algorithms conducted by Joy Buolamwini from MIT Media Lab and Timnit Gebru from Microsoft Research showed that “darker-skinned females are the most misclassified group with error rates of up to 34.7 percent.”

Lighter-skinned males were consistently identified with almost complete accuracy, because the facial analysis datasets used as benchmarks were overwhelmingly composed of white subjects. Predominantly white male faces were used to test the accuracy of tech that would then apply to everyone.

Racial Recognition

Vakil’s Technology, Race, and Ethics in Education (TREE) Lab, codirected with Sarah Van Wart, assistant professor of instruction at Northwestern’s McCormick School of Engineering, moves beyond the classroom and into the community—a hallmark of SESP’s approach. Northwestern students, along with Chicago and Evanston youths and community members, investigate how new technologies affect young people.

“While there’s a lot of new work from scholars and activists on the ethics of tech and computing, there’s a need for more youth voices,” Vakil says.



Vakil’s lab works on ways to improve education around facial recognition and surveillance technologies.



The Young People’s Race, Power, and Technology project (YPRPT) is an out-of-school learning initiative designed for middle school and high school students in the Chicago area.



One of the lab’s main efforts, the Young People’s Race, Power, and Technology (YPRPT) project, is an afterschool program codigned with partners including Evanston Township High School and three community-based organizations in Chicago—the Lucy Parsons Lab, Family Matters, and Endangered Peace

In the pilot program, students from ETHS, Family Matters, and Northwestern created three documentary films exploring how new technologies such as

“While there’s a lot of new work from scholars and activists on the ethics of tech and computing, there’s a need for more youth voices.” Sepehr Vakil

artificial intelligence shape the experiences of communities of color.

As part of the project, the students interviewed local activists, computer scientists, and city council members. Chicago filmmaker and lead instructor Raphael Nash introduced students to the craft of documentary filmmaking.

The project produced multiple documentaries, including *Targeted*, which chronicles the Chicago gang database’s targeting of young Black and Brown men; *Racial Recognition*, examining the threat that facial recognition bias poses to marginalized communities; and *Melting Ice*, which explores US Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s use of social media and other technology tools in their deportation efforts.

“Students learned about storytelling, technology, and their own communities,” says Vakil, who believes educators can

“The lab helped me develop a critical lens for understanding power dynamics in the acceleration of new technology.” Bijal Mehta

shift their curriculum by getting to know their local communities. “They then told their stories through film, which itself was a form of tech learning.”

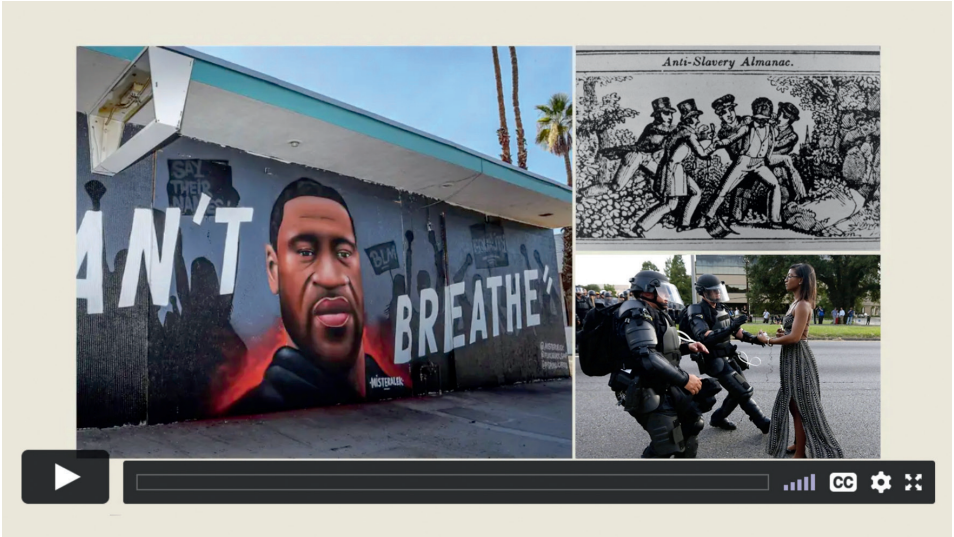
In each of the last two years, the YPRPT project culminated in a film screening hosted by Northwestern’s Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art.

After Princeton University professor Ruha Benjamin saw the 2020 screening, she joined Vakil’s advisory board. Founding director of the Ida B. Wells Just Data Lab, Benjamin is now supporting Vakil’s team as they explore how the TREE Lab can spark educational innovation focused on social justice and technology.

The lab currently hosts all student-produced films for free on its website. “These short documentaries become resources,” Vakil says. “They become data points in our consideration of how young people make sense of these technologies.”

For alumna Bijal Mehta (BS21), an AI and cyber researcher for Tortoise Media in London, the TREE Lab shaped both her interests and career path. Mehta, who cofounded Northwestern’s Responsible Artificial Intelligence Student Organization and worked as a student researcher, credits the TREE Lab with helping her explore the social implications of tech. “The lab helped me develop a critical lens for understanding power dynamics in the acceleration of new technology,” says Mehta.

Because new technologies are profoundly shaping democratic processes, policing, education, healthcare, and cultural life, Vakil’s vision for the future is that “citizens understand these dynamics and have a say in how they play out.” How we approach computer science education—how we look beyond the technical—will shift where the power lies.



PhD students Natalie Melo, Alisa Reith, Jessica Marshall, Charles Logan, Shai Moore, and others played key roles in the YPRPT program, which produced films on policing, surveillance, and technology.

‘Who Is Siri?’

Sepehr Vakil was born in Iran and immigrated to the US with his family when he was three. In Iran, his mother, Maryam Hazeghazam, volunteered at a hospital to care for wounded soldiers—many the victims of advanced military technology. His father, Roozbeh Vakil, taught math at a time when “education itself could be seen as an act of resistance,” he says. Their stories were Vakil’s first glimpse into the complicated relationship between power, technology, and education.

Vakil met his wife, kihana miraya ross, assistant professor of African American Studies at Northwestern, while they were students at the University of California, Berkeley. The two have five children: one-year-old twins Azad and Hafez; a four-year-old son, Sasan; and two older daughters—Simone, who attends Evanston Township High School, and Sage, a premed student at Howard University.

Reflecting on how young children interact with technology, Vakil mentions that Sasan likes to say that Siri “knows everything.”

“Who is Siri?” Sepehr asks Sasan. “The woman inside the phone,” he replies. Their exchange led them to talk about robots, knowledge, and what it means to know something.

“The potential to talk with young children about technology is amazing,” says Vakil, who may be teaming up with researchers at Berkeley and the University of California, Davis, on a new project that explores how teachers can support elementary and middle schoolers in understanding the ethics of tech.



Who Gets to Be Gifted?

The Center for Talent Development focuses on capacity to learn, not “gifts.”

By Julieann Hill

New York City may be phasing out gifted programs in public schools. Seattle is under fire for its “Highly Capable Cohort.” And in San Francisco, a school considered one of the nation’s academic jewels now uses a lottery system rather than test scores to admit students.

As school districts from coast to coast face pressure to reconsider gifted programs amidst cries of inequity and elitism, there’s a renewed emphasis on identifying students of all backgrounds who need talent development and figuring out how to best serve them.

It’s an approach that has been used for four decades at the School of Education and Social Policy’s Center for Talent

Development, which carefully chose its name to put greater focus on the idea that giftedness can be cultivated. Though this wasn’t necessarily the prevailing view in 1982, when giftedness was largely seen as an inborn, immutable characteristic, CTD’s inclusive model for supporting advanced students has now become a standard in the field.

“Giftedness is not a fixed trait that you are born with, like eye color,” says Paula Olszewski-Kubilius, CTD’s longtime director and SESP professor. “It involves developing a child’s strengths early on and providing experiences and support so they can turn their abilities and interests into achievement in an area they love.

“It used to be just ‘gifted,’” she adds. “Now, everybody’s talking about talent development. The rest of the world has caught up with us.”



Though 3.2 million students in US public schools are in gifted and talented programs, millions are being overlooked, experts say. The consequences go beyond wasted talent and unfulfilled potential.

Loaded term
“Gifted” is a controversial label, especially when applied to children, and is defined differently by parents and educators. There’s no agreement on how it should be defined and measured, whereas in adulthood, talent is readily recognized through one’s performance, ideas, and outputs. Early in the 20th century, giftedness was equated with a high IQ. More recent research suggests that giftedness is multidimensional. In a groundbreaking monograph published in 2011 in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, Olszewski-Kubilius, along with colleagues Rena Subotnik and Frank Worrell, proposed a new definition of giftedness that describes it as “performance that is clearly at the upper end of the distribution in a talent domain, even relative to other high-functioning individuals in that domain.” The definition includes the idea that “cognitive and psychosocial variables are malleable and need to be deliberately cultivated.”

Wealth and resources are also factors, says Worrell, distinguished professor of education at the University of California, Berkeley, and director of its Academic Talent Development Program. “If I live in a household where my parents are professionals and well educated, the resources I have—the books I have access to, visits to museums, trips I go on—are going to be substantial,” says Worrell. “It’s no wonder that giftedness is connected to socioeconomic status.” Though 3.2 million students in US public schools are in gifted and talented programs, millions are being overlooked, experts say. The consequences go beyond wasted talent and unfulfilled potential. Research suggests that children whose needs aren’t met in the classroom grow frustrated, bored, and depressed. They suffer both academically and emotionally and fail to develop key executive functioning and psychosocial skills, including resilience or persistence, says Susan Corwith, associate director of CTD and

president of the Illinois Association for Gifted Children. Signs of exceptional reasoning ability can show up differently and may be harder to discern in children who have experienced poverty, according to the 2012 report *Unlocking Emergent Talent*, which Olszewski-Kubilius coauthored when she was president of the National Association for Gifted Children. Often it’s wrongly assumed that low-income students who aren’t performing at high levels can’t achieve academic excellence. “That’s confusing potential with performance and implies a stunning lack of faith in low-income students and what they’re capable of,” says Jonathan Plucker, professor at Johns Hopkins University. Some argue that ability should be viewed as relative to circumstances. In schools with wealthy families, students scoring above national norms at the 95th percentile are often offered advanced opportunities. “But in another school, it

might be appropriate to do that for kids scoring at the 75th percentile,” Olszewski-Kubilius says. In fact, she believes that offering rigorous, above-grade-level work in specific subjects to see how children do is a better method of determining potential. “The chance to do challenging work might reflect higher-level reasoning that clues you in that kids who might not be high achievers on a test are capable of much more,” she says.

An uncertain future
Increasing the number of gifted programs within schools would make the opportunities more equitable, says Worrell. Instead of having selective-enrollment schools with limited seats, every public school could provide programs for all kids who need enrichment beyond the typical curriculum. But while the federal government acknowledges a need for gifted education, there are no provisions, mandates, or requirements for serving academically accelerated kids. Services entirely depend on local funding and leadership, which often means that only higher-income school districts can provide services, fueling concerns about elitism. “We can’t deny children who are ready for advanced work the opportunity to do just that,” Olszewski-Kubilius says. “We’ve got to go from looking at minimum performance for all students to identifying how to move more students to excellent levels of performance. This includes promising low-income and culturally and linguistically diverse students who too often literally languish in our schools.”

Did You Know? Five facts about giftedness

1 *Talent can be developed beginning in childhood through challenging learning experiences* that force a student to study, practice, put forth effort, and learn organizational habits. Parents and teachers can foster talent by emphasizing growth and improvement over grades and performance and reframing “failures” as learning opportunities.

2 *Gifted does not connote good or better.* It is a term that allows students to be identified for services that meet their unique learning needs.

3 *Gifted status isn’t permanent.* “Early high-flyers” from disadvantaged backgrounds often gradually regress toward the mean and even fall below it over time without access to the right kind of learning opportunities. It’s important to periodically reassess students to ensure their current curriculum and opportunities are a good fit.

4 *Most gifted children are socially adept* and are as likely to be extroverted as introverted. Gifted students are not a homogeneous group. They have different personalities, backgrounds, temperaments, and interests. There is no one psychological or personality profile for gifted individuals.

5 *All children have strengths and positive attributes,* but not all children are gifted in the educational sense of the word. The label “gifted” in a school setting means that when compared with others of a similar age or grade, a child has an advanced capacity to learn and apply what is learned in one or more subject areas or in the performing or fine arts. This advanced capacity requires modifications to the regular curriculum to ensure that these children are challenged and learn new material and move to higher levels of achievement.

Sources: Paula Olszewski-Kubilius, Eric Calvert, National Association for Gifted Children

‘Both’ Sides Now

The dangers of false balance

By Lara Weber



When Joe Rogan was accused of spreading misinformation by hosting too many guests touting unproven theories about COVID-19, his solution was simple: He’d add more voices representing the “other side.”

But Rogan, a comedian-turned-UFC color commentator-turned-talk show host, soon came under fire again. The so-called balance he was providing was just making things worse, critics said.

“Bothsidesism”—the practice in the media of presenting both sides of an issue regardless of evidence, facts, or the credibility of sources—grew out of a pressure on newsrooms to avoid showing bias in their reporting. The idea is to be balanced, to be fair. Now researchers and media professionals say that pervasive bothsidesism damages the public’s ability to distinguish evidence-based information from misinformation.

Professor David Rapp, a psychologist and learning scientist at SESP, sums up the problem with Rogan’s approach: “His solution is to say, ‘OK, we’ll bring in more sources.’ But his audience may not really attend to who those sources are. And anytime you pit two sources against each other, it potentially misrepresents how many people and how much evidence may or may not actually support those sources.”

Rapp points to COVID-19 news reports about mask-wearing as an example. When an interviewer brings on a pro-mask person and an anti-mask person, it makes it seem like the medical community is split 50-50 on the mask question—and that’s not the case. In other words, giving both sides equal space or time leads audiences to believe they are equally credible and equally

representative—especially when the interviewer doesn’t challenge their sources or ask for evidence.

A new study coauthored by Rapp and UCLA graduate student Megan Imundo (WCAS18) and published in the *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* found that a false balance in reporting can make people doubt scientific consensus on issues, sometimes making them wonder if an issue is even worth taking seriously.

They performed three experiments to test how people would respond when two positions about climate change

were presented as equivalent, even though one side was based on scientific agreement and the other was not.

“When both sides of an argument are presented, people tend to have lower estimates about scientific consensus and seem to be less likely to believe climate change is something to worry about,” Rapp says.

Presenting seemingly equal sides, he says, can prompt one of

three problematic results:

- It creates doubt about what people think they know.
- It creates confusion: “I don’t know what’s true, so nothing’s true.”
- It creates reliance: “Someone’s arguing that climate change is not a worry, so that must be a valid idea.”

Rapp and Imundo’s research validates concerns that some journalists and newsroom leaders have been raising for years. In her memoir *My Life on the Road*, activist Gloria Steinem wrote that when she wanted to cover gender issues, an editor worried that “if he published an article saying women were equal, he would have to publish one next to it saying they were not—in order to be objective.”

In 2020, veteran editor Geneva Overholser said journalists aren’t serving the truth “when we’re so devoted to ‘bothsidesism’ that we don’t want to look like we’re

“When both sides of an argument are presented, people tend to have lower estimates about scientific consensus.”

David Rapp

favoring anything. It is not a symmetrical situation, yet we act like it is.”

Overholser, a former *New York Times* editorial board member, *Washington Post* ombudsperson, and longtime editor of the *Des Moines Register*, is speaking primarily about traditional newsrooms. But Rapp and other researchers remind us that journalists are hardly the only ones reporting and sharing information now—and that’s part of the challenge.

Consider the Rogan controversy. The Spotify podcaster has millions of listeners and regularly hosts guests who are newsmakers. But that doesn’t necessarily mean Rogan is a journalist—or considers himself beholden to conventional journalistic practices.

“His goal is not necessarily to inform people or help his audience deeply understand scientific ideas or political issues or contemporary debates,” Rapp says. “His goal: ‘I gotta get people to listen.’”

And listen they do—which brings us to our ever-expanding media universe and how nonjournalists earn our trust.

Michael Spikes, a media literacy specialist and learning sciences doctoral student at SESP, points to social media’s steady stream of content—all presented equally in our news feeds—as a source of confusion.

“We have access to so much more information, but we’re less informed than we used to be,” says Spikes, who starts a new role in the fall as lecturer and curriculum specialist at Northwestern’s Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications. “Because our ecosystems are super-open, it allows for so many more bad players to pollute them. We tend to assign credibility based on how easy it is to find the info.”

Rapp’s research into how memory works backs this up and explains why we might be susceptible to misinformation.

“It’s not just that it’s ‘easy’ to get information; it’s that it feels like it’s easy,” he



“We have access to so much more information, but we’re less informed than we used to be.”

Michael Spikes

says. “If I have ideas floating around in my head and I can easily retrieve an idea, I believe that idea is truer because I can easily retrieve it.”

So how do we as media consumers, professionals, or educators get out of this cycle?

Rapp and Imundo found one promising strategy that newsroom leaders could use to help readers—even when “both sides” are offered: When participants in their study read a statement emphasizing the broader consensus of experts on climate change, it reduced the weight they gave to climate change deniers.

“If you can remind people about the consensus view, they take that up and they use it,” Rapp says.

Overholzer and others have emphasized the need for stronger media literacy programs in our school systems so that the emerging generation can make better sense of the information overload we’re experiencing.

Illinois is one of the first states to require high school students to take a unit of media literacy. Spikes and Yonty Friesem of Columbia College Chicago cofounded the Illinois Media Literacy Coalition, a group helping educators integrate media literacy into all aspects of teaching.

Whether or not these programs can keep up with the growing influence of social media and other platforms will shape our world for decades.

Traditional news organizations—newspapers and news magazines—are struggling to stay relevant and solvent in a fast-changing media environment. Rogan’s podcast remains on Spotify, despite boycotts and protests. Cable news commentary programs proliferate. TikTok and Facebook rule the social media landscape. And few of them seem to follow a standard set of rules and ethics as they compete for our attention.

Rogan, for his part, posted a 10-minute Instagram response to growing criticism about misinformation on his podcast, but then made a telling error. He said he loved “Joni Mitchell’s song ‘Chuck E’s in Love.’”

Too bad that song was written and sung by Rickie Lee Jones. Rogan would’ve scored far more points if he’d touted “Both Sides Now,” a song written and sung by Mitchell—and one that captures his new media philosophy.

ALUMNI NEWS

VERONICA BURTON’S NEXT MOVE: THE WNBA

Veronica Burton (BS22) might be one of Northwestern’s greatest-ever players “in any sport,” according to women’s basketball coach Joe McKeown.



But what Coach McKeown will remember most about his steady and stealthy All-American point guard is that she would do anything for the team. “She never had a day where she put herself ahead of the program,” he told the *Chicago Tribune*.

Burton, who was drafted by the WNBA’s Dallas Wings in the first round (seventh overall), is a third-generation Wildcat. Her father, Steve (SoC85, Medill88), and grandfather Ron (BS60) played football for Northwestern; her mother, Ginni (SoC85), was an All-American swimmer. But the mark Veronica has made is entirely her own.

She leaves Northwestern as one of the most distinguished players in program history and the program’s first-ever All-American. A quiet leader, she helped the Wildcats win their first NCAA Tournament game in 28 years in 2021 and a Big Ten title in 2020. The Women’s Basketball Coaches Association named her the 2022 NCAA Division I Defensive Player of the Year, and she earned three consecutive Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year awards.

How she leads

She’s known for three things: consistency, reliability, and a legendarily strong work ethic. Coaches have had to insist that she take breaks. “I like to see myself as someone whom my teammates and coaches can count on,” she says. “I’m not going to tell someone to do something I’m not willing to do myself.”

Coming out of nowhere

Burton’s athleticism, anticipation, and instincts set her apart. She is also a dedicated student of the game. Her playbook includes learning hand-eye coordination exercises (yes, she can juggle) and watching films of or reading about opponents. As a youngster, she’d study films of her older sisters Kendall and Kayla’s high school games. “I like to read people’s eyes,” she says. “They’re most likely to pass where they’re looking.”

Burton, who finished her career second in steals in program history with 394, creates opportunities by baiting unsuspecting opponents into making passes, then . . . you already know what happens.

One class she loved

Burton particularly enjoyed Studies in Organizational Change (LOC306) with Mindy Douthit. The class studies how organizations balance the need for stability with the ability to adapt and change.

“We studied culture, leadership, and roles of teams,” Burton says. “I applied the class concepts to my everyday life.” Her team, of course, was her organization. She assumed the role of leader both on and off the court and helped foster a team culture that emphasized hard work, accountability, and trust.

“Teamwork always extended off the court because it was especially important to build team chemistry and trust,” she says. “This often took place through team dinners, game nights, or movie nights. We were always working together to build our success on the court and off.”

On her phone’s lockscreen

“I’ve got Philippians 4:6–7: ‘Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything,’” she says. “I read that before I go to bed every night. I like to have that as a constant reminder.”

Her own legacy

Burton isn’t feigning modesty when she downplays her accomplishments. “I care more about how people see me as a person than as a basketball player,” she says. “I don’t care too much about the accolades, the stats. My character, my faith, my family—those priorities come first.”

BY JULIE DEARDORFF



D. Steve Boland



Marcia Walker-McWilliams



Skyler and Rocio Mendez-Rozo Adams



Soteria Reid



Meixi



Lauren C. Miller



Yemi Mahoney



Lynn Kotwicki



Lisa Anderson



Isabel Dobbel



Emily Salzman

80s

Arlene Michaels Miller (PhD87) is a professor in the College of Nursing at Rush University Medical Center. Her research looks at individual, family, and community factors that contribute to mental and physical health in immigrant and other minority populations. She is a coinvestigator on three National Institutes of Health–funded studies: “A Digital Application for Pain Management in Home Hospice,” “Dementia Caregiver Chronic Grief Management,” and “Steps to Effective Problem Solving for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities.” She is a board member of the VNA Foundation of Chicago, which funds mental and physical health services to the city’s medically underserved populations.

90s

D. Steve Boland (BS90), chief administrative officer for Bank of America, was appointed to the board of directors of Frontdoor Inc., which provides home service plans. A member of Bank of America’s executive management team, he is also a vice chair for the company’s Global Diversity and Inclusion Council.

Arva Rice (BS90), president and CEO of the New York Urban League, was recognized with the Community Hero Award from New York City mayor Eric Adams, the New York Knicks, and NBA Commissioner Adam Silver.

Wendy Deal (BS92) has been a veterinarian at VCA Mill Run Animal Hospital in Columbus, Ohio, since 2005. She coordinates the VCA New Graduate Mentorship Program in Columbus and recently became the area medical director for central Ohio VCA hospitals. She has been competing in short-distance triathlons since 2018.

Carlin (Johnson) Politzer (BS92) was hired as a vice president for Encore.org, a national nonprofit that brings older and younger people together to solve problems, bridge divides, and cocreate the future.

Yemi Mahoney (BS93) is chief diversity officer and special assistant to the chancellor at Indiana University East.

Jennifer Weiss (BS93, MPT96), a licensed physical therapist, was named CEO of the future Encompass Health Rehabilitation Institute of Libertyville, Illinois.

Kristie Norwood (BS95) is education manager for Children’s Home & Aid’s Early Start program in Chicago.

Lynn Kotwicki (MA97) was elected the first female commodore in the 100-year history of the prestigious Bayview Yacht Club. “Boating and sailboat racing has always been a passion in our family,” she says. “I can’t wait to give back to the sport that has given me so many amazing opportunities.”

Nathania Montes (MA98, PhD02) was named dean of student affairs at College of DuPage in Glen Elyn, Illinois. Previously, as interim dean of student development she created and led Chaps Unite Against Racism, the college’s award-winning equity and inclusion initiative.

Margaret Clauson (MS99) is superintendent of Skokie-Morton Grove (Illinois) School District 69.

00s

Marcia Walker-McWilliams (BS06), executive director of the Black Metropolis Research Consortium at the University of Chicago, was appointed to the Digital Public Library of America board of directors. In 2016, she published *Reverend Addie Wyatt: Faith and the Fight for Labor, Gender, and Racial Equality*, a biography of one of the most influential African American female labor leaders in the 20th century.

Stephanie P. Addison (BS07) was named associate attorney in Taft Law’s Chicago litigation practice, representing clients in complex commercial litigation matters including breach of contract disputes, employment discrimination claims, and consumer class defense. She previously served as assistant inspector general for the City of Chicago Office of Inspector General.

10s

Aireale Rodgers (BS10, MS18) received the K. Patricia Cross Future Leaders Award from the Association of American Colleges and Universities for her dedication to academic innovation in the areas of equity, community engagement, and teaching and learning.

Meixi (BS11), who earned a doctorate in learning sciences and human development at the University of Washington, was appointed assistant professor of organizational leadership, policy, and development at the University of Minnesota’s College of Education and Human Development.

Robin Bellerby (MS13) was named senior vice president of architecture at Premier. Over the last two decades she has managed numerous high-profile projects from design development to project completion, including Manhattan, a \$120 million, 700-unit condo development in Las Vegas, and Mockingbird Flats, a \$28 million, 412-unit multifamily development in Dallas.

Gregory Brennen (MSHE13) received his PhD from Duke University and is the Marion L. Brittain Postdoctoral Fellow in the Writing and Communication Program at Georgia Tech.

Brianna Davis Johnson (MS13) was named the first-ever chief diversity, equity, and inclusion officer for Central Ohio Technical College and the Ohio State University at Newark. Last July, SAGE Journals published her collaborative paper on repressive legalism in higher education.

Kate Schultz (MS13) received the 2021 Faculty of the Year award for the EdD In Health Professions Education program at A. T. Still University in Kirksville, Missouri.

Lisa Anderson (MS15) is senior program manager in Stanford University’s digital education office, which supports digital education across Stanford. She is also directing a nationally syndicated book conversation series called “Academic Innovation for the Public Good.”

Christina Cilento (BS17) is an associate policy fellow at the nonprofit Center for Climate and Energy Solutions. She recently authored a C2ES report that charts a path forward for Arizona to reduce emissions, bolster equity, and build climate resilience.

Julie Emms (MS17) is administrative director for the Center of Quantum Networks at the University of Arizona’s Wynat College of Optical Sciences.

Amelia Plunk (MS17) is a curriculum designer who, as a professional Dungeon master, designs and runs private adventures as part of the fantasy role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons.

Key Ramey (PhD17) is assistant professor of learning sciences at the University of Iowa.

Skyler Adams (MS18) is associate director of admissions for evening and weekend MBA programs at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. He and current MSHE student Rocio Mendez-Rozo are engaged.

Lauren C. Miller (MS18) is senior director of coach experience at Chief, a private network designed for women in executive leadership. Chief was recognized as one of Fast Company’s Most Innovative Companies of 2021.

Dana (Spencer) Larsen (MS19) was promoted to assistant director for residence life at American University.

Rachel Rasmussen (BS19) is youth services coordinator at Baltimore-based nongovernmental organization World Relief, where she manages K–12 and young adult programs for refugee families.

20s

Jack Benjamin (BS20) is a production intern for *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* in New York City. He recently earned a master’s degree in comparative social policy at the University of Oxford.

Juliana Conway (BS20) is a health associate at Mathematica Policy Research in Washington, DC.

Isabel Dobbel (BS20) is the women’s outreach director for Illinois governor J. B. Pritzker’s re-election campaign. She is also chief of staff for Senator Mike Simmons and national committee person for Young Democrats of Illinois.

Isabelle Matthies (BS21) is an analyst with Civic Consulting Alliance, a nonprofit pro-bono government consulting firm in Chicago, and a fellow with the Northwestern University Public Interest Program.

Soteria Reid (BS21) was one of four winners of the Jazzy Johnson Waw-jashk Student Award from Northwestern’s Campus Inclusion and Community. The award recognizes outstanding contributions to sustainable campus change and growth.

Emily Salzman (MS21), a math teacher at Chicago’s Lane Tech College Prep High School, received a five-year fellowship from the Knowles Science Teaching Foundation.

Lisa Thomas (MS21) credited her SESP coursework with helping her win a diversity, equity, and inclusion award from Sheppard Mullin, the law firm where she is partner and leads the privacy and cybersecurity team. She is also on the adjunct faculty at Northwestern’s Pritzker School of Law.

David Weitzman (MSLOC22) is human resources manager for Ingredion Inc., a multinational ingredient provider.



Please send all news updates and address changes to sespalums@northwestern.edu. Or share your update and tag us with #SESPLove on Facebook (SESPNU), Twitter (SESP_NU), or Instagram (SESP_NU). For more class notes, visit sesp.northwestern.edu.

Sperry Leads World Relief Chicagoland

Helping refugees and immigrants find homes

Susan Sperry (MS15) was a high school senior when she learned that a friend’s living situation was falling apart. Her parents opened their home to the girl, an exchange student from Croatia, a decision Sperry called “radical hospitality.”

“Living with someone from a different background and culture was an incredibly rich experience,” she says. “And it planted a seed.”

Now executive director of World Relief Chicagoland, Sperry helps refugees and other immigrants find homes, resources, and community in the US. She credits her master’s in learning and organizational change degree with helping her move up in a field she’s passionate about: coaching people and systems through turbulent change.

Becoming a leader

Sperry began working for World Relief as a receptionist. Later she moved into the role of director of resettlement, where she solved problems large and small for refugee families resettling in the Chicago suburbs. She was working as refugee services director, supporting and coaching managers and staff, when she began studying for her master’s degree. “I just had a hunger to learn, and I wanted to know more,” she says. “World Relief works with people going through transition; the nature of our work is fast-paced and constantly changing. And structurally the organization was also going through change.”

Favorite classes

Of her MSLOC classes, Sperry particularly liked Designing and Executing Strategic Change, a project-based elective that helps students learn how to improve organizations through design. “I’ve always had a



“[I’m fueled by] seeing the beauty of human resilience, helping people make a way for themselves, and seeing how relationships form across cultures.”

desire to dig into what confuses and frustrates me,” she says. “I personally don’t do well with change. Much of what I learned through MSLOC helped me figure out how to change things for the better for myself and others around me.”

Global response

Race, religion, and political realities can shape the global response to the refugee crisis, Sperry says. “For example, many people have observed different responses in Europe and even in this country toward Ukrainian refugees than there were towards Syrians when they were fleeing,” she says. “We should have open arms to people who are fleeing bombs going off in their towns, whoever they are, wherever they are. That should be the compassionate response.”

Unintended consequences

World Relief volunteers are often astounded by the richness of their experiences, Sperry says. “What I often hear is that they expected to be ‘the ones helping or doing things’ but ended up gaining so much more than they gave.”

Why she does it

After decades in the field, Sperry has seen refugees who arrived as children graduate from high school and attend college or launch small businesses and build careers. She is fueled by “seeing the beauty of human resilience, helping people make a way for themselves, and seeing how relationships form across cultures,” she says.

Avoiding burnout

Sperry’s work is tied to her faith. She also keeps the long game in sight. “I can talk a lot about self-care, which I’m not always good at,” she says. “But it’s important to have good relationships, build in regular rhythms of rest, and do things that I find are life-giving, like hiking and paddleboarding.”

An uncertain future

Having been through a season where the support and services for and popular opinion on immigrants and refugees have been based on who’s in power, Sperry says she’s “concerned about who’s in power next— whoever that might be. At the end of the day, it’s real people’s lives that are affected. We have the privilege to advocate with our government, to speak up, to use our voices. Advocacy is a key way to create change.”

BY JULIE DEARDORFF

Nsombi Ricketts

She once wanted to be a writer, therapist, or lawyer. Now Nsombi Ricketts (BS99) uses parts of all those vocations in her role as VP for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) at Brooklyn’s Pratt Institute.



I was definitely a Renaissance kid.

I was into art and music and fashion design. I painted. I drew. I played musical instruments. I danced. I wrote poetry and stories. And I was a voracious reader.

I wanted to explore. Northwestern was a school where if you weren’t sure about what you wanted to do or were interested in many things, you didn’t have to follow a narrow path.

I was impressed that Northwestern had a Black House. It was important to have somewhere on campus where I would be supported and could meet other Black students. Coming from New York to a predominantly white campus in the Midwest was definitely a culture shock.

After getting my MBA at Emory, my first role was in marketing at American Express. But I was never at my desk; I was always volunteering to be on a diversity panel or traveling with HR to do diversity recruiting.

A career coach once asked, “What would you do for free? What’s your passion?” I initially said nothing. I’m not doing anything for free.

But it wasn’t true. When I was in business school, I established a Diverse

Leadership Conference, served as president of the Black MBA Association, and worked with the administration on diversity initiatives—and I wasn’t getting paid for any of it. I was doing it because it was important to me.

I was always doing diversity work. I was balancing my career in human resources and marketing with my natural passion for DEI, but it took a while to find the right role.

A DEI leader has to collaborate with everyone. DEI work can’t be relegated to just one person or one office—it’s everyone’s job.

So much of DEI work is about relationship building, communication and marketing, and ongoing tracking of results. To be effective, you need to influence others to accomplish shared goals, and communicate progress with transparency.

This field is constantly evolving, so you must invest in professional development. I have a DEI certification. It’s not like I just woke up one day and said, “I’m a chief diversity officer.” I go to professional development workshops and conferences all the time to keep learning and expanding my skill set.

We should hire DEI leaders with the same diligence that we hire any senior leader. It’s a mistake to hire any Black, Indigenous, person of color, or LGBTQ+ person and assume that they want or can do this work without any background in DEI. If you put the wrong person in this role and they’re not supported, they can’t succeed. And that can derail an organization’s entire DEI agenda.

Diversity fatigue is real. Early in my career, I didn’t have boundaries—I just wanted to succeed. I worked all the time. I said yes to many things I didn’t want to do. And it took a real emotional, psychological, and physical toll on my health. Now I have much stronger boundaries between my work and personal life, and I say no all the time.

It’s important that I leave a legacy. I want to develop initiatives and implement policies that make an impact. We’re in a unique moment in history right now. People are finally taking DEI seriously and investing resources in a way I have never seen before. And I plan to capitalize on all the opportunities of this moment.

AS TOLD TO JULIE DEARDORFF

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A FINAL ROAR

Morton Schapiro (in purple tie), whose tenure as University president ends in August, shows his purple pride with members of SESP's Class of 2023.