

THE MAGAZINE OF LEARNING, LEADERSHIP, AND POLICY

SIESP

WINTER 2024



The Power of Possibility

New dean Bryan Brayboy
values connections, curiosity,
and community

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SESP WINTER 2024

12 College Admissions
Alumna Corinne Smith helps applicants navigate a changing landscape.



6 Asking Questions

Dean Bryan Brayboy works with—and pushes back against—the forces that shaped him.

10 Still Trying to Change the World

Alumna Renetta McCann celebrates with six words.



MESSAGE FROM THE DEAN

DEAR SESP FAMILY,

I left my dream job and location to come to Evanston and the School of Education and Social Policy because I believe in the power of possibility. It was the only dean-ship I would have considered.

SESP is home to a remarkable group of scholars. We have 41 tenure-track faculty members; 40 percent are members of the National Academy of Education, and others will be elected in the coming decade. The teaching-track faculty are also outstanding; they've earned University-wide teaching awards, and they inspire SESP's undergraduate students to dream big and do big things. The staff enables us to be exceptional. We'd be lost without them.

The students inspire me to be and do better. They come from Scottsdale and Scarsdale, Chicago and Seattle, Vietnam and Kenya. They are musicians. Athletes. World travelers. They care deeply about Evanston. And Chicago.

They are dreamers. And doers. They will teach. They will create and guide nonprofits. Some of them will enter the worlds of business and consulting. And they'll do things that are both ordinary and extraordinary. They often come to SESP with the goal of changing the world. I am convinced that they will. I also know that we need them. Now more than ever.

I wake up every day at 4:45 a.m. singing, because I am fundamentally an optimist. Even on the hard days, I know I made the right decision to move to Northwestern. Our team is working hard to create the



conditions for students, staff, and faculty to thrive. I believe in the power of humility, empathy, openness, and curiosity. I also believe in the power of young people—especially the students of SESP—to guide us into the world in which we will live.

I am grateful to our alumni who are engaged in efforts to help people and places to thrive. Thank you for your example.

Warmly,

Bryan Brayboy
Dean and Carlos Montezuma Professor
of Education and Social Policy

Selections from Brayboy's morning playlist:

- "Someone You Loved" (Lewis Capaldi)
- "Forrest Gump" (Frank Ocean)
- "Next to Me" (Rüfüs Du Sol)
- "You're Beautiful" (James Blunt)
- "My Heaven" (Trace Adkins)
- "A Pirate Looks at 40" (Jimmy Buffett)
- "Friends in Low Places" (Garth Brooks)
- "Every Day I Write the Book" (Elvis Costello)
- "Just Like a Pill" (Pink)
- "Rhinstone Cowboy" (Glen Campbell)

Jackson Named to White House Council

Labor economist **C. Kirabo Jackson**, one of the world's leading experts on the economics of education and the Abraham Harris Professor of Education and Social Policy, was appointed to the White House's three-member Council of Economic Advisers.

Jackson has published groundbreaking studies that help educators and policymakers determine what makes one school better than another and the true measure of an exceptional teacher. Using modern methodological tools to reexamine established education policies, he has researched such topics as the importance of school funding on student outcomes, the long-term effects of single-gender education, and how best to determine teachers' effectiveness.

"At Northwestern, I have expanded the ways I think about questions I'm answering while borrowing from statistics,



psychology, and sociology," says Jackson, who at 43 is one of the youngest members to have been elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the National Academy of Education. The child of a math professor and a United Nations economist, Jackson knows firsthand how education can change a life's trajectory. Growing up abroad, he went to private schools in Jamaica, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania before enrolling in a British boarding school. He says that even at a young age he was struck by the disparity between the local children and himself. "It was clear to me that these were really smart people who had a lot of human potential that just wasn't realized," he adds. "As a nation, we want to be investing in individuals so people can realize their skills and their capacities to be as productive as they can be."

New Dual Degree Combines Social Policy and Journalism

Northwestern University has launched a five-year dual-degree partnership between SESP and the Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications to teach students media skills in the context of education and policy. The joint degree program prepares students for a wide range of careers, targeting those who hope to work in fields that involve communications, policy analysis, and reporting.

Science writers, for example, may need to know how to convey the importance of a vaccine campaign to skeptical communities. Others may work in roles that require government testimony or explaining scientific evidence to a lay audience.

In addition to social policy, students can select any of SESP's undergraduate concentrations, including elementary and secondary teaching, learning and organizational change, learning sciences, and human development in context.



Disillusioned with Democracy



"When schools shut down, so too does Black citizens' access to, and belief in, American democracy."

Sally Nuamah's latest book, *Closed for Democracy: How Mass School Closure Undermines the Citizenship of Black Americans*, received three awards from the American Political Science Association: the Dennis Judd Award, the Ralph J. Bunche Award, and the Best Book Award from the race, ethnicity and

politics section. Described as a "rigorous and compelling account of the costs of participation for Black citizens in US democracy," Nuamah's second book investigates the 2013 school closings in largely poor, segregated neighborhoods in Chicago and Philadelphia. Early in the process, affected residents mobilized politically to save their schools.

"They basically [became] model citizens, protesting, voting, and attending community meetings at higher rates than any other racial group," says Nuamah, a political scientist and associate professor of human development and social policy. When their efforts failed to achieve what Nuamah calls "equitable democratic responsiveness," community members lost their faith in the power of political participation.

"Ultimately, my book reveals that when schools shut down, so too does Black citizens' access to, and belief in, American democracy," she says. "They are everything a liberal democracy demands, and yet, democracy is closed to them."

Kumar, Tripathi Join SESP Faculty

Social demographer **Sneha Kumar** and cultural psychologist **Ritu Tripathi** have joined the school's faculty.

Kumar, whose research explores health inequalities in some of the most populous countries in the world, including Indonesia, India, China, and Brazil, is assistant professor of human development and social policy. Trained in a wide range of social science disciplines from sociology and economics to policy analysis, she studies why and how family structures and dynamics are changing and what these changes mean for individual wellness as people age.

Born in India and raised in Kuwait, Kumar earned her doctorate in developmental sociology from Cornell University and was most recently a postdoctoral fellow at the Population Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin.

Tripathi, an expert in organizational behavior and cross-cultural psychology, is assistant professor of instruction. She will develop and teach courses on global leadership, international negotiations, and cross-cultural management for both undergraduate and professional master's programs and will serve as a capstone adviser for the Master's in Learning and Organizational Change program.

Over the summer, Tripathi taught a class for the dual-degree applied economics and social and economic policy master's program, in which students study how applied economics plays out in real-world policies in both China and the United States. She most recently was assistant professor at the Indian Institute of Management in Bangalore, where she taught MBA courses and designed and taught short modules for business leaders.



Kumar



Tripathi

How Trauma Led to Advocacy

Kaylyn Ahn uses her voice to empower victims of sexual assault

By Colleen McNamara



When Kaylyn Ahn contacted the police in 2021 to report she had been raped by an acquaintance, she was told that prosecutors would never pick up her case. Instead, a sergeant advised her to try not to let it happen again and move on.

Ahn, then 17, had been drinking and was voluntarily intoxicated at the time of the assault. Because of that, the officer explained, the case would be extremely difficult to prosecute and would likely go nowhere.

“I was devastated,” says Ahn, now a third-year SESP student. “I hadn’t told anyone what happened, and I had been agonizing over the decision, should I report or not? The police didn’t take me seriously at all. It felt like a second loss of agency, like I had no choice—first in the assault and then with the legal system.”

Instead of giving up, she appealed to state representative Mark Walker, in

whose office she had been interning. At the time, “consent” per Illinois statute hinged on whether an assailant had administered the substance that incapacitated the victim.

Walker spearheaded legislation to address the loophole, adding language to make clear that if someone is unable to give consent, it doesn’t matter how or why. “The responsibility for the crime is on the perpetrator,” Walker says. “It’s long past the time to stop blaming the victims of these crimes.”

Some say the situation reflects a larger problem. A 2020 study found that 80 to 90 percent of sexual harm reports made in the prior decade to the Chicago Police Department did not result in an arrest.

“It is incredibly difficult to get a case that is reported to law enforcement charged, prosecuted, and convicted,” says Madeleine Behr, policy director at the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation, which offers

free legal support to survivors of sexual assault. “Even after the #MeToo and other movements, we still find so many reasons not to believe victims when they come forward.”

Ahn testified in support of the new legislation, which was signed into law by Illinois governor JB Pritzker in 2022 with Ahn standing alongside him; life has been a whirlwind since. Now 19, Ahn has crisscrossed the nation speaking about gender and violence. She spent a summer in Washington, DC, for an internship in the State Department’s Office of Global Women’s Issues, where she worked on a policy paper about gender-based violence in Afghanistan.

“I hadn’t told anyone what had happened, and I had been agonizing over the decision, should I report or not?”

In July, Pritzker appointed her to the Illinois Council on Women and Girls. For the next two years, Ahn will advise the governor and General Assembly on policy issues, and next summer she’ll work abroad at an embassy or consulate as part of a US Foreign Service program.

That’s all on top of her studies at Northwestern, where she’s double-majoring in social policy and legal studies. She still struggles with the aftermath of trauma, including sleepless nights, but she’s trying to be patient with herself and the pace of social change.

“Trauma has a way of ripping away your voice and power,” Ahn says, but helping get the bill passed “was a reminder of how much power I truly have, and it was proof that I could make good change in the world.”



Megan Bang



Jeannette Colyvas



Mesmin Destin



Simone Ispa-Landa



Ana Paula Melo



Alexis Orellana



David Rapp



Regina Seo



David Uttal



Sepehr Vakil



Hoa Vu



Tommy Wells

IN BRIEF

The School of Education and Social Policy was ranked **No. 3** in the 2023–24 *U.S. News & World Report* graduate school rankings.

Megan Bang was elected to the National Academy of Education’s board of directors.

Dean **Bryan Brayboy** received the George and Louise Spindler Award for his contributions to educational anthropology. He was also named to the William T. Grant Foundation’s Scholars Selection Committee, joining professor **Cynthia Coburn**, who is in the middle of her five-year term.

Jeannette Colyvas was among a select group of academics invited to the Oxford Residence Week for Entrepreneurship Scholars. Though a different cohort is selected each year, Colyvas has been invited annually since 2018 due to what organizers call her “exciting and original work.”

Mesmin Destin, a founding director of the SESP Leadership Institute, was appointed inaugural faculty director of student access and enrichment at Northwestern. “As our student body diversifies across multiple dimensions, it is critical that the institution grow in ways that authentically embrace students’ backgrounds, perspectives, and goals,” he says.

Larry Hedges received the José Vasconcelos World Award of Education from the World Cultural Council at the University of Helsinki.

Simone Ispa-Landa was elected chair of the American Sociological Association’s education division.

Professor emerita **Carol Lee** was elected chair of the National Board for Education Sciences.

Dan McAdams received the Society for Personality and Social Psychology’s Constellation Award.

Ana Paula Melo and **Tommy Wells** are the 2023–24 early-career visiting fellows at SESP’s Center for Education Efficacy, Excellence, and Equity.

David Rapp and **Michael Spikes** (PhD23) spoke at the Driving Change community workshop held by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. Rapp discussed the influence of inaccurate information, fake news, and false claims; Spikes’s talk covered how to use media literacy to better understand the current media landscape.

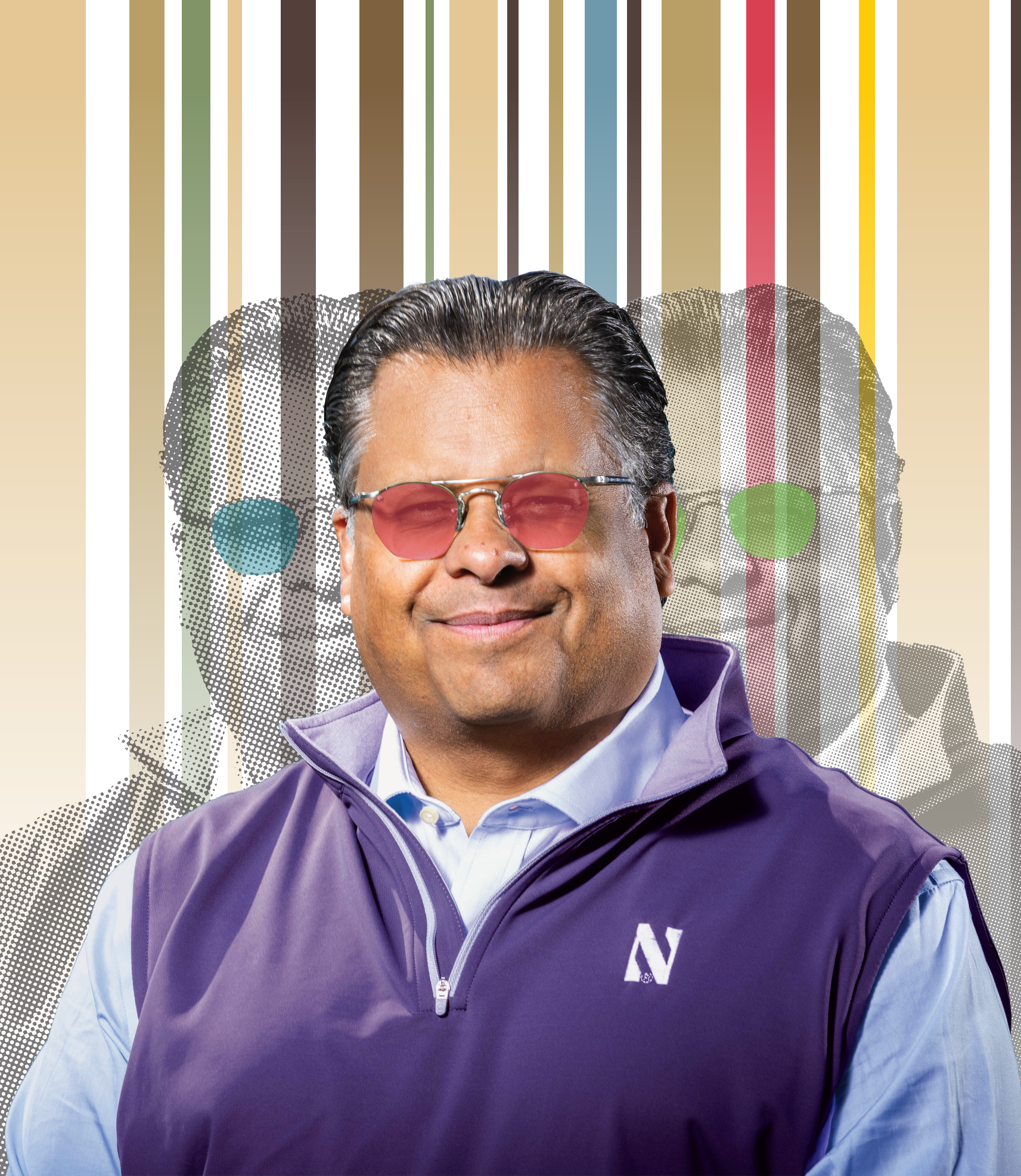
Economists **Regina Seo**, **Alexis Orellana**, and **Hoa Vu** are new lecturers in the dual-degree Master of Applied Economics and Social and Economic Policy program.

Ryan Smerek’s new book, *Speaking Up at Work: Leading Change as an Independent Thinker*, is “an engaging, evidence-based, and actionable read about how to raise problems and solutions,” says organizational psychologist and author Adam Grant.

A team including **Lois Trautvetter** was awarded \$50 million over five years by the National Science Foundation and the Simons Foundation to establish the National Institute for Theory and Mathematics in Biology.

David Uttal and colleagues received a \$100,000 Tools Competition award to develop an interactive platform that helps students and teachers learn spatial and math skills by using intricate and familiar patterns found in the natural world.

Sepehr Vakil delivered the keynote address “Widening the ‘Learning Tent’ of Computing Education” for the 2023 Computer Science Teachers Association. He was also interviewed for the CSTA Equity Fellowship podcast *One Voice in CS*.



THE POWER OF POSSIBILITY

New dean Bryan Brayboy will be asking questions

By Julie Deardorff

Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy didn't often question authority as an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. So when he received a C+ in organic chemistry and his academic adviser told him to forget about medical school, he did just that.

Today Brayboy, a citizen of the Lumbee Tribe, considers that one-sided conversation a major turning point in his life.

Why didn't he challenge the advice? Why didn't he consult with his older brother, who also had earned a C

in organic chemistry and still went on to become a doctor? Why wasn't he more curious about the advice and the reality of it?

"It was a huge lesson," says Brayboy, who became dean of the School of Education and Social Policy last June. "The role of curiosity is fundamental and key. It's also one of the things I love most about higher education."

An anthropologist and the Carlos Montezuma Professor of Education and Social Policy, Brayboy is happy with his trajectory, which was strongly influenced by his parents and an elder in their Lumbee community who suggested he become a teacher. But he worries that others—who could have been anything they dreamed of becoming—were unnecessarily dissuaded by a comment or grade.

"I knew the rule about paying attention to my elders, but I didn't know the ones about how to do college, or that I could question an adviser," Brayboy says. "I learned that a single adult can have a profound ability to set someone's future."

Now a world-renowned scholar on race, diversity, and Indigenous experiences in education, Brayboy is leading what he calls the best school of education in the nation and, arguably, the world. Sensing a touch of Midwestern modesty in Evanston, Brayboy wants the SESP community to stand tall for being part of such an accomplished school.

"Social policy isn't the only thing that makes us unique," he says. "It's also the political scientists, economists, computer scientists, and sociologists. It's learning scientists, teacher educators, psychologists,

"The role of curiosity is fundamental and key. It's also one of the things I love most about higher education."



and those studying human development. What would it mean to put our collective shoulder to the wheel? That's our opportunity—and responsibility."

Many of Brayboy's views can be traced to his parents, who worked in education and healthcare and strongly believed in the power of possibility. They were activists who didn't march at protests; instead, they were both employed by the federal government at various times and used its structures to help Native peoples start clinics, access resources and educational opportunities, and become teachers, doctors, dentists, and nurses.

"They saw systems that had been historically—and remain—oppressive as also offering possibilities to change the future of communities," he says. "They taught me there are a lot of ways to push back against unequal structures. They taught me to push back."

While at the University of North Carolina, Brayboy began wrestling with a question that would later drive his research: "What happens when you don't know the rules?" He was studying 40 hours a week, grinding like crazy, when a classmate said, "You work all the time. Why aren't you thriving? Do you understand how to read a syllabus?"

He didn't. "My future was framed because I didn't know how to 'do' college,"



"My future was framed because I didn't know how to 'do' college."

he says. Brayboy switched to political science; he also started asking questions. He took on campus leadership roles, serving as president of his fraternity, and ran for student government and joined a Native American student group. After graduation, he pursued teaching after a chance encounter with an elder from his Lumbee community; later he applied to graduate school.

At the University of Pennsylvania, Brayboy drew on his own undergraduate experience. Curious about whether other Native students knew how to navigate the higher education system, he spent two years essentially living with American Indian undergrads at Ivy League schools. In his dissertation, he found that those students learned the rules from one another or didn't learn them at all. They also sought spaces where they could be themselves and committed themselves to developing skills and earning credentials to serve the needs of their tribal nations. It felt familiar to his own experiences.

"Everybody who does really good work in social science finds topics that have a



personal life connection," says Brayboy's doctoral adviser, Frederick Erickson (PhD69), professor emeritus at the University of California Los Angeles. "There's a little bit of autobiography in what any of us do. Bryan is a perfect example of that."

Since then, Brayboy's work has focused on building programs to help those who often aren't welcomed into institutions of higher education. His most influential research is Tribal Critical Race Theory, or TribalCrit, a groundbreaking framework he developed in 2005 to help explain Indigenous peoples' complex experiences with education, colonization, and racism.

"Tensions aren't going away," he says. "I'm not terribly hopeful that the federal government and institutions of higher education will be as open as they need to be for people who have vast differences. Institutions, by their very nature, are conservative; they change very little. But I'm hopeful about what we can change at SESP."

Prior to accepting the SESP deanship and coming to Evanston, Brayboy was

the President's Professor in the School of Social Transformation and vice president of social advancement at Arizona State University. He also served as senior adviser to the university's president, director of the Center for Indian Education, and coeditor of the *Journal of American Indian Education*.

Gretchen Buhlig, CEO of Arizona State University Foundation, describes him as "a disruptor, but one who does it in a way that brings people along." Other close colleagues praise his commitment to inclusivity and equity, his administrative and leadership skills, and his ability to home in on people's strengths and use them for good.

"To Bryan, people matter, and matter deeply," says Marlene Tromp, president of Boise State University. "He can intelligently, creatively, and courageously make truly difficult decisions, but he always does so while honoring the humanity of all. This is why he is such an extraordinary leader."

Brayboy recently received the George and Louise Spindler Award from the

ELEVEN THINGS ABOUT BRYAN BRAYBOY

BRAYBOY AND HIS WIFE, Doris Warriner, professor of anthropology at Northwestern, have two sons, ages 22 and 20.

HE IS A DOG PERSON. Because he has allergies to pet dander, he and Doris have two hypoallergenic Australian labradoodles: Apollo and Ollie.

HIS PARENTS have been honored for heroic acts. His late mother, Mary, was awarded the Carnegie Medal in 1984 for saving two coworkers during an office shooting. His father, Bobby, received the noncombat V (for valor) military award after he pulled a woman and her child from a burning car on the highway.

HE HAS BEEN A VISITING and noted scholar in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Norway. From 2007 to 2012, he was the visiting President's Professor of Indigenous Education at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

HIS WORK has been supported by the US Department of Education; the National Science Foundation; the Ford, Mellon, Kellogg, and Spencer Foundations; and others.

BRAYBOY ADVISED STARBUCKS on how to train staff to deal with inherent bias as part of the coffee giant's To Be Welcoming project.

HE IS A GIFTED STORYTELLER. Once, when a colleague remarked that he "told good stories," later adding that this skill might prevent him from "being a good theorist," he ran the idea past his mother. She said, "Baby, doesn't she know that our stories are our theories? And she thinks she's smarter than you because she can't tell stories?"

OVER THE PAST 21 YEARS, Brayboy and his teams have helped prepare more than 165 Native teachers to work in American Indian communities.

HE WAKES UP AT 4:45 A.M. SINGING (see playlist on page 1). "I think it's because I'm fundamentally an optimist," he says, even though he suspects those around him are rolling their eyes.

ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS he read last year was *No Country for Eight-Spot Butterflies* by Julian Aguon. He also recommends *Yellowface* by R. F. Kuang.

HE COLLECTS EYEGLASSES, which are on display in his home. Every lens is tinted for aesthetics and to ease eye-strain. He chooses a pair based on his mood and the day's weather. "My brighter lenses—marigold, watermelon, robin's-egg blue, and lime—will see more time in Evanston because of the gray," he says, looking on the bright side.

Council on Anthropology and Education for a lifetime of work shaping the educational anthropology field, K-12 schools, and higher education. In 2018 he was elected to the National Academy of Education and named a fellow of the American Educational Research Association.

Though he is the first Native American

dean in Northwestern's history, he has stopped seeing firsts as special. "For me, there's a sense of responsibility, which is to not be the last," he says. "What does it mean to be second or third? It connotes a different kind of success than being first. Now I am interested in seeing whether we can create the conditions for a second."

Six Words Is All She Needs

By Gayle Worland

It's no secret that Renetta McCann (Comm78, MS12) is a fan of the six-word memoir—a handful of pithy words crafted to tell a story or sum up a life. In fact, when McCann was inducted into the American Advertising Federation's Advertising Hall of Fame last year, some of her admirers created the website sixwordsforrenetta.com, filled with such tributes to the trailblazer as “Thanks for lifting as you climb,” and “So glad she's in my corner.”



She was first for a reason.

—Lamont

McCann, who calls herself a South Side Chicago girl at heart, has spent much of her career as a change agent focused on talent development. After holding many roles at advertising agencies Leo Burnett, Starcom Worldwide, and Publicis Groupe,

Compassionate leader who includes and inspires.

—Amy

she returned home to Northwestern to earn a second degree—a master's in learning and organizational change from the School of Education and Social Policy. Now chief inclusion experience officer for Publicis, she is also an adjunct lecturer for SESP's Master's and Executive Learning and Organizational Change programs, teaching classes such as Designing Organizations and Leading Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice in Organizations.

“I'm a strategist who works at the intersection of business and people,” McCann explains. “One day someone asked me why I do this type of work. I responded with ‘human potential realized; human progress accelerated’—a six-word story that distills my beliefs.”

McCann's first job at Leo Burnett, which she got through a campus interview as a senior, led her to the field of advertising media, which has grown exponentially in the decades since. “It fundamentally set me on a path of being a trailblazer for Black professionals in media and general marketing agencies,” she says. “Eventually I realized I was signing up for something pretty rare.” She went on to become many “firsts” at various companies: the first

Black media director, the first Black executive vice president in media, and the first Black female CEO of a global media company.

“Along with doing the work, I was also managing the intangibles of what it means for a Black woman to be doing this work and what possibilities that might create for other Black people,” she says.

McCann, whose children are now adults, also set an example for working women and parents, noting that “it was up to my generation to prove that women could have babies and still produce at the highest professional levels.”

McCann isn't certain what prompted her fondness for six-word stories, but she does remember picking up the 2008 book *Not Quite What I Was Planning: Six-Word Memoirs by Writers Famous and Obscure* a few months after it was published. The book was inspired by *SMITH* magazine, the self-proclaimed home of the six-word story.

“It was a fun, thoughtful, and creative technique to explain really complicated things,” she says. “I realized that if your desire was to really crystallize an idea, this was probably a great mechanism by which to do it.”

Six-word stories, which are used in schools and as a team-building exercise in corporate settings, have been a staple of the Master's in Learning and Organizational Change program for more than a decade, says Kimberly Scott, the program's executive director and associate dean for innovation and program development, who calls McCann a “generative leader of learning and change.”

Introduced to the program by alumna Susan Barrett Kelly (MS11), the story idea is used to help students write personal brand statements, to generate stories about the program, and to succinctly capture the program's mission of “empowering transformation in organizations through people.”

SESP psychologist Dan McAdams, a professor of human development and social policy, says that asking people to distill their identity into half a dozen words is similar to his research interviews that tease out how people “make meaning in their lives through story and myth.” In life story interviews, people describe important chapters, scenes, and characters in their lives. At the end, they try to sum things up by identifying a key theme or motif that runs through the narrative.

Likewise, the six-word story “challenges you to identify something key and central in your narrative identity—a message or important sequence—that can be captured in a pithy expression,” McAdams says, adding that “while it is difficult to utter anything profound in six words, there is something valuable, I think, in getting to the gist in narrative identity.” He says his own story would be “raised daughters, wrote books, loved Becky.”

For McCann, six-word stories are entirely different from social media posts. They also “only show up in certain moments,” she says. But they can have a lasting impact. For her induction into the Advertising Hall of Fame, McCann came up with her own six-word memoir: “Still trying to change the world.”

“Maybe the way I get to change the world now is by somewhat influencing the next generation of leaders,” she says. “To me, it fits in that six-word story.”

Can you say it in six? We asked alumni to write six-word stories about SESP faculty members.

Distributes leadership and protégés across fields.

—Mollie McQuillan (PhD19) for James Spillane

Stories make us who we are.

—Shadd Maruna (PhD98) for Dan McAdams

Understanding emotional mysteries: exploring the lifespan.

—Jordyn Ricard (BS20) for Claudia Haase

Waits for espresso machine, craves pretzels.

—Victor Lee (PhD09) for Bruce Sherin

Writer, storytelling teacher; cultivates possible worlds.

—Corey Winchester (BS10) for Shirin Vossoughi

Let's rethink civics to organize change.

—Kristine Lu (PhD23) for Matt Easterday

The Changing Rules of College Admissions

Behind the scenes with alumna Corinne Smith



Corinne Smith was blunt when she met with college admissions officers during high school. “I vividly remember them asking if I knew what I wanted to do,” she recalls. “I’d say, ‘I want your job.’”

Now associate director of undergraduate admissions at Yale University, Smith (WCAS13, MS16) oversees rural outreach and recruitment, coordinates domestic travel and virtual events, and manages up to 2,500 undergraduate applications across seven states. At the same time, she is pursuing her doctorate in diversity and equity in education at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, focusing on rural students and barriers to college access.

Smith recently chatted with us about her book *The College Essay Journal: A Mindful Manual for College Applications*, written with Ann Merrell (MS16), as well as SESP’s Master’s in Higher Education Administration and Policy (MSHE) program and how advancements in artificial intelligence will affect college essays. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

What was your own college essay topic?

My name. It was not a good essay. I’ve applied to school three times since then—I transferred and then applied to master’s and doctoral programs—and it gets better every time. But it’s not easy. I’d much rather read other people’s essays than write my own.

How many essays do you read each year?

Somewhere between 1,800 and 2,000 files. Each file has multiple essays, and I’ll read them more than once. That’s for my territory, but I also vote in Yale’s admissions committees, where you’ll see 60 to 70 applications per day.

Why did you incorporate mindfulness and brainstorming techniques into your book *The College Essay Journal*?

Applying to college should be exciting, right? You’re embarking on the next phase of your life and writing about yourself in a reflective way. [Coauthor] Ann Merrell and I were both seeing that it was unnecessarily stressful and causing anxiety. We wanted it to be a fun, really reflective, and positive experience. This is the book I wish I’d had when I was 17.



How can you tell when an adult has helped?

Parents tend to insert themselves into the story. It's a good thing to have people edit the essay, but too much editing means the writing gets overly crafted.

What is your recommendation on what not to write?

The "shock value" essay. I had one that started with "my best friend and I injure each other about once per week," which didn't sound healthy or like a good friendship. Two paragraphs later I learned they are circus performers who practice dangerous stunts at their weekly class. It could have been interesting but instead became a hurdle to overcome because the beginning was confusing.

Since a Supreme Court decision last year made it unlawful for colleges to consider race as a specific factor in admissions, can applicants write about race or ethnicity?

Essay topics are a very personal choice and should depend on what the student feels comfortable sharing. If a student does choose to write about their race or ethnicity, I'd encourage them to do so within the context of a larger story or essay topic. We don't want students to feel like they're being required to trauma-dump or relive difficult experiences in their essays.

For example?

For years we've read essays in which students describe cooking food with their grandmothers in a way that represents their heritage. Their background comes up, but it's not the sole focus of the piece. This allows us to learn more about who they are, what they value, and how they express themselves. My advice is to write about race or ethnicity in the context of something else that you care about.

Is it unethical to use artificial intelligence like ChatGPT on admissions applications?

Students need to be exceptionally careful because they will probably have to attest to not using any artificial intelligence help. Admitted students who get caught are putting their place in the class in jeopardy.

Are there other downsides to AI?

The most authentic essays and student voices won't be captured, and that's what we're looking for. These platforms might be able to write an essay, but those pieces rarely have the emotion, vulnerability, or depth that admissions officers like to see.

How can AI be used effectively?

Ask it for an outline to help you brainstorm where you're going. I was writing an essay on intersectionality and wanted to see if ChatGPT came up with the same key points that I had. This prompt worked pretty well, and I could see how a student might take the outline and build from it. But it's important to be

"[AI] platforms might be able to write an essay, but those pieces rarely have the emotion, vulnerability, or depth that admissions officers like to see."



Corinne Smith had no interest in writing her own college application essay. But how great would it be, she thought, to read everyone else's?

careful. ChatGPT lies! When I asked it for references on intersectionality, some were real but many were completely made up.

You nearly went to another school for your master's degree instead of Northwestern. What changed your mind?

[MSHE program director] Lois Trautvetter called to say I'd received an offer to do my internship in Northwestern's athletic department. I asked the other school I was considering if they could do anything similar, and they said, "That's a great offer. You should take it."

What were classes like?

We were learning from leading people in the profession. The vice president of enrollment management at Northwestern taught our class on the topic. Gene Lowe, the

University president's adviser, taught two of my classes. These were leaders of the institution taking their time to teach us.

Was it hard to work during the day and take classes at night?

It was busy but fun. I built a social life and a network at Northwestern in athletics and admissions. I had great people not only to give me references but who could connect me with others in the higher ed space. I now know people all over the country.

How did your interview at Yale go?

The first thing the dean of admissions said to me was "My Northwestern diploma is right over there." He had his MBA from the Kellogg School of Management and said, "If you come work here, you can still bleed purple. You can still root for the Wildcats, and I'll cheer them on with you."

Five reasons we love MSHE ▶▶▶

The Master of Science in Higher Education Administration and Policy program prepares students to work in careers from academic advising and alumni relations to athletics, global education, and nonprofits. Alumni find jobs around the world, but many like to stay close to home: 74 MSHE alumni currently work for Northwestern, and 31 master's students have internships on campus as part of the curriculum. Here are a few reasons alumni value the program.

INSTRUCTORS AND FELLOW STUDENTS

"Our instructors were talented and engaged practitioners who knew how to talk about the real world as well as theory. And the students in my cohort were incredibly energetic, motivated, and intelligent—I learned as much from them as from my instructors. You form relationships in a program like this that last, and those friendships and connections will be with me throughout my career."

Dave Musser (MS09), deputy director of policy implementation and oversight at the US Department of Education's office of federal student aid

THE INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE

"I interned in Northwestern's career advancement office, which validated my interest in career services, gave me the in-depth training and practical student-facing experience I lacked, and set me up to be successful in my job search in the field. It set such a great foundation that I still draw upon things I learned in that internship."

Lauren Faucette (MS14), senior career adviser for the MSHE program

THE MASTER'S PROJECT

"While challenging and at times exhausting, the master's project really taught me valuable research skills that I frequently use in my career. It also gave me the confidence to undertake original research when it came time to do my PhD and dissertation."

Kate Schultz (MS13), senior program manager of AI, machine learning, and analytics at the Mayo Clinic and faculty director of the health sciences program at Northwestern's School of Professional Studies

TRAINING IN RESEARCH METHODS

"My role is to use data analytics to better understand application trends and help strategize for outreach and yield, so I'm grateful to have been trained in qualitative and quantitative research methods through MSHE courses and graduate assistantships during my time as a student."

Joanne Kang (MS17), assistant director of MBA admissions at Harvard Business School

DIVERSITY OF THOUGHT

"The program encourages the expression of different views, ideas, and insights, all with the aim of improving the higher education system."

Sonia Hussain (MS21), assistant director of the Chicago Field Studies program for Northwestern's Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences

STEAMbassadors Show Off Skills

College-age mentors from diverse backgrounds demonstrated their work to Northwestern University president Michael Schill and guests during the One Summer STEAMbassadors Showcase at Chicago's Harry S. Truman College. The STEAMbassadors community mentorship program, cofounded by learning sciences professor Nichole Pinkard (below), trains college-bound 18- to 24-year-olds from underresourced communities to work with young people whose neighborhoods lack educational opportunities in computer science, engineering, and the arts.



The STEAMBassadors program is part of professor Nichole Pinkard's visionary work developing an education ecosystem for Chicago.



Northwestern president Michael Schill (right) greets Vishesh Kumar, a postdoctoral fellow in the lab of associate professor Marcelo Worsley (left).

ALUMNI NEWS

The “Tea” on the PhD

Workshop sheds light on SESP doctoral programs

Most people have heard the term *PhD*, and they know getting one is an outstanding accomplishment. But few picture themselves on that journey—especially if they lack role models.

Connections, a daylong PhD preparation and community-building program at SESP for those historically underrepresented in higher education, was designed to demystify the process and clarify expectations. In each session, facilitators, graduate students, faculty, and aspiring doctoral students wrestled with questions like “Is a PhD for me?”

The workshop—which grew out of a Daniel I. Linzer Grant for Innovation in Diversity and Equity awarded to professors Claudia Haase, Quinn Mulroy, and Regina Logan and was supported by SESP—drew people interested in doctoral programs related to human development, social policy, and similar fields.

“We often think about the PhD as a mechanism for creating more-just futures and a more-just world.”

—Aireale J. Rodgers

Throughout the day, participants discussed everything from figuring out their own reasons for pursuing a PhD to the importance of finding the right program and adviser, navigating the application process, and considering costs.

Aireale J. Rodgers (BS11, MS18), an assistant professor of higher education at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and graduate student Janella Benson, also at Madison, facilitated several sessions and provided “The Tea on the PhD.” They



fielded questions about research, academia, and finances and provided tips on how to apply.

“We often think about the PhD as a mechanism for creating more-just futures and a more-just world,” said Rodgers, who earned her doctorate at the University of Southern California. “It’s one of the most creative and impactful steps you can take to make a difference.”

Connections was organized by doctoral students and faculty in SESP’s Human Development and Social Policy program and Megan Redfearn, director of faculty and doctoral student affairs. Graduate students Phoebe Lin, Shanequewa Love, Andrew Stein, Kanika Khanda, Jen Cowhy, and Tre Wells helped imagine, organize, and plan the program and shared their experiences during roundtable events and panels.

People who identify as LGBTQ+ or who come from communities of color and first-generation or lower-income backgrounds are vastly underrepresented in doctoral programs. According to the National Science Foundation, only 3 percent of doctoral degrees are earned by Black women.



Above: Alumna Aireale Rodgers, who earned her doctorate in urban education policy, helped facilitate the event. Above left: Undergraduate Lillian Fu learns about life as a doctoral student.

“We need change in academia,” said Claudia Haase, an organizer and associate professor of human development and social policy. “Conferences like Connections are one way we can create a different future together.”

A PhD is a terminal degree—as far as one can go—and those who pursue one should want to dive deeply into empirical research, Rodgers said. “You’re moving from being a consumer to an active producer of knowledge. It’s an opportunity to go really narrow, really deep, into a topic.”

After earning her undergraduate and master’s degrees at SESP, Rodgers chose the University of Southern California in part because she could join a cohort of five other Black women. Her mom called the group the “super six.”

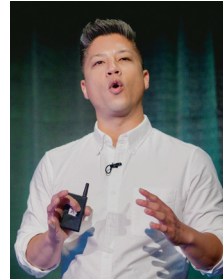
“Instead of thinking, ‘Oh, I don’t have this yet,’ try to understand why they need you,” Rodgers said. “You have a lot to offer to the institution.”



Alan Kaplan



Jean Hoffman Mrachko



Jonathan TranPham



Katharine Cusick



Steven Serikaku



D'Wayne Bates



Danielle Moehrke



Imani Wilson



Steven McGee



Rebecca Ball



E. Dylan Cruz



Alec Abramson



Stephen Bournés



Suzanne Budak



Joan DeGennaro



Nala Bishop

60s

Marianne Ariyanto (BS68) is a retired dance teacher who taught for more than two decades at what is now the Jakarta Inter-cultural School.

70s

Alan Kaplan (BS73, MA/MS75) is semi-retired and provides union-related and employment law counseling, drafting, negotiation, and training services following his litigation career at the National Labor Relations Board and in private practice.

Barbara Talbott (BS73) leads the Northwestern Club of Atlanta, which hosts more than 30 annual events. She is part of Northwestern's Admissions Council and reunion committee and involved with funding and administering scholarships for Northwestern, Alpha Phi sorority, and Atlanta Panhellenic. Now retired, she ran the operations for a \$2 billion consulting company within IBM.

Steven Serikaku (BS74) spent 34 years working in the Chicago Public Schools and now spends most of his time volunteering and advocating for universal health insurance, affordable housing, criminal legal system reform, and anti-oppression policies.

Pro tip: "Learn from your students first if you are not from the same community. Support your colleagues—they are your best support system in a tough work environment."

80s

Antonio Burketh (BS83) is a computer consultant, adviser, and technology strategist who was a member of various teams that delivered sociotechnical innovations at IBM, Xerox, and Grid Systems.

Steven McGee (BS88, PhD96), one of the first learning scientists in the nation, is president of the Learning Partnership, which uses research to support STEM education.

Pro tip: "Research careers outside of university settings. It's important to experience education from the practitioner point of view to better understand how the realities of education relate to the theories you are learning in class."



90s

Stephen Bournés (BS93), a member of the inaugural class of 1989 Golden Apple Scholars, is deputy superintendent at Chester (Pennsylvania) Community Charter School.

David Mrachko (BS93) is vice president of Hanna Commercial Real Estate, where he oversees the firm's growth in the Detroit and northwestern Ohio markets.

Jean Hoffman Mrachko (BS93) is associate director of Michigan Alternative Route to Certification and on the board of the Northwestern University Marching and Band Alumni.

Pro tip: "Find experienced mentors to guide you in your first few years—and then be a mentor to others. You will never stop learning the craft of teaching!"

Rebecca Ball (BS98), a former middle school teacher, now works with four-year-olds at Swarthmore (Pennsylvania) Friends Nursery School.

Pro tip: "Don't expect to change the world right out of college. Look for small accomplishments every day, and you will gain more confidence. As a teacher, you will change and grow just as much as your students do."

D'Wayne Bates (BS98), a former professional football player and member of the Northwestern Athletics Hall of Fame, is an assistant principal and award-winning athletic director at Glenbard East High School in Lombard, Illinois.

Suzanne Budak (BS98) is an educational research coordinator at Chicago's Erikson Institute.



Paul Jeruchimowitz (BS98) leads Accenture's global operating model and organization design practice.

00s

Melissa McGonegle (BS03), who started her career with Teach for America, is senior director of talent strategy and leadership development at the KIPP Foundation, where she leads the team that runs the national Principal Pipeline program.

Pro tip: "Be a great teacher first. Those skills can and will translate into any other work you do with youth or adults."

Jonathan TranPham (BS03) is founder and CEO of the startup Reflect, which matches people with mental health therapists.

Julie Levin (BS04) is director of curriculum and grants for Easthampton (Massachusetts) Public Schools.

Pro tip: "Looking at data is increasingly important for educators. Take courses in statistics and psychometrics."

10s

E. Dylan Cruz (BS13) is director of sales operations for Reyes Coca-Cola Bottling. He is a member of SESP's Board of Advisors and the class of 2013's tenth reunion committee. He also served on his first- and fifth-year reunion committees.

Joan DeGennaro (BS13) is operations manager at Y Combinator's Startup School in New York City. She pivoted from working in international development to early-stage startups and venture capital.



Alyssa Lloyd (BS13) is the overdose prevention program coordinator at the Allegheny County Health Department in Pennsylvania.

Danielle Moehrke (BS13, KSM21) is director of strategy and operations at LEAP Innovations.

Camille Cooley (BS18) is a health policy professional and a consultant for Manatt Health.

Katharine Cusick (BS18) is a law clerk at Blank Rome LLP.

Joy Holden (BS18) earned a degree from Harvard Law School and is now an attorney at the American Civil Liberties Union of the District of Columbia.

Imani Wilson (BS18) is a licensed clinical social worker at Evanston Township High School.

20s

Alec Abramson (BS23) is an associate consultant for the global strategy and consulting team at PwC, where he previously interned.

Nala Bishop (BS23) is a fellow with the Northwestern Public Interest Program and works at Evanston Township High School.

Dayna Rapkin (BS23) is an investment banking analyst for the Raine Group in New York City.



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

During SESP's annual reunion networking event last October, current undergraduates joined more than two dozen alumni for lunch and "pro tips"—advice and wisdom related to careers and life after Northwestern. To receive information about next year's lunch, email SESPsao@northwestern.edu.

Christina Cilento Doesn't Want a Bag

Creating change as a clean-energy consultant

When **Christina Cilento** (BS17) resolved to avoid plastic in 2021, she was surprised by how much time and energy she spent begging others to do her small favors. At the farmer's market, she asked if the vendor would reuse the plastic bag containing green beans. On the phone with the grocery store, she wondered if they could set aside two unpackaged roasted chickens, which she'd carry home in a gigantic pot.

The experience taught Cilento, now a consultant in Washington, DC, for the clean-energy firm Strategen, that it's difficult to go it alone when it comes to promoting sustainability and fighting climate change. Individual actions, she says, need to be coupled with teamwork and systems transformation to result in lasting change.

"My journey in the climate and plastics space very much reflects what I learned at SESP," she says. "It feels good to channel my passion for personal sustainability into widespread education and policy-level change."

A longtime sustainability advocate who gave away 300 bicycle helmets when she was president of Northwestern's Associated Student Government, Cilento began thinking about how to channel her activism when she was selected to report on the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris. Two years later, she won a Luce scholarship to work on local environmental issues in Laos for nonprofit Village Focus International and travel across southeast Asia after graduation.

During that period, Cilento observed environmental damage firsthand. In addition to inhaling fumes from burning plastic in Laos and witnessing heaps of trash choking Manila Bay, she spent her time talking with rural Lao communities about the environmental effects of development projects like rubber plantations and hydroelectric dams.

"We'd travel eight hours on dirt roads to get to villages and talk about [the] really pressing issues communities faced," says Cilento, who became fluent in the Lao language during



Cilento tries her hand at tilling a field at Village Focus International's sustainable agriculture training center in Lao Ngam, Laos.

"Every oddball thing I manage to get unpackaged is a piece of ocean litter avoided."

her three years in the country. "It taught me a lot about framing environmental issues in ways that resonate. People might not identify as environmentalists, but they're still concerned about their community's health and well-being."

She now uses those skills at Strategen, where she works on projects like helping a southern California utility develop a 20-year energy resource plan. Her role requires speaking with community members about what they want to see in the plan, including how much of the community's energy will be renewable and where it will come from. The goal, she says, is to make people feel empowered even though it can be easy to feel hopeless about climate change. "I'm trying to give communities a voice in shaping their energy future," she adds.

In her spare time, Cilento, an avid hiker, volunteers with the speakers' bureau of nonprofit Beyond Plastics. She talks to faith communities, student organizations, and other groups across the country about the history of plastic pollution, its effects on health and the planet, and policy solutions to fix it.

Her own plastic consumption remains relatively low, and she still shops in bulk and brings her own containers to restaurants. What's changed since 2021 is that she's easier on herself when she can't be completely plastic-free—but she's no less determined.

"Every oddball thing I manage to get unpackaged is a piece of ocean litter avoided," she wrote in *Grist*. "Every incredibly accommodating grocery worker who gives a thoughtful nod when I explain why I'm asking them to stuff pieces of cod in a Tupperware for me is another person who might think more critically about the role of plastic in their own lives."

Candy Bowl Confessions



You know me, but I've never formally introduced myself: I'm the Candy Bowl from the SESP student affairs office.

It's crazy to think I've been a part of SESP for over two decades. Thanks to Mark Hoffman, who I hear is now associate director for SESP's Higher Education Administration and Policy program, for bringing me into the mix. He saw the student affairs office as a community hub where students loved to hang out, but it was missing something sweet.

That's where I came in. Mark nabbed my first edition from World Market, and I've been with SESP ever since.

First and foremost, I'm a provider. I'll never gobble the candy myself. Sure, it's tempting, but you need self-discipline to be a pro candy bowl. You think it's easy sitting with all that delicious candy in you 24/7? I know weaker candy bowls who can't control themselves. "Oh, I'll just have one M&M for myself," they say. Next thing you know, they're upside-down in a candy coma.

Being a part of SESP is the ultimate fly-on-the-wall gig. I spend my days hanging out with students, hearing them talk, laugh, and learn. Whether they're talking about their practicums or petitioning classes or discussing the many ways they give back, I feel so lucky to be in such a great community.

I've always felt so appreciated. I've been referenced in so many commencement speeches—what an honor! How many bowls can say that? Frankly, I feel like I'm the most beloved bowl aside from the Super Bowl.

It's a joy when students—and the faculty frequent fliers—pop in and grab a handful of candy on their way to or from classes. I feel like I'm handing off water to marathon runners—giving a small help, a little respite—as I cheer you all on.

I wish I could say it's all been perfect, but there was one fateful "incident" when I was accidentally dropped and broken. I remember it so clearly: panic throughout the office, Now and Laters strewn across

the floor. It was mayhem. Fortunately, I bounced back. I rose from the candy-coated chaos, fully restored and ready to serve some Nerds (the candy, that is, not you all).

As for who dropped me, I'll never spill those jelly beans.

I like to think I'm just a piece of what makes SESP such a special place. I get a lot of credit, but it's also the intimate community, warmth, and welcoming nature of our school. We're our own special island in the Northwestern community—which is even sweeter than my candy itself.

If I could make one request, it would be to make your future alumni donations to specifically expand my candy budget—I'd love for that to hit eight or nine figures. Hey, a bowl can dream.

AS TOLD TO DAN PERLMAN

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NCAA CHAMPIONS

Last year, Northwestern's women's lacrosse team captured both the Big Ten title and its eighth national championship. Eleven members of the team were SESP scholar athletes, including all-tournament selection Madison Taylor, now a second-year.