

# Center *of* Success

The University earns high marks for initiatives to support students traditionally overlooked in higher education.

By Robin L. Flanigan

**T**HE IDEA OF PURSUING A PHD WAS NEW TO LaFleur Stephens '02 a decade ago. Now teaching at Princeton University, she was first introduced to the idea as a political science major at Rochester.

As a Ronald E. McNair Scholar, she took a course called *The Culture of the Academy*, developed and taught by Beth Olivares, associate dean for diversity initiatives in Arts, Sciences & Engineering. In the course, Olivares introduced students to the history of higher education, the roles of faculty and administrators, and the expectations for success among graduate students.

For students like Stephens, the course—which has since become a template for other universities—was the first time someone had clearly spelled out how higher education worked and how they could find a place in it.

A few years after graduation, Stephens began to entertain the idea of a graduate degree. Olivares, the director of the David T. Kearns Center for Leadership and Diversity in Arts, Sciences & Engineering, had kept in touch and offered to help her apply.

“My family always had high expectations for me,” says LaFleur, who later this year will join the Princeton faculty as an assistant professor of politics. “It was the expectation that I would go to college. I think most people’s parents have high expectations for them, regardless of race or class. Some of us are just fortunate enough to have more social capital to help realize those dreams.”

Helping provide some of that social capital has been a specialty of Olivares and her staff at the University for more than two decades. While issues of access to higher education—particularly for low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented students—have recently

gained traction in the nation’s political conversation, Olivares and her staff have quietly built a national model for supporting students who not too long ago would have been overlooked by most selective universities.

“Colleges and universities right now are more pivotal to economic security and the future of this country than they have been for most periods of our existence as a society,” says Arnold Mitchem, founding president and current president emeritus of the Council for Opportunity in Education, a nonprofit advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C.

“One of the reasons I really praise and admire Dr. Olivares is that she has an appreciation for class and gap issues. She somehow got the attention of the leadership of the University to get seriously involved in doing something about these disparities. You’ve really engaged this issue and gotten results because you care, and that’s significant.”

Richard Feldman, dean of the College, says issues of access to education are a priority for the University, but the personal commitment that Olivares and her staff bring to their work has helped the Kearns Center exceed all expectations for the program.

“Beth has personally encouraged, nurtured, and invested in students in ways that have been transformative not only for individual students, but also for the University and our community,” Feldman says. “She really is a role model and an inspiration.”

As director of the Kearns Center, Olivares oversees programs for more than 1,000 students a year at Rochester and has extended the University’s system of support well beyond the River Campus. Established in 2002 and named for David Kearns ’52, a former Xerox Corp. CEO



## Politics Professor

As a McNair Scholar encouraged to take her schooling to the highest level, **LaFleur Stephens** '02 discovered a PhD would help her eventual career in more ways than she'd ever thought possible.

"I had no exposure to anyone with that degree, or even any idea what one would mean, before participating in the McNair Program," she says.

Even so, it took the political science major "some convincing" to return to school, after a three-year break to work for a nonprofit hunger organization and a social policy think tank, to earn a master's degree and PhD in political science at the University of Michigan. Beth Olivares, director of the Kearns Center—which formed the year Stephens graduated—kept in touch during that break.

"She was definitely influential," says Stephens, who is spending 2013-14 in a postdoctoral position at Princeton University before joining the faculty there as an assistant professor of politics later this year. "In terms of advancement, I'd never thought much about what you could do with only a bachelor's degree, and my perception of a PhD was that the degree was too far removed from the advocacy and social justice issues that I care about."

Her research work as a McNair Scholar included documenting the political attitudes of African Americans in the post-civil rights generation, and, in a separate project, examining the gentrification of Rochester.

The former morphed into her dissertation topic and current research exploring race, politics, and public opinion.

"Being exposed to this kind of academic lifestyle was vital," Stephens says. "You really can drive your own research agenda, travel, meet interesting people, and answer interesting questions.

"To this day I speak very highly about the McNair Program," she says. "Sometimes it's all about exposure. You don't know what you don't know."

**MCNAIR SCHOLAR: Joining the faculty at Princeton University, former McNair Scholar Stephens plans to continue her studies of race, politics, and public opinion.**



who championed diversity in education as a business leader, national policymaker, and University trustee, the center is a focal point for many of Rochester's efforts to support low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented minority students in Arts, Sciences & Engineering. Earning more than \$10 million in federal, state, and local grants over the past decade, Olivares and her staff provide academic as well as social support to both students and parents.

The center's key goal is to help increase diversity in American academia, from the student body to the faculty.

"Authentic diversity is integral to the success of American education and research," Olivares says. "Knowledge can't advance as it should if large segments of society are virtually absent from advanced learning, as is now often the case."

Among the center's programs is its original initiative, the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program, a U.S. Department of Education initiative named for Ronald Erwin McNair, a laser physicist who died in January 1986 aboard the NASA Shuttle *Challenger*.

In addition, the center supports about 20 Kearns Scholars each year as part of a program, partly funded by the National Science Foundation, to guide students to advanced study in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—the so-called STEM fields—and oversees the Xerox Engineering Research Fellows program, which provides intensive research experiences for students in engineering.

The center's track record has impressed colleagues across the country:

- Among alumni Kearns Scholars, more than 50 percent are studying for graduate degrees in STEM fields.
- About 85 percent of Rochester McNair Scholars go on to graduate school, compared to about 45 percent among students in the national McNair Program.
- Since the McNair Program was established at Rochester in 1992, more than 100 students have earned doctorates.

Olivares estimates that she has personally mentored more than 450 students, including 42 PhDs, 32 MDs, two doctors of pharmacy, and two doctors of psychology, as well as many others still in the educational pipeline. This year, Stephens becomes the first of her mentees to hold a faculty position at an Ivy League school.

In nominating Olivares for one of the top mentoring awards from the National Science Foundation, (Continued on page 30)



**KEARNS SCHOLAR:** With the goal of becoming a professor at a research institute, Rodrigues credits advisors at the Kearns Center with keeping him on track toward his undergraduate degree as a Kearns Scholar, McNair Scholar, and Xerox Engineering Research Fellow.



## Energy Consultant

**Luis Soto** '11, '12 (MS) was a junior when his grandmother died. He found it difficult to grieve while maintaining his grades, as well as juggle a part-time job and extracurricular activities. He sought refuge at the Kearns Center.

“The people there were understanding and a great support,” he says. “And they also reminded me of what my goals were. They said, ‘These are the opportunities available, but you need to put in the hard work.’ And then they told me I could do it. I don’t think I would’ve been as successful if it weren’t for them.”

Now a new product development manager in Manhattan at GlobalData, a research and consulting company for the energy and health care industries, Soto was a Kearns Scholar in 2008 and a Xerox Engineering Research Fellow in 2010. During an eight-month stint as a research assistant for Wendi Heinzelman, professor of electrical and computer engineering and dean of graduate studies for Arts, Sciences & Engineering, he studied radio-frequency identification (RFID) technology.

**KEARNS SCHOLAR: Now an industry consultant, Soto began studying issues in energy as a Kearns Scholar and a Xerox Engineering Research Fellow.**

Though originally set on becoming an electrical engineer with his electrical and computer engineering degree, it wasn’t until he received guidance from Kearns Center staff while filling out graduate school applications that he realized he wanted a career that would offer more socialization. With an interest in energy, he received a master’s degree—the first person in his family to do so—in technical entrepreneurship and management (TEAM), a program offered jointly by the Simon Business School and the Hajim School of Engineering & Applied Sciences.

During graduate school, he worked as an assistant at the Kearns Center, conducting research to be used in grant proposals for educational programs. “Being able to see things behind the scenes gave me a better appreciation for how much hard work and effort the center puts forth in trying to address students’ needs,” he says. “I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to give back.”

## ◀ Optical Scientist

Uncertain during his freshman year about whether to keep biology as a major, **Sean Rodrigues** '12 talked over his interests with Nick Valentino, the Kearns Center’s assistant director for college programs, and wound up switching to chemical engineering as a sophomore. That year, when Rodrigues debated whether to return home to Massachusetts to help raise his younger sister, Valentino stayed by his side, encouraging him to stick with his studies and support his family in other ways.

“I was always a motivated student, but Nick helped push me along the way when I’d have a rough week,” says Rodrigues, who’s working toward his master’s degree and PhD in electrical and computer engineering at the Georgia Institute of Technology. “He was always behind me, even when I didn’t think I had the confidence, saying, ‘Give it a shot. Just try.’ He kept me accountable.”

Through the Kearns Center, Rodrigues became a Kearns Scholar

as a freshman, a McNair Scholar as a sophomore, and a Xerox Engineering Research Fellow as a junior. Financial support that accompanied those designations—allowing him to cover housing and meal costs without acquiring extra sources of debt—aided his ability to accept summer opportunities, which included conducting research on membranes that have applications for fuel cells. “I probably wouldn’t have gotten my foot in the door with that first chemical research position without the Kearns Center, and I just kept getting into more programs from there,” he says. “It was an incredible resource.”

Now working on nonlinear optics and plasmonics, Rodrigues, recently awarded a three-year stipend from the National Science Foundation’s Graduate Research Fellowship Program, hopes someday to become a professor at a research institute.

“Nick still contacts me to see how I’m doing,” he says. “He keeps me actively engaged in the community.”





## Digital Analyst

Before participating in the Kearns Center's Upward Bound Math/ Science Program, **Jazmyn Haywood** was extremely shy and unable to express herself freely.

"The staff found a way to get me out of my shell," she says. "I was also surrounded by students with the same goals and aspirations, which encouraged me to develop the social skills I needed to become a more confident person."

Haywood saw a flyer for Upward Bound as a junior at Rochester's Joseph C. Wilson Magnet High School.

"I knew I wanted to go to college but probably didn't have all the necessary tools," she says. "It seemed like a great opportunity."

Upward Bound advisors helped her mom and grandparents locate scholarships, understand the financial aid process, and fill out application forms to colleges and universities that Haywood thought were "probably out of my reach."

For her personal statement, they helped her feel comfortable sharing her desire to make her grandfather proud. They routinely checked in on her once she got into Clarkson University in Potsdam, N.Y., and

**UPWARD BOUND: Participating in the Kearns Center's Upward Bound programs at Rochester's Wilson High School convinced Haywood that she could succeed in college. She earned her degree from Clarkson University in Potsdam, N.Y.**

they wrote a recommendation letter that helped her study abroad in England during her junior year. She earned a bachelor's degree in digital arts and sciences from Clarkson in 2013.

As an Upward Bound program assistant for two summers while in college, Haywood helped high school seniors develop their own personal statements and shared her personal experiences at Clarkson University. She hoped to boost self-confidence in students the same way that Upward Bound advisors had done for her.

These days, Haywood works as a digital analyst for an internet marketing company in Buffalo. Her goal is to continue developing her social skills and land a management position one day.

"I am very thankful to have been a part of Upward Bound," she says. The people there "are like my second family. It's a lifelong connection."



## Psychological Studies

**Jarrett Hannah '14** grew up listening to his mother tell him he was going to college—but that he would need a scholarship to limit the financial burden.

He was able to make that happen through the Kearns Center, becoming a Kearns Scholar as a freshman and a McNair Scholar as a sophomore.

“For the McNair Program, I was basically told it was for hotshot scientists across the country, and that I should be one of the unexpected people to succeed despite whatever obstacles were in my way,” says the double major in psychology and brain and cognitive sciences.

“I never got any special attention in high school, and it was really cool for me to come here and have people understand that I didn’t have the easiest upbringing.”

During the summer between his sophomore and junior years, Hannah worked with Miron Zuckerman, professor of psychology, on a project to explore whether specially designed computer technology could help people increase their self-control.

“That experience was more than just a position for me,” says Hannah, who went on to work last summer at a research lab at the University of Toronto.

There, he studied neurophysiology and neural functioning, areas of psychology that he hopes to research further in graduate school.

If everything goes as planned, he’ll be earning a PhD—and he says he has the Kearns Center in large part to thank for that.

“One of the reasons I still have my ambitions,” he says, “is because I’ve been pushed to do the best that I can at this University.”

**KEARNS SCHOLAR:** While working with faculty on research projects as a Kearns and McNair Scholar, Hannah realized that he wanted to become a psychology researcher.



(Continued from page 26) Orlando Taylor, the president of the Washington, D.C., campus of the Chicago School of Professional Psychology, highlighted her success in mentoring future leaders in STEM fields: “[Olivares] is known throughout the McNair community as one of the nation’s leading mentors of underrepresented undergraduate students.”

Olivares says she and her staff have recognized that fostering the idea among young people that a college education is attainable requires a long-term engagement, what she calls “intensive services” about how to get into college, how college works, and the requirements for success.


As part of that effort, the center has expanded its programs to include children in the Rochester City School District, establishing college-readiness programs for children from kindergarten through 12th grade.

Through two federally funded Upward Bound programs, as well as drop-in centers at area high schools, younger students get an early look at what goes into earning a college diploma. About 150 undergraduates each year serve as tutors and mentors for the programs.

As the holder of a doctorate in English literature, Olivares knows that each student has a compelling story to tell about his or her hopes and ambitions when given the chance to talk about the future. “In the communities that many of our students come from, being academically smart is not seen as a marker of success,” she says. “It’s something to be mocked or hidden. We’re that safe space. We say, ‘It’s OK to be smart,’ and ‘No one will hurt you for wanting to do something different.’ We want students to blossom into who it is they’re meant to be.”

Anthony Plonczynski '06, '08W (MS), the center’s associate director, says one of the keys to the center’s success is the attention the staff pays to thinking about students’ lives both inside and outside the classroom. That sometimes means being life coaches as well as academic advisors, he says, noting that staff members often offer support to students during emotional and social interruptions that interfere with their academic lives.

Identifying those needs, and thinking creatively about how to address them, is a hallmark of the Kearns Center, says Olivares.

Says Plonczynski: “We want to be a sanctuary for students. We take this calling very seriously. We’re family.” 

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*Robin L. Flanigan is a Rochester-based freelance writer.*



**UPWARD BOUND:** “I found out who I was,” Monroe says of her experience in working with the Kearns Center’s Upward Bound programs at Rochester’s East High School. “I hope to be a leader for life.”



## Industrial Hygienist

**Tyler Nicholas** '12 opened himself to new career possibilities after hearing Kearns Center alumni talk about their graduate school experiences.

"They made me realize what I wanted to do after graduation, and that was to go to graduate school instead of medical school, which was my original plan," says Nicholas, who became a Kearns Scholar as a sophomore and a McNair Scholar as a junior. "The Kearns Center helped me figure out what I was interested in, and how to tailor my education to that."

Interested in environmental health after a class in epidemiology, Nicholas received help finding a yearlong research position in a toxicology lab at the Medical Center's Department of Environmental Medicine. He landed a subsequent research position in the department's exposure assessment lab.

Stressed out while applying to graduate school, Nicholas often retreated to the Kearns Center, where "there was always food and someone to talk to about anything."

**KEARNS SCHOLAR: With the guidance of Kearns Center staff, Nicholas undertook research on mercury's effects on child development, leading to his graduate school interests.**

Prompted by staff members, he presented research on the effect of mercury on child development at two conferences as a senior.

"I didn't realize at the time how important it was to have that experience," he says.

With a degree in environmental science, Nicholas is now pursuing a master's degree in environmental health at the University of Washington's School of Public Health, with the intention of earning a PhD in environmental and occupational health and, eventually, getting a job as an industrial hygienist. He hopes to focus on the growing nanotechnology industry.

"I never would've ended up in research if it weren't for the Kearns Center," he says. "Now I actually get to see the results of my research take form and potentially improve thousands of lives. It's pretty astounding."

## ◀ Rising Senior

**Imani Monroe** is upfront about her "rough background." Growing up in an unsupportive home, while dealing with identity issues stemming from her adoption, she feels as if she has had to raise herself.

The senior at East High School in Rochester credits her four-year involvement with the Upward Bound program with opening doors she didn't realize were accessible to someone like her.

The Upward Bound staff, she says, provided the support she needed when her grades drastically slipped last year, when she wondered whether depression and stress would cause her to be "another student who failed."

"The people there said, 'We're not going to let that happen. We know you have something in you that drives you, and we want to help pull it out of you.' And I said I was going to fight back and succeed," she recalls. "I want to break those stereotypes, make myself proud, and better my future."

At the end of every marking period (she's consistently on the honor roll), Upward Bound leaders tell Monroe they're proud of her. When she feels she needs extra help in a subject, they provide tutoring. Buoyed by comments that she's an inspiration to others, Monroe joined the program's Student Leadership Council and is serving as president for the 2013-14 school year.

Her Kearns Center connections led to an internship this past summer with an asthma study team at the Medical Center, an experience she says gave her great insight into both medical research and working in an office setting.

Monroe plans to become a detective to provide protection and justice for others.

"With Upward Bound, I found out who I was," she says. "I feel like with the support that was given to me, I should pay it forward. I hope to be a leader for life."



# SEEKING εὐδαιμονία EUDAIMONIA

How do we develop good character?  
Philosophers and social scientists are teaming  
up—and turning to Aristotle for guidance.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

**A**T A TIME WHEN THE PHRASE “ANCIENT history” is a common pejorative, you’d be forgiven if you didn’t know that we are living in an age of Aristotle.

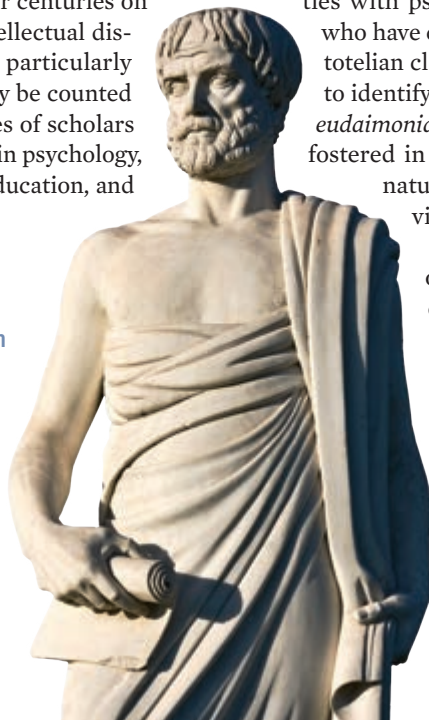
But interest in the Athenian sage, who lived and worked more than two millennia ago, has been an identifiable and enduring feature of the intellectual landscape of multiple disciplines for at least the last three decades. After centuries on the sidelines of secular intellectual discourse, Aristotelian ideas, particularly about ethics, can reasonably be counted as among the key influences of scholars not only in philosophy, but in psychology, development economics, education, and the law.

**NEO-ARISTOTELIAN:** Curren says the revival of interest in Aristotle in the past several years is “remarkable,” and well suited to addressing many of the problems of our age.

“It’s remarkable,” says Randall Curren, chair of Rochester’s philosophy department.

A scholar of Aristotelian ethics, Curren has crossed disciplines through much of his career. Although his primary appointment is in the School of Arts & Sciences, he’s had a joint appointment at the Warner School of Education since his arrival at Rochester in 1988. Since then he’s forged ties with psychologists studying well-being, who have carried out empirical tests of Aristotelian claims. He’s worked with educators to identify ways in which Aristotle’s ideal of *eudaimonia* or “human flourishing” might be fostered in schools. He’s joined forces with natural scientists concerned with environmental sustainability.

And although he hasn’t developed any formal ties with economists, he’s heartened by the influence of Aristotelian ethics in development economics. Capability theory, a new paradigm of human well-being developed in the 1980s by Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen







and University of Chicago philosopher and law professor Martha Nussbaum, is associated with a new United Nations metric for international development efforts that takes into account non-monetary indicators. “Capability theory is self-consciously Aristotelian,” says Curren. “When people like Amartya Sen start adopting these ideas, it really is the age of Aristotle in some very interesting ways. There’s no doubt about it. Aristotle’s got legs.”

The focus of Aristotle’s theory of ethics was the nature of a good life, the role of virtues in living a good life, and how civic institutions might be designed to enable human beings to work toward that ideal. *Eudaimonia* was the Greek term for living well—or living a flourishing life, as it’s been translated in English—and its essence was fulfilling one’s human potential well.

Fulfilling one’s potential well required virtue—at least two kinds of virtue, in fact. There were intellectual virtues, such as the capacity for knowledge and reason, and there were moral virtues such as courage, honesty, and self-restraint, among others.

Aristotle argued that moral virtues, like any virtues, were obtained through guided practice. And a further, and arguably most challenging aspect of Aristotle’s ethics, was that in order for individuals to develop moral virtues, civic institutions, including schools, had to be designed to foster their practice. Individuals didn’t develop moral virtues on their own, but rather, through social interaction. Therefore, developing moral virtues was a civic enterprise.

At first glance, this might all sound rather high-minded. But Curren’s expertise in Aristotelian ethics has been in wide demand, and far outside the confines of academic conferences.

**C**URREN HAS BECOME A KEY FIGURE IN THE ARISTOTELIAN revival for his work on character education. Character education—some of it Aristotelian, some not—gained traction in the United States in the 1990s. President Bill Clinton sponsored a series of White House conferences on the subject that brought together educators, researchers, and leading proponents of character education. Curren, a delegate to two of those conferences, consulted widely in the Rochester area in the mid-1990s as multiple area school districts began to craft character education programs.

In the last year, he’s taken on his biggest role in character education yet—in the United Kingdom. In November 2012, Kristján Kristjánsson, a leading scholar in Aristotelian ethics now at the University of Birmingham, asked Curren to take the position of chair of moral and virtue education at a new research center housed in Birmingham’s education school: the Jubilee Centre for Character and Values.

A so-called “fractional appointment,” it was designed to be compatible with his full-time role at Rochester. It would also be a joint appointment with the Royal Institute of Philosophy, an institution founded in the 1920s by Bertrand Russell with the intention of bringing the best work in philosophy before the public.

In his role at the Jubilee Centre, which began in May 2013, Curren offers intellectual leadership, through contributions to proposals, speaking engagements, and consultation with a group of resident scholars in disciplines such as psychology, education, and the law. Their work involves researching successful models for character education, and exploring how ethical values inform decision making in a variety of the professions.

Curren was formally inaugurated in his professorship at the Royal Institute of Philosophy, the first in its history, in January. A



conference based on his work culminated in his keynote, “Meaning, Motivation, and the Good.” In the fall, he’ll lecture across Britain.

The Jubilee Centre emerged at a fraught time, in the aftermath of a spate of rioting in August 2011. The riots began in an impoverished neighborhood in London, after a police officer shot and killed a 29-year-old man, father to four children. Rioting spread throughout London, and to other cities, including Birmingham. It generated national soul searching, followed by the appointment of a commission, a study, and a final report with recommendations.

The commission noted Britain’s high levels of unemployment, feelings of hopelessness among many youths, and called for multiple improvements in the delivery of social services. But the report also noted the “strong potential” of educational programs “designed to help children build resilience and self-confidence as part of normal school life.” These “character education” programs, commissioners concluded, should be further studied and expanded nationally.

Curren concedes that character education can appeal to those concerned about rising levels of “hooliganism.” But the primary funder of the Jubilee Centre, the John Templeton Foundation, has been pouring resources into research in psychology and philosophy that has pointed toward more complex, less direct, and less



immediate solutions to social upheaval than the critics of Britain's young ruffians might imagine.

With Kristjánsson as its deputy director, the center would have an Aristotelian bent from the start. And for the research chair in moral and virtue education, the center looked for someone with a similar orientation.

"We were looking for someone who was at once an established figure in mainstream philosophy and a big name in philosophy of education," says Kristjánsson. "We also wanted someone with a naturalistic, broadly virtue ethical approach to character education."

"I'm completely on board with the mission of the Jubilee Centre," says Curren. "But I don't come to it assuming it's a simple matter of people being unethical, and that there would never be riots again if there were adequate character education in the schools. That would be a very un-Aristotelian point of view."

The phrases "character education," and even more so, "moral education," can be off-putting to some, Curren notes. "It can sound heavy-handed and didactic. People who are understandably

skittish about moral education, who worry that it's going to be indoctrinating—they have an image of it as a heavy-handed thing."

But in his work with schools, Curren has seen the controversy dissipate when stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and administrators get together to define and list values and virtues. "It's

about common morality," he says. "When you have public processes to define those lists, there's a lot of convergence, across the political spectrum, among people with very different experiences. They converge on short lists of traits that are just, without controversy, traits that everybody wants their kids to have. And everybody at least intuitively understands that their lives are not going to go very well if they don't have these traits."

From the Jubilee Centre, researchers have fanned across Britain, interviewing teachers and students at a wide range of schools. They've asked about character education programs currently in place, attempting to find out from teachers what they believe their role should be; and from students how various aspects of their education might help or hinder their attempts not only to develop various virtues, but also to define them in the

**OFFICE HOURS:** Chair of the philosophy department in Arts & Sciences and a faculty member at the Warner School, Curren meets with Warner master's student Jenna Tomaselo and philosophy doctoral student James Otis.





first place. The aim? To improve character education in the interest of the “flourishing pupil.”

A genuinely Aristotelian character education assumes that a particular virtue, like any skill, can be learned through practice. Practice begins by offering students a basic vocabulary—often a list of virtues they define through discussion—that reflect traits they admire, that they’d want their friends to have, that they’d like to have themselves. From there, it’s a matter of dialogue to determine how to interpret and apply virtues in various real-life situations.

“Many of us who come out of Aristotelian ethics use analogies like learning to play a musical instrument,” Curren says. “Initially,

**ACROSS THE POND:** In London last January, Curren addressed the Royal Institute of Philosophy, as the 89-year-old institute’s first honorary professor. He’ll lecture throughout Britain this fall.

bidden yet brisk,” Curren writes, and as it turned out, his math teacher responded by offering him the chance to design and teach the course’s unit on the slide rule, and to design and grade the unit exam.

Studying philosophy at his local college, the University of New Orleans, he moved on to graduate school at the University of Pittsburgh, where the philosophy department is internationally

you practice with a lot of guidance. But the goal, in developing virtues of character as in musicianship, is for the student to learn to guide her own practice.”

That involves developing a vocabulary as to what constitutes good playing, as well as learning to carry out multiple tasks at once. There’s producing the sound, but also listening, and then responding to what you hear, as you play. “You need to listen for the right things,” says Curren, “and to want to get better.”

Curren discovered philosophy at a young age. He says he was attracted to logical systems and explanations. He spent his lunch money on philosophy books. It was a respite from everyday life, but life, its messiest and darkest aspects, were ever present for Curren. The life of the mind is often considered a luxury, but Curren may be a case in point that people can pursue a life of the mind under difficult circumstances. When Curren was eight, his mother committed suicide, leaving him and two brothers in the care of his father, who, like his mother, suffered from mental illness. “Having been taught little by my parents and left to ripen in Rousseau’s garden as I might, I had also enjoyed more than a little freedom to explore, invent, and pursue my interests as I pleased,” he writes in a forthcoming autobiographical essay. Libraries and bookstores, he found, were “well-ordered spaces to make my own.”

He devoured works by Bertrand Russell, David Hume, and many others. He also began reading works in psychology, starting with R. D. Laing’s *Sanity, Madness, and the Family*. He took out a subscription to *Psychology Today*.

By the end of high school, he’d developed his lifelong interest in the philosophy of education—as well as his signature tendency to seek practical applications of philosophical ideas. In an underground newspaper he founded with friends, he penned a critique of his school’s testing practices based on the ideas of the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, who posited three stages of learning, in which mastery of details was only one stage—the second—between inspiration and achievement of real understanding. Sales of the paper were “for-

distinguished for work in the philosophy of science. He pursued a wide range of interests, but gradually came to focus on the issue that would animate his career: the role of communities—Curren would say the responsibility of communities—in the formative development of children.

**A**N ARISTOTELIAN REVIVAL WAS WELL UNDER WAY BY the time Curren finished graduate school in 1985. “Debates in moral theory were getting a bit stale,” he says. An essay called “Modern Moral Philosophy,” by the British philosopher G. E. M. Anscombe laid out the problems, and her critique became enormously influential.

Moral philosophy should be “laid aside,” she wrote, starkly, “until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking.”

One by one, she struck down each of the most influential thinkers on ethics in the modern Western tradition. What all of them shared was a reliance on a duty-based notion of ethics, without reference to any authority, foundation, or reference point.

“When you’re trying to get people to respect moral tenets, there’s a long tradition of claiming divine sourcing of the norms,” Curren says. “The Greeks thought the laws were handed to their kings on stone tablets by Zeus. It’s the story of Moses. They all told that story.” Secular philosophers jettisoned the divine, but proceeded with concepts based on religious assumptions, Anscombe argued.

What Aristotle addressed, that no one else in the Western tradition had, according to Anscombe, were psychological factors such as intention and motivation. Her article helped to reignite interest in Aristotle among philosophers, and to pave the way for interdisciplinary work with psychologists.

Curren began to explore connections between Aristotelian ethics and modern theories of motivation when he arrived at Rochester. Here were the psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, founders of an influential theory of motivation called self-determination theory.

In a 1985 book *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior*, Deci and Ryan identified basic human needs to develop our capacities, act according to our own will, and connect to others and to our social environment. Based on their preliminary research, they set forth three basic psychological needs—for autonomy, competence, and relatedness—necessary to develop the deepest engagement with life and greatest feelings of well-being.

“It’s enormously gratifying to me to actually be working with them,” Curren says about the collaboration with Deci and Ryan that developed over many years. It began with informal conversations about shared interests. Then, in 2007, they organized an interdisciplinary lecture series on happiness through the Humanities Project, an initiative begun by President Joel Seligman to foster discussion on campus regarding important humanistic questions.

Ryan had long harbored an interest in philosophy—he’d even majored in the subject in college. And when it comes to Aristotle, “my interest is longstanding,” he says.

In 2001, he and Deci first explicitly tied their work in self-determination theory to the Aristotelian idea of *eudaimonia* in an article, “On Happiness and Human Potentials.” The article responded to psychologists who were seeking the roots of happiness, which they defined, broadly speaking, as the attainment of pleasure and avoidance of pain. They declared self-determination theory *eudaimonic*, and the happiness-based approach to human well-being, *hedonic*.

Aristotle contrasted a *eudaimonic* life that fulfills human

potentialities well, with lives devoted to wealth-seeking, status-seeking, and amusement. He postulated that riches and status were not sufficient for living well, and even detracted from it.

“As we pursued this connection,” Ryan says, “we saw that *eudaimonic* thinking offers many testable empirical hypotheses.” In collaboration with Curren, their research began delving further into the connections between virtue and fulfillment.

Last year, the three coauthored “What Humans Need: Flourishing in Aristotelian Philosophy and Self-Determination Theory.” Empirical psychological research concluded that across cultures, among both genders, and in a variety of age categories, people who pursued intrinsic aspirations, including contributions to their communities, close relationships, and autonomous pursuit of personal interests, reported higher measures of happiness and well-being than those whose successes were in extrinsic aspirations such as wealth, fame, and appearance.

It might sound like a truism. Who hasn’t been told that “money can’t buy happiness”? Or, for that matter, love? But how well do contemporary institutions reflect those adages?

Not much, the authors concluded. “There are strong global economic and social forces fostering consumptive, materialistic lifestyles and selfishly focused value priorities,” they wrote. And those forces have resulted, at least in part, from a philosophical tradition, forming the basis of much mainstream economic thought, that assumed “an inherent selfishness and self-interested calculus to all interactions—views that we regard as without foundation in evolutionary science.”


If you accept the arguments of Curren, Deci, and Ryan, then redesigning institutions to foster *eudaimonia* is a tall order. But, Curren maintains, “it’s entirely possible if one pays attention to what humans actually need.”

**T**HE CHALLENGE WAS STEEP FOR ARISTOTLE AS WELL. HE lived in the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War, which had cost both Athens and Sparta dearly.

Both states had been exceptionally stable by the standards of their world. What set them apart was that they were successful conquest states. The Athenians relied on their colonies to relieve the poverty and conflict that toppled governments elsewhere. Many of their poor were sent off to colonies, and the conquered populations provided a tax base to subsidize the poor who remained in Athens.

“With conquest no longer possible after the Peloponnesian War, the question of how to live well without the spoils of conquest was a matter of intense philosophical interest,” Curren says. “Critiques of greed and injustice were common.”

Athenian social harmony, in other words, had rested on an insecure foundation. Curren fears 21st-century social harmony, resting on the promise of unending economic growth, is on a similarly unstable footing. When he began to consider the problem of sustainability in a world of declining ecological capacity and rapid population growth, “it struck me that what the Greek moralists were struggling with, is something that we’re actually struggling with, though we don’t fully understand it yet. Which is that we’re going to have to figure out what the alternatives are to endless economic growth as a basis for having any semblance of social tranquility.”

Nonetheless, Curren sees reason to be hopeful. “The good news, if Aristotle is right, is that moderation in wealth—as in everything—is enough.” 



WHAT'S  
YOUR  
*love*  
STORY?



## Rochester research finds that talking with your spouse about movies may increase your odds of finding your own happy ending.

**C**AIT POWALSKI '08, '11M (MPH) ADMITS THAT HER husband, Will Chesebro '09, '10W (MS), doesn't like it when she asks questions while they watch movies at home.

But during a wintry night in February, the couple made a point of having a conversation as they streamed *Indecent Proposal*, a 1993 movie starring Demi Moore and Woody Harrelson. In the film, a financier played by Robert Redford offers the fictional couple \$1 million if he can sleep with Moore's character.

The movie makes a point of putting the couple in an emotionally wrought situation, one designed to test their relationship by pushing hard on some hot marital buttons—fidelity, trust, honesty, ambition, money.

Prompted by a 12-question guide designed by Rochester psychologists, Powalski and Chesebro discussed the fictional couple's relationship—how they interacted, how they communicated, and how they treated one another—a conversation that took place during the movie and for a good 30 minutes afterward.

"I think it reaffirmed that we communicate a lot," says Powalski, noting that while the movie brought up some touchy subjects, she and Chesebro were in agreement

about how they handle the sometimes tense situations that crop up for newlyweds. And although it was "a little bit weird" to watch a movie as a way to think about their relationship, she and Chesebro agree that the experience was an intriguing way to jump-start conversations about marriage. "It was really worthwhile in thinking about our relationship and relationships in general," Powalski says.

Could date night some day turn into marriage therapy night?

While the answer to that will take a few sequels, an innovative study by Rochester researchers and colleagues at UCLA is finding that giving couples some direction on how to watch movies together may be a powerful tool for marriage counselors.

Led by Ronald Rogge, associate professor of psychology at Rochester, and Thomas Bradbury, professor of psychology and codirector of the Relationship Institute at UCLA, the researchers found that a relatively simple program of watching a handful of movies and talking about them over the course of a month was as effective in reducing the divorce rate for young couples as more intensive, workshop-oriented programs.

"We thought the movie treatment would help, but not

**KISS & TELL: Can having focused discussions about movies like *Love Story* (opposite) help reduce the likelihood of divorce for young couples?**

*By Scott Hauser*





**SCREEN TIME:** Using onscreen relationships to prompt discussions between real-life couples, the Rochester study features a star-studded list, including *Terms of Endearment* (top), *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* (middle, left), *Barefoot in the Park* (middle, right), *Love Jones* (bottom), and *A Star Is Born* (right).



nearly as much as the other programs in which we were teaching all of these state-of-the-art skills,” says Rogge, the lead author of the study. “The results suggest that husbands and wives have a pretty good sense of what they might be doing right and wrong in their relationships.

“You might not need to teach them a whole lot of skills to cut the divorce rate. You might just need to get them to think about how they are currently behaving. And for five movies to give us a benefit over three years—that is awesome.”

Involving 174 couples and published in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, the study is one of the first long-term investigations to compare different types of early marriage education programs. In addition to the group that watched movies, one group of couples worked with trained counselors to learn how to better identify areas of friendship, agreement, and conflict, while another attended sessions on how to be more empathetic and work better as a team.

**O**VERALL, COUPLES USING THE MOVIE-AND-TALK APPROACH had divorce rates of about 11 percent after three years, comparable to those in the traditional, educator-led programs, but less than half the 24 percent divorce rate of a group that completed none of the programs.

Scott Stanley, a research professor and codirector of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver, says the study has important findings for people in the field.

“What’s nice about the study is that it raises important issues to grapple with in terms of the nature of what you do and the nature of what people respond to—and perhaps how they change,” says Stanley, who was not involved in the study. “It raises good questions, and it shows the importance of working with different strategies.”

With roughly half of all marriages in the United State ending in divorce, the researchers set out to test the underpinnings of many marriage education programs: whether couples will weather the friction of living together better if they can master certain relationship skills.

“When we started this study, the prevailing wisdom was that the best way to keep relationships healthy and strong was to help couples manage difficult, potentially divisive conversations,” says Bradbury.

The team randomly assigned newlyweds to one of three groups: one took part in a long-standing marital education program known as PREP; one participated in a new program designed by Rogge and his colleagues; and the third were enrolled in the cohort that used

**Overall, couples using the movie-and-talk approach had divorce rates of about 11 percent after three years, comparable to those in the traditional, therapist-led programs, but less than half the 24 percent divorce rate of a group that completed none of the programs.**



movies to become more aware of the dynamics of their relationships. The study concentrated on the first three years of marriage, because “relationship dissolution is front-ended,” says Bradbury; one in four ends in divorce.

The PREP group learned ways to communicate more effectively, learned conflict management techniques, and were given strategies to preserve positives aspects of their lives together. Earlier studies have shown the program to be effective at promoting happier and more satisfying relationships over three to five years.

The compassion and acceptance training cohort participated in an intervention designed by Rogge and his collaborators aimed at helping couples work together as a team to find common ground around their similarities. Couples were encouraged through a series of lectures and exercises to approach their relationships with more compassion by doing things like listening as a friend, practicing spontaneous acts of kindness and affection, and using the language of acceptance.

Both programs involved weekly lectures, supervised practice sessions, and homework assignments over the course of a month, for a total investment of roughly 20 hours, all but two of which were with a trained facilitator.

By contrast, the movie-and-talk group devoted half as much time to their assignments and all but four hours took place in their own homes. Participants attended a 10-minute lecture on the

importance of relationship awareness and how watching couples in movies could help spouses pay attention to their own behavior. They then watched *Two for the Road*, a 1967 romantic comedy about the joys and strains of young love, infidelity, and professional pressures across 12 years of a marriage. Afterward, each couple met separately to discuss a list of 12 questions designed to explore both constructive and destructive examples of behavior that the onscreen couples engaged in.

They chose from a list of 47 movies featuring intimate relationships as a major plot focus and were asked to watch one a week for a month, followed by the same guided discussion for about 45 minutes.

Karla Hatley, a doctoral student in higher education administration at the Warner School, and her husband, Jonathan, say they found the process “eye-opening.” As with Powalski and Chesebro, the two were not enrolled in the study, but they completed the first assignment in the program, which was to watch a movie and then discuss it based on the questions devised by the researchers.

The Hatleys, who were married in 2010, watched *Love Jones*, a 1997 movie starring Larenz Tate and Nia Long about a Chicago couple who wind through an emotionally charged relationship. It is, Karla notes, one of her favorite movies, but watching it with the intention of having a focused discussion made her realize that the fictional couple’s relationship mirrored hers and Jonathan’s in ways she hadn’t thought about but that were helpful to discuss.

**HOME THEATER: Karla and Jonathan Hatley say they found the experience of discussing one of Karla’s favorite movies, *Love Jones*, “eye-opening” because they realized that their real-life relationship mirrors some of the behaviors portrayed in the movie.**



# Can Movies Help Your Love Connection?

Rochester researchers are developing the idea that movies featuring relationships can prompt important discussions about the dynamics of real-life couples. Tools to guide couples through the process are available at <http://couples-research.com>.

## Movies in the Study

Couples were asked to watch one movie a week and then discuss it for about 45 minutes.

*A Star Is Born*  
*Adam's Rib*  
*Anna Karenina*  
*As Good As It Gets*  
*Barefoot in the Park*  
*Children of a Lesser God*  
*Days of Wine and Roses*  
*Desk Set*  
*Dying Young*  
*Fools Rush In*  
*Forget Paris*  
*French Twist*  
*Funny Girl*  
*Gone with the Wind*  
*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*  
*Hanover Street*  
*Husbands and Wives*  
*Indecent Proposal*  
*Jungle Fever*  
*Love Jones*  
*Love Story*  
*Made for Each Other*  
*Mississippi Masala*  
*Move Over, Darling*  
*Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*  
*My Favorite Wife*  
*Nina Takes a Lover*  
*Nine Months*  
*On Golden Pond*  
*Pat and Mike*  
*Penny Serenade*  
*Pfft!*  
*Red Firecracker, Green Firecracker*  
*She's Having a Baby*  
*Steel Magnolias*  
*Terms of Endearment*  
*The Devil's Advocate*  
*The Egg and I*  
*The Male Animal*  
*The Out of Towners*  
*The Thin Man*  
*The Way We Were*  
*Untamed Heart*  
*When a Man Loves a Woman*  
*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*  
*With Six You Get Eggroll*  
*Yours, Mine and Ours*



## Sample Questions

The couples used a guide featuring questions designed to elicit discussion about their own relationships. Here's a sample of some of the questions:

**What was the main relationship portrayed in the movie?** This is the relationship that you will focus on in the following questions.

**What main problem(s) did this couple face?** Are any of these similar to the problems that the two of you have faced or might face as a couple?

**Did this couple strive to understand each other?** Did they tend to accept one another, even if they were very different? Or did the couple tend to attack each others' differences?

**In what way was this relationship similar to or different from your own relationship in this area?**

**Did the couple have a strong friendship with each other?** Were they able to support each other through bad moods, stressful days, and hard times? Did they listen to each other like good friends? Did the couple in the movie do considerate or affectionate things for each other?

**How did the couple handle arguments or differences of opinion?** Were they able to open up and tell each other how they really felt, or did they tend to just snap at each other with anger? Did they try using humor to keep things from getting nasty? Did it feel like they were really trying to understand each other?

**If the couple got into arguments, did they tend to become heated?** Did the couple ever start attacking each other, getting increasingly mean and hostile? Did they end up saying things they didn't really mean? Once this started happening, how did the arguments tend to end?

**When one of the partners brought up a problem, did he or she seem to do it in a constructive way** (keeping things specific, explaining his or her feelings without attacking), or did it seem more like an attack? Did it seem like bringing up a problem became an assassination of the partner's character?

**How did the couple in the movie handle hurt feelings?** Did they apologize to each other? Did the apologies seem sincere? Did they tend to jump to negative conclusions when their feelings got hurt, or did they tend to give each other the benefit of the doubt?

**Did the partners seem to have similar expectations of their relationship?** Where did their expectations differ? Did it seem like they were aware of their own expectations? Were their expectations reasonable? Did they share their expectations with each other?

**“The sad truth is that when life knocks you down, you come home and the people you are most likely to lash out at in frustration are the ones you love the most. For these couples to stop and look and say, ‘You know, I have yelled at you like that before. I have called you names before and that’s not nice. That’s not what I want to do to the person I love the most.’ Just that insight alone, is likely what makes this intervention work.”**—*Ronald Rogge, associate professor of psychology*

In particular, the characters take a long time to realize that they were undermining their relationship by failing to admit that they could be headstrong.

“They let their pride get in the way,” Hatley says. “That mirrored us as well. Pride sometimes gets in the way, and neither one of us wants to be the first to say, ‘I’m sorry.’”

One of the questions in the program asks whether the partners approach problems constructively or “Did it seem like bringing up a problem became an assassination of the partner’s character?”

“We both do that to some degree,” Jonathan says. “We start off trying to build each other up, but it ends up being an assassination. It definitely opened our eyes.”

Rogge hopes that such self-directed reflection can open new possibilities for nurturing nuptial ties on a broader scale.

“It’s incredibly portable,” he says of the movie-and-talk approach. “There are really great marriage education programs available now but most require facilitators trained in a particular program to administer them. If couples can do this on their own, it makes it much easier to help them,” he says.

The results suggest that many couples already possess relationship skills, they just need reminders to put these into practice, the authors conclude. “And that’s an amazingly fertile idea. It’s more sensible and it’s cheaper,” says Bradbury.

**T**HE RESEARCHERS NOTE THAT RELIGIOUS GROUPS HAVE long-standing traditions of offering marriage preparation classes, initiatives that secular institutions are beginning to experiment with in efforts to reduce the likelihood of marital separation. For example, Fairfax County, Va., offers free “compassion training” to newlyweds, the U.S. military has an “oxygen for your relationships” program, and Oklahoma, home to one of the nation’s highest divorce rates, has poured millions into a “marriage initiative.”

Chesebro says that he and Powalski learned the lessons of communication early in their lives together. After they met on the River Campus in 2007, they were regularly separated by jobs and post-graduation pursuits that took them to different cities—and at times, different countries—before their marriage in 2012. They were struck by how in tune they were when they enrolled in a Pre-Cana workshop, the Roman Catholic Church’s premarriage counseling program required of couples who want to get married in the Church. The program made clear that couples have to be prepared to address a lot of touchy subjects over the course of a marriage.

“They really force you to talk at Pre-Cana about all aspects of marriage—finances, sex, relationships, everything,” he says, noting that he was surprised at how few of the couples in their group seemed to be able to articulate how they thought about such topics.

“We were like, ‘Oh, this is how we would handle that because we already discussed it,’” Chesebro says. “Pre-Cana was a way to see how we were communicating, and it reinforced that communication was important for relationships to work.”

But he imagines that he and Powalski could find themselves watching movies and having similar discussions in the future.

Rogge says it’s not that movies have a special magic when it comes to helping make relationships last. The goal is to help couples find a relatively easy way to keep important conversations going.

“I think it’s the couples reinvesting in their relationship and taking a cold hard look at their own behavior that makes the difference,” he says. “The sad truth is that when life knocks you down, you come home and the people you are most likely to lash out at in frustration are the ones you love the most. For these couples to stop and look and say, ‘You know, I have yelled at you like that before. I have called you names before and that’s not nice. That’s not what I want to do to the person I love the most.’ Just that insight alone, is likely what makes this intervention work.”

For Denver’s Stanley, the new study underscores that it’s important for couples to think about and talk about their relationships, which isn’t always easy to do. Some will be able to do that on their own through a program like watching movies, but many will need the prompting of a structured program.

“Anybody who’s going to invest the time, you’re going to get some traction in your relationship,” he says. “I haven’t thought for a long time that one approach is likely to be the be-all-and-end-all for all couples. I think this study is a great example that other thoughtful approaches, in fact, seem to work well.”

Rogge says that being able to provide alternatives to couples is important, especially for people who are uncomfortable with relationship workshops and group interventions.

“You might not be able to get your husband into a couples group, especially when you are happy,” says Rogge. “But watching a movie together and having a discussion, that’s not so scary. It’s less pathologizing, less stigmatizing.”

Since some of the newlyweds in the study had been together for as many as seven years, Rogge speculates that the movie method would be helpful for long-term marriages as well.

“Taking time to sit down and take an objective look at your relationship with your partner is going to be helpful for any couple at any stage. They can make it a yearly thing they do around their anniversary—watch a movie together and talk about it. That would be a fantastic thing to do and a great present to give themselves each year.” **B**

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*Susan Hagen, who writes about social sciences for University Communications, contributed to this story.*