

Center *of* Success

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

By Robin L. Flanigan

THE 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.” 

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."