



STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

At 14, He Began his Mission to Treat Autism

Nicholas Page relishes research opportunities at Rutgers

Nicholas Page was just 14 when he started working in the lab of a Rutgers–Robert Wood Johnson Medical School professor.

He landed that gig by simply asking for it. Page was participating in the Brain Bee, a competition for high school students hosted by the Medical School.

"I was mingling with faculty and asking about research opportunities for high school students," he says.

The one who said "yes" was Mladen-Roko Rasin, a professor of neuroscience and cell biology who studies the formation of the brain, and how it is disrupted in diseases such as autism and epilepsy.

"The rest is history," says Page, of Matawan, New Jersey.

Indeed, he is now a **School of Arts and Sciences** junior on a bold mission.

"I want to work on some of the first drug-based treatments for autism," says Page, a cell biology and neuroscience major. "This is one of the hardest problems, but one I think we could solve in my lifetime."

To get a sense of the seriousness with which Page is pursuing his goal, consider how he spends his summers. In 2017 he worked in a University of Pennsylvania lab studying ALS, or Lou Gehrig's Disease. Last summer he worked at UCLA with a leading scholar of autism genetics.

Junior Nicholas Page

“
I love the research-
friendly environment
at Rutgers.
”

"Each summer I travel to labs across the country to learn new techniques and explore my interest in ways that will give me a bigger picture," he says.

Page, the son of a police officer and a special education teacher, always loved science, but initially ruled out biology until Paul Servidio, a science teacher at Matawan Regional High School helped him see the field in a different way.

"I learned that biology is about solving problems," Page says. "Everything I do in the lab is about solving problems, from 'why didn't my experiment work?' to the answer to big questions, such as 'what are the genetic causes of autism?'"

He was deeply influenced by his mother's work educating kids with special needs, and from knowing families who have children with autism.

"It is something I have been exposed to enough to understand its impact, and to know I want to commit my life to finding treatments," he says.

As an undergraduate, he has seized every opportunity for research, sometimes working up to 40 hours a week. He is currently performing experiments in laboratory mice to see how impeding blood flow in embryos could cause neurodevelopmental disorders.

He was selected as a Goldwater scholar by the Barry Goldwater Scholarship and Excellence in Education Foundation last spring, one of the premier undergraduate awards in STEM fields.

"I love the research-friendly environment at Rutgers," he says. "By investing a lot of time in this research, there are no bounds to what we can figure out and how big of an impact we could have."

ROUNDUP

Things You May Not Know about the School of Arts and Sciences

Rutgers University–New Brunswick Recognizes Its Highest Academic Achievers



Elise Zhou wasn't just a good student. She was a stellar one.

The School of Arts and Sciences Honors Program 2018 graduate finished with highest honors in philosophy, a second major in political science, a minor in history, and a 4.0 GPA. As an Eagleton undergraduate associate, she researched the prison system's treatment of recovering addicts.

Zhou was among the 171 graduates honored by President Robert Barchi and Francis Harper Barchi at the reception for the Matthew Leydt Society (pictured at left). Named for the first and only 1774 graduate of Queen's College, the society spotlights top graduates at Rutgers University–New Brunswick and Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences.

"I always chose classes I was genuinely interested in and invested in," Zhou says. "The grades, GPA, and honors are the cherry on top that comes when you do something you love."



Adjacent to the Wright-Reiman Chemistry Complex on the Busch Campus, the new building's front courtyard features *The PhD Molecule*, a 27-foot-tall sculpture by Larry Kirkland comprising a stainless steel depiction of a caffeine molecule on a black granite base representing a blackboard with etched chemistry symbols.

In September, the School of Arts and Sciences celebrated the opening of the new chemistry and chemical biology building, a state-of-the-art facility that provides critically needed teaching, laboratory, and support space enabling our world-renowned faculty to accelerate research in drug design, alternative energy, biomaterials, biophysics, and nanotechnology.

"The Department of Chemistry and Chemical Biology educates thousands of undergraduates and graduate students, and produces research that benefits health, energy, and the environment," says

School of Arts and Sciences Executive Dean Peter March.

"Now the department has a fitting 21st-century home."

Designed with an eye toward collaboration, combining instructional spaces with flexible research spaces and inviting common areas, the building will enhance already excellent teaching and research, says Vice Dean of Research and Graduate Education and Distinguished Professor of Chemistry Jean Baum.

"The new possibilities will attract graduate students and new faculty and bolster our partnership with industry."

THE POWER OF 100 DOUGLASS YEARS

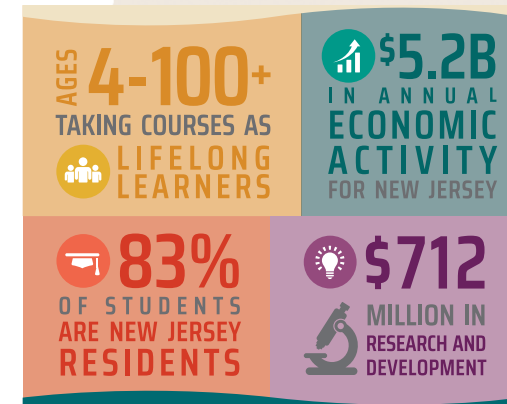
Founded in 1918 as the New Jersey College for Women with 54 students and 12 books in its library, Douglass has grown into a diverse and vibrant community of 2,600 undergraduate women and over 39,000 dedicated alumnae.

The Power of 100 Years: Douglass Centennial Celebration in September featured Deborah Gray White Board of Governors Distinguished Professor of History moderating the Daytime Colloquium exploring the history of Douglass as it pertains to African-American, Jewish, and Puerto Rican students at Douglass and relaunched Campus Night celebrations. Learn more: douglass.rutgers.edu/our-history

Rutgers Delivers

Through teaching, research, health care, and community service—and as an economic engine for the state—Rutgers improves the quality of life for thousands of people every day. Rutgers educates more than 69,000 students each year for the workforce of tomorrow and has prepared more than 500,000 alumni for leadership and success.

Rutgers delivers for the people of New Jersey.



RUTGERS DELIVERS

Practicing Law and Contributing to the Greater Good

Douglass alumna appointed to commission helping Puerto Rico relief

Arianna Mouré was a Rutgers undergraduate who found inspiration and insight in both the classroom and the larger world off campus.

As an aspiring law student, Mouré DC'2006 pursued a double major in political science and criminal justice.

She also gained much wisdom from the Spanish-speaking immigrants she would meet in her part-time jobs around New Brunswick. She listened to their stories and learned about the everyday hardships and injustices they experienced.

"They were extremely vulnerable, and some were being scammed by their employers," Mouré says. "They were afraid to tell anybody, but they were comfortable coming to me."

Mouré explained that those encounters, along with her studies, helped to shape her as an adult and inspire her to become a lawyer. Fittingly, she was asked earlier this year to join a statewide effort to help one of the most vulnerable communities in the world: hurricane-ravaged Puerto Rico. Mouré was appointed by Governor Phil Murphy to New Jersey's Joint Commission on Puerto Rico Disaster Relief. She served alongside prominent clergy, public officials, and corporate executives.

"Here I was, a second-year associate, sitting next to these accomplished professionals," she says. "It was amazing."

But absorbing the details of the devastation from Hurricane Maria was heartbreaking.

"I was deeply saddened to see the lack of humanity afforded to our fellow Americans on the beautiful island of Puerto Rico," she says. "The delay in providing Americans who live in Puerto Rico the basic necessities was inhumane."

The commission issued its report last May, making numerous recommendations for assisting relief efforts in

Puerto Rico as well as helping evacuees in New Jersey. Mouré is committed to continue working to help Puerto Rico, through the commission, the Hispanic Bar Association, and as a private citizen.

"I feel very connected to Puerto Rico," she says. "My parents took me every summer. All of my good memories are tied up in that culture."

Mouré grew up in Long Branch and chose Douglass College to join an all-women community. Coming to a campus as big as Rutgers University was a challenge she relished. She credits the Educational Opportunity Fund with helping her set strategies for success.

"I learned to always sit in the front row and to make sure my professors knew who I was," she says.

"I felt privileged to be at Rutgers, and I took advantage of every opportunity."

After graduating, she decided she needed real world experience. So, she worked as a sales representative for several major pharmaceutical firms.

"The pharmaceutical companies train their people very well," Mouré says. "I couldn't imagine having the amount of responsibility I have today serving my clients without the skills I developed in the business world."

A graduate of Seton Hall School of Law, she works for the firm Day Pitney where she handles a wide range of cases involving labor, employment, and education law.

As she reflects on her past and considers her future, Mouré says that contributing to the public good is always foremost in her mind.

"I want to make a positive contribution to society," she says. "I want to give back to the community that made me who I am."

ALUMNI PROFILE

Arianna Mouré DC'06



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THREE DECADES OF HELPING STUDENTS SUCCEED IN STEM

A conversation with Kamal Khan, director of the Office for Diversity and Academic Success in the Sciences

In 1986, two Rutgers faculty members, Kamal Khan and Francine Essien, started an academic support program for disadvantaged and underrepresented students. Today, that program is called ODASIS, the Office for Diversity and Academic Success in the Sciences, and is recognized universitywide and beyond for its work preparing students for STEM professions. It has a staff of eight full-time employees and serves more than 1,000 students every year with a myriad of programs that begin at the high school level.

In the interview below, Khan, the longtime director, discusses how ODASIS got started and why it has been so successful.

Q: Where did you grow up, and what is your educational background?

A: I was born and raised in Trinidad and in 1973 I had the opportunity to spend the summer with my uncle and his family in New Jersey. He was a family physician in Camden and a great mentor in my life. I finished high school in Cherry Hill and continued at Rutgers for my undergraduate and graduate degree. I ultimately went on to receive my doctorate degree.

Q: What inspired your commitment to helping students from underrepresented backgrounds?

A: When I was a graduate student at Rutgers, I was an instructor in the sciences. I found that when you combine personal commitment and a regimented study method, the result was always success!

Q: Is that the ODASIS approach?

A: Yes, our unique program is to take each student and map out a rigorous program tailored for them. We have applied this model for the past 30 years and I am proud to say that over 1200 ODASIS alumni have gone on to pursue professions

in the health allied fields. These professionals are some of our most generous alumni supporters!

Q: What do you like most about your job?

A: The satisfaction of seeing hundreds of students become successful doctors, dentists, and other medical professionals. Being able to mentor underrepresented students is amazing. These are some of the same students who once doubted themselves and are now the ones that come back to advocate for the ODASIS program. Seeing this big picture is my greatest reward!

Q: ODASIS has grown. Do you still have time to work one-on-one with students?

A: Oh, absolutely! For example, with seniors going on to medical, dental, and other health related professional schools, I do mock interviews to prepare them for their interviews. This is very important work and has to be done on a one-to-one basis. The students have to be able to express themselves and demonstrate that they have the passion to become doctors and take care of people; the humanistic side of things is very important for their success and being able to help them one-on-one is very powerful!



Professor Khan received the Rutgers Clement A. Price Human Dignity Award in May 2018 for his commitment to promoting and practicing diversity and inclusion as director of ODASIS. Joining him at the award ceremony were (l. to r.) Juan Cerezo EOF SEBS'18 Microbiology; Tachi Uueghu-Ogbonna SAS'18 Biological Sciences; Paul Gallina SAS'18 Cell Biology and Neuroscience. All three ODASIS graduates are attending Temple Lewis Katz School of Medicine with full 4 years scholarships.

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Access



After the Storm, a Rutgers Professor Emerges as Key Public Intellectual

Yarimar Bonilla helps expand the public discussion on Hurricane Maria and Puerto Rico

Yarimar Bonilla, a professor of anthropology and Latino and Caribbean Studies, has long focused her research on the relationships between Caribbean territories and the powerful nations that have jurisdiction over them. She is now speaking out and writing about how those relationships left Puerto Rico in a vulnerable state long before Hurricane Maria.

When Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico last September, Rutgers University–New Brunswick professor Yarimar Bonilla felt the impact on many levels.

At first, as she followed the news reports from her home in New York, she felt fear.

"All my family was on the island," says Bonilla, a professor of anthropology and Latino and Caribbean studies in the **School of Arts and Sciences**. "My mother was one of the people who did not lose her phone line, so I was able to talk to her while the storm was bearing down."

Although her mother was safe, and would soon move temporarily to the mainland, Bonilla felt increasingly troubled in the weeks that followed. As the scope of the disaster became clear—the destruction of the power grid, the decimation of the island's agriculture, and the wiping out of homes, roads, and bridges—Bonilla says she and other Puerto Ricans living in the diaspora fell into a kind of shock.

"I heard one woman describe it as 'catatonia,'" says Bonilla. "We were going about our lives in a state of immobility while our society was breaking (continued inside)"

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● The **School of Arts and Sciences** provides an education of unparalleled breadth and depth, from biological, mathematical, and physical sciences to humanities and social and behavioral sciences. With outstanding teaching, boundary-breaking research, and engagement with the broader world, Arts and Sciences prepares students for fulfilling lives and careers, expands access to higher education, and contributes to the greater good in New Jersey and the world.

In this issue we see first-hand how students, faculty, and alumni are contributing to that greater good: An anthropologist and an alum respond to Hurricane Maria and the crisis in Puerto Rico; computer science students lead each other to success; a program in exercise and aging brings senior citizens to campus; an economist and women's and gender studies students make a case for women and children at the United Nations; and a budding scientist who first worked in a Rutgers lab at age 14 is looking for the clues to autism. Across the Arts and Sciences and across the state, Rutgers delivers.

The School of Arts and Sciences is the largest and most comprehensive academic unit of Rutgers University–New Brunswick. With roots that date back to the beginning of higher education in America, the school reflects a tradition of liberal arts learning that began in 1766 with the founding of Queen's College, the institution that would become Rutgers University. Four outstanding undergraduate institutions carried that tradition into the 21st century: Rutgers, Douglass, Livingston, and University colleges. Established in 2007 with the union of these four colleges, the School of Arts and Sciences, with 750 full-time faculty and a vibrant and diverse student body of over 20,000 students, is now a globally engaged teaching and research institution.

SOCIAL & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

(continued from front)

Rutgers Professor Emerges as Key Public Intellectual

down. We felt this complete sense of powerlessness.”

So Bonilla took action in the only way she knew: She spoke out, using her scholarship to expand the public discussion beyond the day-to-day reports of devastation. Bonilla drew a larger picture that showed how Puerto Rico's status as a U.S. territory had left its economy and infrastructure in a weakened condition long before the storm hit.

Over the last year, she has become increasingly visible as a public intellectual, making her voice heard on both social and traditional media networks. Her writing has appeared in the *Washington Post* and *The Nation*; she is quoted frequently in stories by national and international news organizations; and she was the subject of an in-depth interview by legendary journalist Bill Moyers.

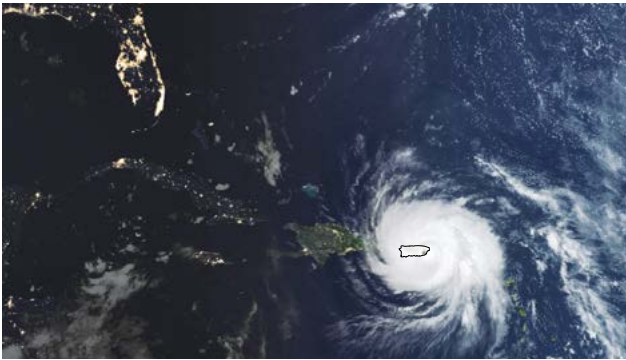
“Before this year I had done maybe four or five interviews total,” Bonilla says. “This year alone I’ve done over 20.”

“Initially, I was just fighting that feeling of powerlessness. But I realized that this is part of my role as a scholar: to speak out, to add context, and to help educate the public.”

Continuing that mission, she is developing research and teaching projects to examine what she describes as the very man-made conditions that set the stage for the catastrophe of Maria. She plans to write a book, tentatively titled: “American Disaster: Puerto Rico before and after the Storm.”

Bonilla's research has long been focused on the complex relationships between Caribbean territories and the powerful nations that have jurisdiction over them. Her first book, for example, *Non-Sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment* (University of Chicago, 2015), examined the issues of sovereignty and citizenship on the French Caribbean island of Guadeloupe. “My specialty is examining those places that are not independent nation states and have ambiguous political relationships to colonial centers,” she says.

Puerto Rico is a territory of the United States; its residents are U.S. citizens yet have no congressional representation. In addition, the island is blocked from engaging in free trade by the Jones Act, and has steep income inequality, made even greater by tax incentives for wealthy newcomers, Bonilla says. Many Puerto Ricans, she adds, cannot afford to buy items like storm windows and



NASA's image of Hurricane Maria over Puerto Rico, September 20, 2017

portable generators.

For her book, she wants to work backwards from the storm and show how Puerto Rico had been mired in recession for at least a decade, with the state implementing austerity policies, which weakened infrastructure and conditioned residents' expectations.

In May, Bonilla received a fellowship from the Andrew Carnegie Fellows Program, which provides support to scholars in the humanities and social sciences.

“I want to write a book that's useful for people both inside and outside Puerto Rico,” she says. “I want people to ask why it is that the United States has territories, how did it come to have them, and why does it maintain them in this politically ambiguous position.”

This fall, meanwhile, she is organizing a public conference and teaching an independent research seminar for Rutgers undergraduates in which students will study different aspects of the storm and recovery.

“The class will become a research team and together we will produce a website where we will publish the results of our investigation, using text, videos, and other multimedia tools,” says Bonilla. “The goal is to disseminate the results to the Rutgers community and beyond.”

Join us for “*Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico a Year after Maria*,” September 28, 2018. Prominent journalists, writers, artists, scholars, curators, and activists from Puerto Rico and the U.S. will reflect on the impact and aftershocks of hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. Learn more: academicaffairs.rutgers.edu/pr

LIFE SCIENCES



Mary Phillipp (center), a Franklin Township resident, was one of dozens of senior citizens from Central Jersey to take in a session of exercise and education provided by students studying exercise science in the Department of Kinesiology and Health.

IN A CAMPUS GYM, STUDENTS ENGAGE WITH THE ELDERLY AND LEARN ABOUT EXERCISE AND AGING

Popular course focuses on outreach

Patricia Gargiulo, a 76-year-old Central Jersey woman, was doing some stretching exercises in the Loree Gym at Rutgers University–New Brunswick and basking in the company of dozens of undergraduates.

“I love this,” she said. “I told every person I’ve talked to today that this has been great.”

On a rainy morning last spring, Gargiulo and other senior citizens from Sayreville and Franklin Township boarded a bus at their local senior centers and traveled to Rutgers University–New Brunswick for a friendly session of exercise and education with students in the Department of Kinesiology and Health in the **School of Arts and Sciences**.

The seniors warmed up their muscles to Pharrell Williams’ “Happy” and then made their way around the gym, checking out the different stations students had set up: a yoga workout for flexibility; a stepping exercise to monitor heart rate; and information tables on nutrition, heart disease, and other topics.

Gargiulo said she had a bit of trouble standing on one leg during an exercise, but happily held onto “a really muscular guy” for balance.

“Learning if this way, by interacting with people, is so much more effective than reading it in a book,” she said.

The same principal holds true for the students.

Consisting mostly of exercise science majors, the students were reaching out to seniors as part of Professor Susan Kaplowitz’s “Exercise and Aging” class. The elective, a department staple that is always in high demand, draws aspiring doctors, physical therapists, and anyone else interested in working with the elderly.

Jerusha Peram took the course as a sophomore and liked the experience so much that she returned last year to

serve as one of two course assistants to Kaplowitz.

“This is real life experience, and it’s transformative,” Peram says. “We’re going beyond what’s in our textbooks and working directly with people.”

Peram is considering a career in physical therapy. “I really like the aspect of working one on one,” she says. “You are with the patient, and you are with the treatment. You can see the progress.”

Kaplowitz, who has been teaching the class for 20 years, is well known for bringing seniors and students together for intergenerational learning experiences. As the director of the department’s Center for Exercise and Aging, she has built relationships with senior communities across the region. Last year, she brought her students anywhere they could find an elder audience, from assisted living facilities to the local mall. They also helped out at the New Jersey Senior Olympics and the Middlesex County Department of Aging Senior Walk.

“This is probably our 12th program this year,” Kaplowitz says. “I firmly believe that the best way to learn is to go out in the community and work with the population you study in class.”

With the dramatic rise in the elderly population, she adds, such experiences are essential for all students heading into health-related fields. In 2050, the population aged 65 and over is projected to be 83.7 million, almost double its estimated population of 43.1 million in 2012.

Kaplowitz says interest in her course has grown steadily over the years to the point where she now offers several sections, which fill up quickly.

“The students we have are very compassionate and very smart,” she says. “They want to help people, and they know that in this major, and to get into graduate school,

it’s very competitive and very demanding.”

Erin Haddon, an exercise science major who graduated in 2018, is planning to work as an EMT in her hometown of Maple Shade and then take her MCAT to pursue medical school.

“The ultimate goal or dream would be surgery,” she says. Inside the Loree Gym, Haddon taught seniors about cardiovascular health, giving them practical tips such as how medications like antidepressants and beta blockers can affect the heart rate.

Students Alexandra Ferranti and Natalia Krasowski showed seniors some gentle yoga moves to improve posture, decrease risk of injury, and increase blood flow for overall health and vitality. Both students are interested in becoming physical therapists. And they relish working with elderly populations.

The seniors said they were impressed by the program. “I love these students,” said Doris Regan. “They are so knowledgeable and so friendly and so willing to help.”

Regan and others said they were striving to stay active, and appreciated learning more about exercise.

“I do a lot of walking, and I’m a golfer,” Regan said. “I belong to two leagues.”

Terry Thorsen favors a dance-oriented fitness program. “I do Zumba,” she said. “The stepping exercise the students had me do here was quite helpful.”

Overall, the seniors left feeling upbeat and energetic. Richard and Mary Phillipp, a married couple from Franklin, were mulling what to do afterward.

“I guess we’ll go back to the senior center, get our car, and go home for lunch,” Richard said.

Mary gently begged to differ. She said she was now ready for a more adventurous afternoon.

“I thought we’d go down the shore,” she quipped.

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COMPUTER SCIENCE STUDENTS BUILD A NETWORK OF SUPPORT

An undergraduate group emerges to create a strong culture of mentoring and outreach

SaraAnn Stanway was having “a really horrible day.” But it would prove to be an important turning point in her undergraduate years at Rutgers University–New Brunswick.

Stanway was a first year student, preparing for a computer science midterm in her data structures class. She hunkered down in the CAVE, a student lab and study space at the Hill Center.

“It was at the beginning of exam week,” says Stanway, now a **School of Arts and Sciences** senior. “My to-do list was so huge that I had no idea where to start, and I was completely exhausted.”

A sophomore named Sakib Jalal introduced himself to ask if she’d like to try solving a data structures problem.

“I was annoyed at first,” Stanway says. “I wasn’t in the mood to be interacting with other humans. But I solved it, and then he gave me another one, and this went on for a few hours.”

Jalal, as it turned out, was a member of the Undergraduate Student Alliance of Computer Scientists (USACS), a little-known but well-networked group with a simple mission: “Keep the Rutgers computer science/tech community thriving.”

The group, built up over years by passionate students including Sakib’s older brother Sameen Jalal SAS’15, has been extraordinarily resourceful at finding ways to accomplish its mission: Staging hack-a-thons, forging connections with tech companies, and creating a strong, supportive culture of mentoring for Rutgers students majoring in computer science.

Stanway, for example, ended up getting a perfect score on her midterm.

“The practice problems Sakib gave me were particularly difficult because they were the ones that companies use to test software engineering candidates,” she says. “Of course he didn’t tell me that until after I got my exam score back.”

That was just the beginning. Stanway and other students say USACS has opened up avenues—from social gatherings to research projects to opportunities for jobs and internships. Last year, Stanway was selected for the hackNY Fellows Program, one of the premier computer science summer fellowships in the nation. She was one of four fellows from Rutgers among two dozen students from schools such as MIT, Johns Hopkins, Yale, and Stanford.

“Our presence in hackNY is a major source of pride,” Stanway says.

“Every year USACS mentors teach their mentees about it, urge them to apply, and help review their application before they send it in.”

Ben Yang, a junior, says he arrived at Rutgers knowing he would major in computer science, but feeling little passion for the field or for getting involved in the community.

“I just wanted to get ahead and get a job,” he says. “But meeting the people in USACS inspired me and transformed my undergraduate experience. Everyone was involved and willing to share their experiences and advice. These were people that I could hang out with and call friends.”

Thu D. Nguyen, chair of the Department of Computer Science, praised the group’s contributions.



Undergraduate Student Alliance of Computer Scientists leaders answer questions from fellow students.

“The students have taken incredible initiative to build a strong community, which strengthens the department,” Nguyen says. “And their outreach programs are a wonderful way for the students to expand their impact beyond Rutgers.”

This year, Stanway and Yang are serving as USACS president and outreach director respectively, steering the group toward new challenges.

“I owe a lot of where I am now to the USACS community,” says Yang, who was a hackNY fellow over the summer. “Now I want to pass on the torch to younger students. The idea is always to make sure everyone is included.”

In 2018, USACS was active on numerous fronts. The group brought in guest speakers to Rutgers like the pioneering computer scientist Brian Wilson Kernighan. The group is also in the early stages of a project that—when finalized—would provide data engineering assistance to the Human Trafficking Response Unit overseen by the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office.

“We would be the only college with undergraduates

volunteering to write code to put sex traffickers in prison,” Stanway says. “That’s pretty incredible.”

USACS is also working hard to make the ranks of computer science students more diverse. Stanway credits Tanya Balarajui SAS’18 with helping to create more support networks for women students. And Stanway has developed a program to make “virtual classroom visits” to New Jersey schools.

Stanway says the idea is to reach out to disadvantaged school districts and show students the array of possibilities in pursuing tech careers. She took charge of one last year at Hackensack Middle School and is planning more for the coming year.

“To me, computer science is one of the last tenets of the American dream,” Stanway says.

“There are not many fields where you can go from an impoverished background to upper middle class in one generation.”

“We have a responsibility to make sure everyone has the opportunity to enjoy and thrive in this field that many of us would not have known about were it not for luck and privilege.”

HUMANITIES

At the UN, Students Gain an Extraordinary View of the World

Undergraduates are “armed with knowledge” as they learn about global issues

The meeting at the United Nations was packed with human rights activists, journalists, and diplomats.

The topic up for discussion was huge: Achieving gender parity so employees throughout the UN would be evenly split between men and women.

“This is long overdue,” said Ana María Menéndez, an under-secretary-general and part of a high-level panel that included a former deputy president of South Africa as well as ambassadors from Qatar and Ethiopia.

Joining them was Rutgers University–New Brunswick professor Radhika Balakrishnan. When it was her turn to speak, she broadened the discussion.

“We need to go beyond gender parity,” said

inequality, Balakrishnan has long been involved with the UN and is currently co-chair of the Civil Society Advisory Committee to the United Nations Development Programme.

“I bring a voice that reflects both my training as an economist and my work on gender equality issues,” she says.

In her course, she teaches students about global issues and then brings them to the UN as those issues come to life during the CSW’s 10-day session, which draws thousands of observers, activists, and officials. Students get observer status, allowing them to participate on behalf of various non-governmental organizations.

“We have a surprising amount of power,” says Jake Wasserman, a 2018 graduate who majored in public health

“Young people are taking strides and doing amazing things... The world should know how serious we are and how much we care.”

Balakrishnan, a professor of women’s and gender studies in the **School of Arts and Sciences** and faculty director of the university’s Women’s Center for Global Leadership. “We need to really change the patriarchal attitudes that are not just in the UN but all over the world.”

As she spoke during the session last March, Balakrishnan could see familiar faces from Rutgers. Three of her students were in the audience. And more than a dozen others would be attending UN events over the next two weeks during the 62nd annual session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).

“This is an unbelievable opportunity,” says Steven Haverlock, a senior majoring in women’s and gender studies and human resource management. “Most undergraduates don’t get to do this.”

The students—20 juniors and seniors—were getting an unusually high level of access through Balakrishnan’s “Feminist Advocacy at the United Nations” course.

An economist who focuses on poverty and gender

and minored in cognitive science. “We have the ability to go up to any of the ambassadors and negotiate with them about the issues we have been studying in class.”

Students come well-armed with knowledge. “We read the same documents that the UN people are reading so we know what’s on the table,” says Tasnia Shahjahan, who is double majoring in women’s and gender studies and political science. “In class we discuss the gaps in the documents, and the various fault lines, which give us insight into the underlying issues.”

The theme of the CSW 2018 session was Empowering Rural Women and Girls. Shahjahan had been reading UN reports of an increase in child marriage in her native country of Bangladesh, and how that development may be related to global warming. “Climate change leads to a loss in agricultural land, and then families who can’t support themselves respond by marrying the girls off at a young age,” she says.

After visiting the UN, the students work on final

projects that are presented publicly at an event that draws faculty and students from across the university.

“The entire experience is life-changing for students,” Balakrishnan says.

Halimat Oshun, a 2018 graduate, agreed. A Rutgers–University Newark student, Oshun was so intrigued by the course description that she took the train to New Brunswick to attend the class.

“Having conversations with people who make a direct impact in the world encourages me as a young woman to strive to shatter that metaphorical glass ceiling and go for my dreams without reservation,” Oshun says. She explored the impact of menstrual health on educational opportunities.

“When rural girls don’t have access to sanitary materials, they don’t go to school,” she says. “They end up missing one to three months of school every year.”

The course attracts students from many majors, creating a lively mix of opinions, experience, and aspirations.

“I am a public health student, but we have students from philosophy, English, women’s and gender studies, and film,” Wasserman says. “You get to hear ideas that you may not have heard in your own department.”

One student created a documentary about the course. Morgan Sanguedolce, a 2018 graduate who majored in English, says she was impressed by her fellow students. Her film, which is titled “Participation Generation: Feminist Advocacy at the UN,” includes interviews with Balakrishnan and students.

“I wanted to show how young people are taking strides and doing amazing things, like attending the UN Commission on the Status of Women,” she says. “The world should know how serious we are and how much we care.”



Learn more: unwomen.org



Rutgers professor Radhika Balakrishnan has long been involved in the United Nations. In her course, “Feminist Advocacy at the United Nations,” Balakrishnan provides students a thorough grounding in global issues, and then arranges for the class to visit the UN to see those issues come to life during the annual Commission on the Status of Women.



Rutgers and New Brunswick leaders and alumni spoke at the grand opening. Left to right: James M. Cahill SC’76, Mayor, City of New Brunswick; Bart Kilian RC’48, President, Class of 1948; Peter March Executive Dean; and Christopher Molloy PHAB’77, CSNB’87, Interim Chancellor, Rutgers University–New Brunswick

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