



DENISE TABER FINARD '80
WOMEN'S INSTITUTE
AT RUSSELL SAGE COLLEGE
2024-2025: AT A GLANCE



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Dear Friends and Supporters,

This past year at the Denise Taber Finard '80 Women's Institute has been one of powerful growth, purpose-driven leadership, and profound community connection. As I reflect on the milestones we've reached together, I'm struck by the consistent thread running through each of our efforts: women stepping forward, leading with compassion and conviction, and building a future rooted in justice, equity, and possibility.

Our student ambassadors have lived these values in action. Whether walking in solidarity during the Breast Cancer Awareness Walk, bringing Halloween joy to children in the hospital, or studying inclusive justice models in Cleveland's Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Court, they continue to deepen their leadership by serving, learning, and showing up for others. They are growing into leaders who move through the world with empathy, clarity, and purpose.

We are equally proud of the scholars and changemakers we've welcomed this year. Award-winning filmmaker Judith Helfand brought bold storytelling and radical transparency to campus, encouraging students to lead through narrative and truth. Best-selling author, and historian Robin Gerber captivated us with the story of Barbie's creator, Ruth Handler, reminding us that leadership often starts with reinvention and courage. And this fall, we celebrated the powerful legacy of Denise Taber Finard '80 with the renaming of our institute and Finard House — a transformational moment that affirms our mission and future.

This year also marked the third annual Every Campus A Refuge (ECAR) Gathering, where Sage welcomed more than 130 participants from across the nation to explore how colleges can serve as catalysts for inclusion and systemic change. These dialogues and collaborations have strengthened our belief that leadership is not just about position, it's about building communities of belonging, one action at a time.

As we look to the future, I'm especially excited to share that the Women's Institute is preparing to launch the Women's Leadership Pathway — a bold new initiative that will empower Sage students and professionals alike to lead with insight, vision, and heart. With programs designed for both undergraduates and working professionals, this pathway will bridge academic learning and real-world impact, ensuring Sage women are prepared to rise as thoughtful, resilient, and inclusive leaders.

We are also thrilled to welcome Professor Amy Pass as our new faculty fellow for the student ambassador program. Her commitment to student development and holistic learning will further enrich the leadership journeys of our students, and we are so fortunate to have her join our team.

Before closing, I want to extend my sincere thanks to Dr. Michelle Napierski-Prancl, who has served as faculty director of the Women's Institute with thoughtfulness, dedication, and care. Her scholarship, mentorship, and steady advocacy have been instrumental in shaping the institute and supporting the growth of so many students along the way. Michelle's leadership has been rooted in empathy and a strong belief in the power of women's voices. We're truly grateful for all she has contributed.

In every corner of the Women's Institute, I see students leading with integrity, faculty offering transformational mentorship, and community members showing up to support and believe in our mission. This work is made possible by all of you. Together, we're building something powerful and lasting.

Shelly Calabrese
Executive Director

From the Executive Director



Program Highlights and Events

An Evening with Robin Gerber

On March 24, we were thrilled to welcome best selling author, historian, and dynamic speaker Robin Gerber for an inspiring Women's History Month virtual talk on the life and legacy of Ruth Handler, founder of Mattel and creator of Barbie. Drawing from her acclaimed book *Barbie and Ruth*, Robin shared behind-the-scenes stories of risk, reinvention, and resilience, offering powerful lessons in leadership, ethics, and entrepreneurship.



Healthy, Baby Girl

On September 12, the Women's Institute hosted a powerful screening of *A Healthy Baby Girl*, followed by a moving conversation with Peabody Award-winning filmmaker and Women's Institute Visiting Affiliate Scholar, Judith Helfand.

The deeply personal documentary explores the intersection of science, corporate power, and family, chronicling Helfand's own experience after being diagnosed with DES-related cervical cancer at age 25 — decades after her mother was prescribed the drug during pregnancy. Filmed over five years, the documentary offers an intimate portrait of mother-daughter love, survival, and political awakening in the face of an ethical and medical crisis.



Lafayette Event

On September 18, the Women's Institute partnered with the Hart Cluett Museum to mark the Bicentennial of Major General Gilbert Motier, Marquis de Lafayette's Farewell Tour and his historic visit to Troy in 1824.

The event honored Lafayette's legacy as a lifelong advocate for universal human rights and abolition. As part of the commemoration, Dr. Jennifer Burns, lecturer at the University at Albany, presented her groundbreaking research on Troy's early Black community and its active role in abolition efforts — already well underway when Lafayette visited.



Program Highlights and Events

Every Campus a Refuge Gathering

Russell Sage College was honored to host the third Every Campus A Refuge (ECAR) Gathering and Pre-Gathering Event: Welcome Corps on the Road from September 19-21, 2024. This national convening brought together more than 130 participants from across the country — including members of refugee and immigrant communities, higher education leaders, resettlement agencies, and socially-conscious organizations — for two days of collaborative learning, powerful storytelling, and action-oriented dialogue.

Co-hosted by the Russell Sage ECAR Chapter and ECAR's national nonprofit, the Gathering featured interactive workshops, keynote speakers, and networking opportunities designed to deepen the role of colleges and universities in refugee resettlement and integration. Attendees explored how higher education can serve as a catalyst for welcome, inclusion, and systemic change.

Denise Taber Finard '80 Women's Institute

In a ceremony on September 19, Russell Sage College announced the renaming of The Women's Institute at Russell Sage College in honor of Denise Taber Finard, a biology graduate whose career focused on emerging sciences and the equitable application of those discoveries.

Following this transformative gift, The Women's Institute at Russell Sage College — founded in 2020 when Russell Sage became co-educational across two campuses in Troy and Albany — is now known as the Denise Taber Finard '80 Women's Institute. The institute's headquarters on the college's historic Troy campus, formerly known as Frear House, also has been renamed Finard House.



Time to Pass the Torch

Reflections from the Last Five Years (2020-2025)

Michelle Napierski-Prancl, PhD

Faculty Director of the Denise

In 2020, Russell Sage College launched the Women's Institute along with the student ambassador program to honor Margaret Olivia Slocum Sage's commitment to social justice and to preserve the legacy of the women's college. At the same time, I was given the honor and responsibility to serve as the first Faculty Director of the Women's Institute. President Ames and Provost Hand tasked me with creating the ambassador program, growing the women's studies minor, and ensuring that the Women's Institute programming connected to Sage's curriculum — all while navigating the unique challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, I am proud to say that I met each of these challenges with integrity, ingenuity, creativity, empathy, and great success. We started the ambassador program with five students, and in 2025, it has grown to 13 ambassadors. Over this time, we also welcomed graduate students into the ambassador program and hired graduate and undergraduate work-study students. These efforts have created a strong cohort and feminist community at Finard House.

As the faculty director, my most important task was to create connections between the Women's Institute and the curriculum. One of the ways this was done was through the requirement that ambassadors take a course in women's studies and/or make progress toward completing the minor in women's studies. This ensured students had a scholarly foundation in feminist studies to help inform the work they did as ambassadors. This year, six students, including three ambassadors, completed the minor in women's studies. Their capstone papers covered a range of topics worthy of study. Leah Madore, an ambassador and a psychology major, who was also named one of the 2025 Capital District Sports Women of the Year, explored "Hidden Struggles Among Female Athletes." Sophia Pearl, an ambassador and a nutrition major who served as one of the Overalls for Rally, used qualitative methods to analyze Netflix comedy specials and questioned "The Gendered Nature of Humor, Do Men Truly Hold the Funny Bone?" And Hannah Voorhaar, an ambassador, sociology major, and Ferguson Fellow, conducted a content analysis of best-sellers by author Colleen Hoover for her paper titled "Romanticization of Abuse: An analysis of the occurrence of abuse in popular romance novels."

As you can see, the students serving as ambassadors and earning minors in women's studies are among the most engaged and successful students on campus. This is further evidenced by the number of students who have been inducted into Iota Iota Iota honor society in women's studies. In 2022, I established the Epsilon Upsilon Chapter of the Triota Honor Society at Russell Sage College. Students who achieve an overall GPA of 3.3 and have maintained at least a 3.0 in their women's studies coursework are eligible for induction into the honor society. In lieu of membership dues, the Epsilon Upsilon Chapter asks its members to donate to a women's organization of their choice. While the donation may be monetary, it was my hope that students would instead choose to donate their time — and most have chosen to do just that. Since 2022, 23 students, including 10 student ambassadors, have been inducted into Iota Iota Iota.

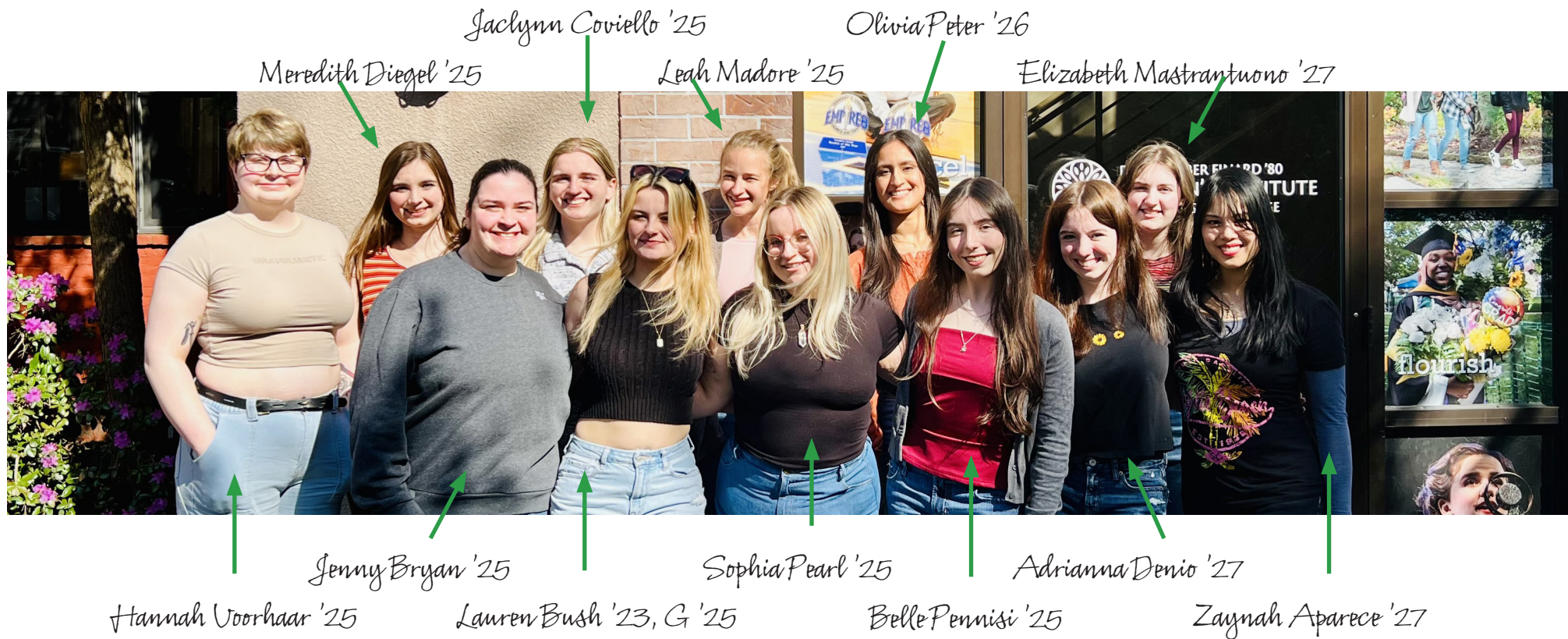




During the last five years, I also revised the women's studies curriculum, which included creating a new course WST 260: Feminist Lives & Legacies: a seminar class that meets in Finard House. Books read in this class, as well as in my SOC/WST 209: Gender, Feminism & Society course, were deliberately incorporated in the Women's Institute programming over the years including: Judy Batalion's *The Light of Days*, Kate Moore's *The Woman They Could Not Silence*, A'Lelia Bundles' *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madame CJ Walker*, Nell McShane Wulfhart's *The Great Stewardess Rebellion*, and Robin Gerber's *Barbie & Ruth*. These public lectures showcased the academic explorations that occur in the classroom, and in return, brought these conversations to a broader, more global audience. Prior to my work as the faculty director, only a handful of students would graduate with the minor in women's studies. Since 2020, we have seen a 1,000% increase in the number of students minoring in women's studies: from 1 to 11. I am proud that I was able to achieve this significant increase during a time when student engagement was being challenged by COVID-19. I have also had the unique opportunity to leave a few physical markers on campus as well. We planted a magnolia tree in front of Finard House to honor the inaugural cohort of student ambassadors, installed new peace poles on each campus, constructed a peace labyrinth in the Finard House garden, and created an ambassador "home" in Finard House. Each symbolically pays tribute to Margaret Olivia Slocum Sage and her commitment to education and social justice.

Finally, I take enormous pride from my mentoring of the student ambassadors. Their accomplishments—having made an impact beyond the Sage community, exemplify Russell Sage's mission of Be, Know, Do. Just this year, Jenny and Sophia collected 378 bras for I Support the Girls. Zaynah and Adrianna delivered trick-or-treat goody bags to children at the Bernard and Millie Duker Children's Hospital and then returned in the spring to shower new moms with self-care gifts for Mother's Day. Jaclynn planned ambassador days of service at Joseph's House, while Belle and Olivia organized our Toys for Tots collection drive. Hannah hosted a "Feminist Food for Thought" lunch with a screening of the documentary *Women of the White Buffalo*. Leah and Lauren led our Making Strides Against Breast Cancer ambassador team and hosted a spooky Halloween party for the College Experience students. Merideth created a treasure hunt/trivia contest for Women's History Month that took students around the Troy campus, and Lizzie facilitated a cross-campus rainbow egg hunt for the International Transgender Visibility Awareness Day. There were also tabling events, charity bake sales, team-building endeavors, and my favorite—"smashing the patriarchy" at SageFest. I am in awe of all that they accomplished this year and every year.

In sum, I would like to thank Russell Sage College for entrusting me with the responsibility of serving as the first faculty director of the Women's Institute. I am proud of all that I have accomplished and know that the time is right to pass the torch. Good luck to my friend and colleague, Amy Pass. I look forward to seeing the continued success of The Denise Taber Finard '80 Women's Institute.

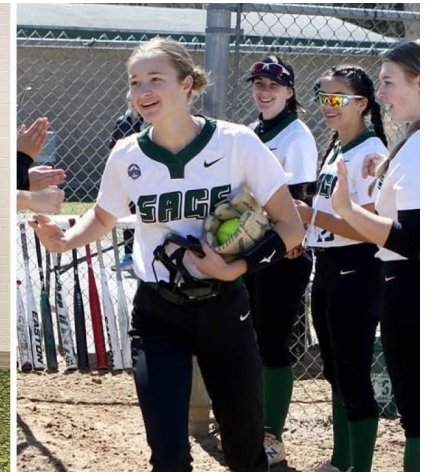


Meet our Ambassadors

Our Women's Institute student ambassadors launched a dynamic social media campaign to spotlight their peers through personalized ambassador profiles. From concept to content creation, the students took the lead in designing and curating posts that highlight each ambassador's passions, goals, and leadership journey. This campaign not only fostered connection and visibility but also showcased the ambassadors' creativity, initiative, and collaborative spirit. By sharing their stories in authentic and engaging ways, they exemplified how young leaders can use digital platforms to inspire, uplift, and build community.

Breast Cancer Awareness Walk

Our Women's Institute student ambassadors proudly participated in this year's Breast Cancer Awareness Walk, demonstrating their commitment to community engagement and compassionate leadership. By showing up in solidarity with survivors, fighters, and families, our ambassadors embodied the values of empathy, advocacy, and civic responsibility that lie at the heart of their leadership journey. This experience not only deepened their understanding of public health issues affecting women but also empowered them to lead with purpose, compassion, and connection to their community.



Ferguson Fellowship Sends Students to Cleveland to Study Cuyahoga County's Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Court

At the beginning of the 2024-2025 academic year, Russell Sage College Sociology majors Zariah Motley and Hannah Voorhaar, a Women's Institute student ambassador, traveled to Cleveland, Ohio, with support from the Doris Adams Ferguson '53 Memorial Endowed Student Fellowship for Sociology. Their trip was an opportunity to learn about Cuyahoga County's Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Court and to explore needs and opportunities in the criminal justice and disabilities advocacy fields. Voorhaar graduated in May 2025. She is applying for positions in human services and deciding among the many different options for a master's degree applicable to her career goals.

"I just want to be in the field of advocating and supporting people with developmental disabilities, making the world a more inclusive place."

-Hanna Voorhaar

Halloween at Albany Medical Center's Bernard and Millie Duker Children's Hospital

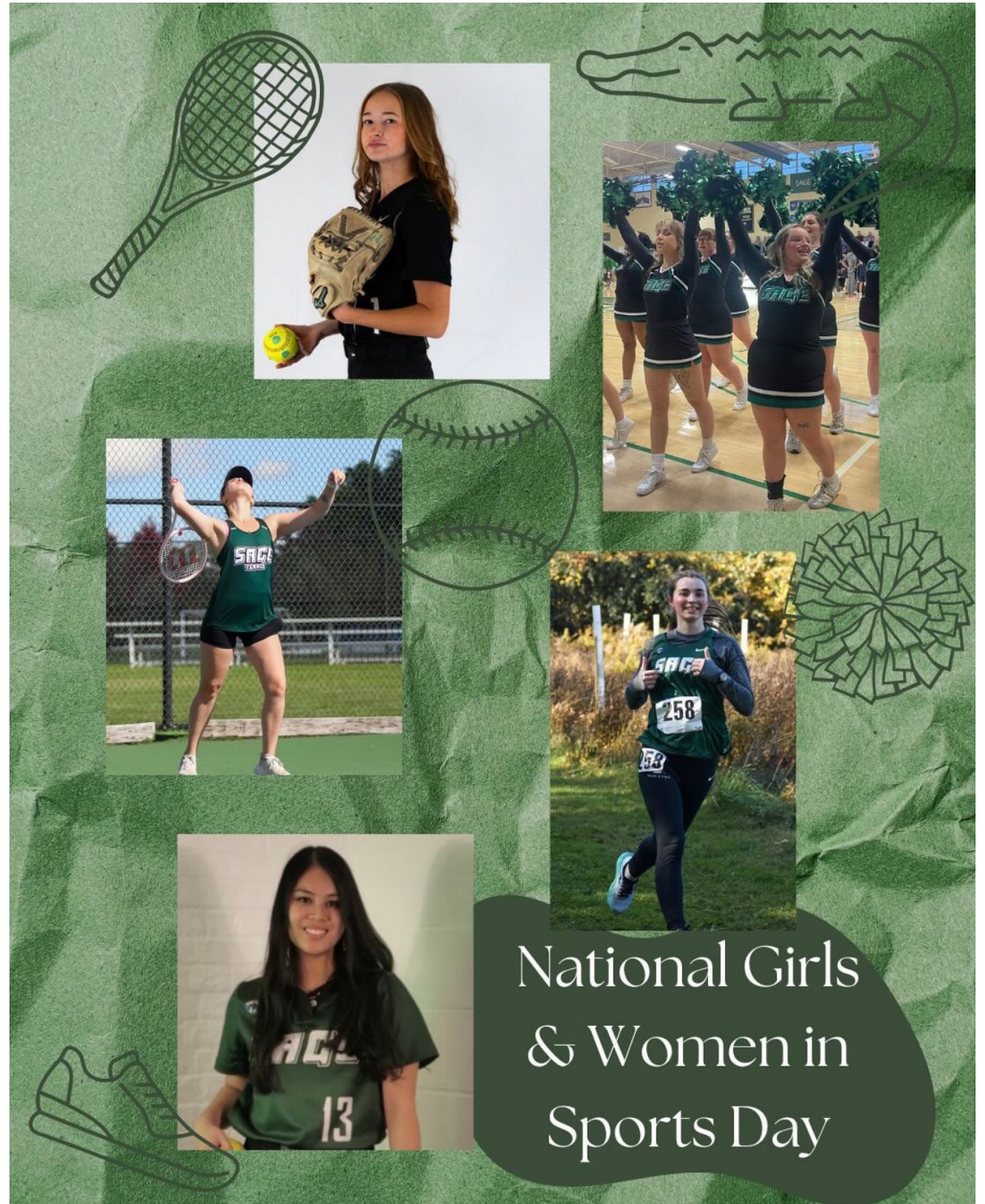
This Halloween, our Women's Institute Student Ambassadors brought joy and festive spirit to the young patients at Albany Medical Center's Bernard and Millie Duker Children's Hospital by delivering treats and spending time with children undergoing treatment. Through this act of service, our ambassadors demonstrated the heart of empathetic leadership — showing up with kindness, compassion, and a commitment to lifting others.

Capital District Sports Women of the Year

Russell Sage College softball pitcher and Women's Institute Student Ambassador Leah Madore (Williamsville, Vt./Battleboro Union) was named as a collegiate award recipient for 2025 by the Capital District Sports Women of the Year organization. The Capital District Sports Woman of the Year program celebrates outstanding female student-athletes from high schools and colleges in the Capital Region who excel in academics, athletics, and community service. Leah is the Sage softball program's leader for career strikeouts and strikeouts in a season.



Women in Sports Day is a powerful celebration of the strength, dedication, and resilience of women and girls who compete, coach, lead, and advocate in the world of athletics. At Russell Sage College, several of our Women's Institute student ambassadors are also student-athletes — a dual role that speaks volumes about their commitment, discipline, and leadership. Balancing the rigors of academics and athletics, these students lead by example, showing what it means to persevere, work collaboratively, and elevate others both on and off the field. Their experiences as athletes enrich their leadership journeys, strengthening their voices as changemakers within our campus community and beyond.



National Girls
& Women in
Sports Day



Affiliate Scholar: Judith Helfand

Visiting Affiliate Scholar, Judith Helfand is a Peabody Award-winning, Emmy-nominated documentary filmmaker known for her deeply personal, family-centered storytelling and signature blend of humor, heart, and radical transparency. Her acclaimed films include “Blue Vinyl”, “A Healthy Baby Girl”, “Cooked: Survival by Zip Code,” and “Love & Stuff.” As co-founder of Working Films and Chicken & Egg Pictures, she has also been a driving force in supporting women and gender-expansive storytellers.

Helfand’s work aligned closely with the Women’s Institute’s mission to empower women through leadership, storytelling, and social impact. Her films centered women’s voices and explored themes of resilience, justice, caregiving, and legacy — offering a powerful model for student ambassadors as they examined identity, leadership, and the narratives that shape communities.

Faculty Fellow: Professor Amy Pass

We are absolutely thrilled to welcome professor Amy Pass as the new Denise Taber Finard ’80 Women’s Institute Faculty Fellow for the Student Ambassador Program!

Professor Pass brings an incredible depth of experience in research, instruction, and student support to this role. As an assistant professor and student success librarian at Russell Sage College, she has been a champion for academic growth and holistic student development. Her passion for teaching, whether through first-year experience courses, study skills workshops, or service-learning programs, perfectly aligns with the Women’s Institute’s mission to cultivate reflective, values-driven leadership among our student ambassadors.

With a career rooted in empowering learners — from federal training programs in Washington, D.C., to online education innovation at SUNY Empire and now at Sage — Professor Pass exemplifies the mentorship, knowledge, and care we hope to instill in every student who passes through our doors.



Exciting News:

Launching the Women's Leadership Pathway

We're thrilled to announce the upcoming launch of the Women's Leadership Pathway (WLP) at Russell Sage College — a new, comprehensive initiative from the Women's Institute designed to empower women at every stage of their leadership journey.

Building on Sage's proud legacy of advancing women through education, service, and leadership, the WLP is a two-part program that guides participants from college through their careers.

- ▣ A four-year undergraduate experience starting in the first year, featuring leadership education, mentorship, and a sophomore-year study-away focused on global women's leadership.
- ▣ In partnership with the Times Union's Women@Work network, we're developing a flexible, publicly accessible microcredential program for early to mid-career professionals, focused on strategic leadership, advocacy, and inclusive workplace practices.

Launching soon, the WLP ensures women are prepared to lead with purpose, clarity, and courage — through college and beyond. Stay tuned for more details and opportunities to get involved!

