



The Denise Taber Finard '80 Women's Institute at Russell Sage College | Annual Report 2025-2026



A YEAR OF REFLECTION,
GROWTH, AND POSSIBILITY

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Over the past year, the Denise Taber Finard '80 Women's Institute has lived through a season of reflection and growth. Familiar paths have gently given way to new ones, and the institute has been invited into a deeper alignment with its founding vision and future calling.

We have strengthened our role as a catalyst for women's leadership, mentoring, and community engagement. Our students are learning to see

themselves as leaders, through structured mentoring with executive women in the Capital Region, professional development workshops, and immersive experiences that connect them with alumnae/i and community partners.

And life has a way of gifting the institute with unexpected experiences.

During 2025-2026, those gifts emerged most clearly through new leadership, funding, and a fresh infusion of energy, which you'll read about in this report. Each transition asked us to trust what we could not yet fully see. Emily Dickinson understood the inner posture of spiritual and imaginative readiness when she wrote, "I dwell in possibility – " Her words capture the stance we have embraced this year.

Stepping into the role of interim director of the Denise Taber Finard '80 Women's Institute was, for me personally, one of those unexpected opportunities. It reignited my passion as an activist and champion of women and called me back to the work of shaping spaces where women's voices, stories, and leadership can flourish. This role has been less about administration and more about stewardship — tending the roots, honoring the ancestors of our mission, and opening the doors wider for those yet to come. When Margaret Olivia Slocum Sage founded Russell Sage College, she understood how an idea, joined with resources and courage, could change lives through education.

Today, the Women's Institute continues to be the place where we consciously nurture these historical roots. Our mission is grounded in the founder's vision: Education for women is both personally liberating and socially transformative.

The legacy and continued support of donors, alumnae/i, students, faculty, and community partners weave this mission into our story. And as we more than double the number of student ambassadors for 2026-2027 and expand our leadership development program for professionals in the region, we ask: How can we best embody Margaret Olivia Slocum Sage's vision now?

Best regards,

Eileen V. Brownell, Ph.D.

Interim Director, Denise Taber Finard '80 Women's Institute
Russell Sage College

NEW FACES AT THE INSTITUTE

In 2025-2026, we were fortunate enough to have Faculty Fellow Amy Pass meeting with the ambassadors weekly and guiding them through structured learning, interactive workshops, and brainstorming for service-learning initiatives, with a strong emphasis on leadership development and civic engagement. We thank Amy for her work with us!

This fall, we welcome our new faculty fellows:



Dr. Tonya Moutray

Dr. Tonya Moutray is a professor of English in the Interdisciplinary Studies Department. Her research explores the intersections between women's studies, the history of healthcare and education, and literature and culture. She teaches courses in Romantic and Victorian literature, first-year writing, and RSC 301: Innovating to Impact, and she will work with the institute as a women's studies scholar.



Professor MaryEllen Tedesco

Professor MaryEllen Tedesco is the department chair and undergraduate program director of the School of Management. With 40 years of progressive experience in human resources, she brings deep industry expertise and academic insight into the classroom. She will work with the institute on leadership development programming.





VISION

The Denise Taber Finard '80 Women's Institute at Russell Sage College promotes a vision of intersectional feminism that confronts structural inequalities and advocates for equity and equality for all people. The institute acts as a catalyst and voice for the societal changes that shape our local, national, and global communities, and inspires positive social change through intentional acts of service and community partnership.

MISSION

The mission of the Women's Institute is to:

- **Design** and deliver programming that showcases women's accomplishments across disciplines and generations for ambassadors, alumnae/i, and our community.
- **Develop** and support feminist leaders, with particular attention to mentoring students in leadership, advocacy, and community engagement.
- **Strengthen** campus and community partnerships that advance equity, justice, and inclusion.
- **Sustain** the Women's Institute student ambassadorship program by:
 - Providing structured opportunities for student leadership and facilitation involving ambassadors in planning, implementing, and evaluating programs and events.
 - Engaging ambassadors in professional development and mentoring relationships with faculty and professionals.
 - Encourage student participation in community engagement and volunteer initiatives aligned with feminist and social justice values.

This mission guides the Women's Institute's strategy in program planning, partnerships, and resource allocation, ensuring that our work remains grounded in feminist principles and responsive to emerging needs.

We are proud to share the progress accomplished in alignment with the college's new strategic plan, Sage Forward. As stated in Goal 5 of the plan, we are to "Position the Denise Taber Finard '80 Women's Institute as a National Model of Intergenerational Women's Leadership." **As you'll read in this report, we are on our way.**



STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS

Recruit a diverse, high-potential cohort of undergraduate students each year (Goal 5, Tactic 1)

Our strategies for recruitment in 2025-2026 have paid off with the fall 2027 cohort. We're excited to welcome 16 incoming undergraduate students of diverse backgrounds added to our existing 12 ambassadors, more than doubling the Women's Institute student ambassador program. In addition, we have established a path for undergraduate ambassadors who graduate and are beginning their master's or doctoral studies at Russell Sage.

Looking ahead ...

Older students showing the way: This fall, the returning ambassadors will deliver a program for new, incoming ambassadors, welcoming them into our community and mentoring them as they begin their college experience at Russell Sage. This work echoes the "big sister" legacy of the women's college. Planning includes a mixer and small mentor groups for support and connection.

The (graduate) student becomes the teacher: Congratulations to Sophia Pearl '25, who is starting her nutrition practicum this fall and sharing her expertise with our ambassadors in a two-part program called "Feminist Food for Thought." Feminist Food for Thought brings together women's health, hormone-informed nutrition, and feminist scholarship in a warm, community-building environment. Through research-based presentations, feminist quotes, and food demonstrations, ambassadors deepen their understanding of their own bodies and explore how food can support hormone balance, brain health, and overall wellbeing.

Embed Mentorship and Faculty Leadership (Goal 5, Tactic 3)

Developing a strong mentorship system: Mentorship is at the heart of the Women's Institute. We see mentoring not as a single program, but as a way of being in community. We are in the early years of building an integrated mentoring model that connects diverse cohorts of ambassadors, faculty from across the disciplines, alumnae/i, trustees, advisory board members, and community partners into relationships of mutual learning, accountability, and care.

In the coming years, we will continue to clarify structures, expectations, and assessment tools so that mentorship remains not only heartfelt, but also visible, measurable, and sustainable. Our goal is that each ambassador can look back and see a clear pattern of mentors, conversations, and experiences that helped them claim their own leadership story.

Faculty engagement and leadership in the Women's Institute takes a number of forms, including faculty supervising ambassador research, faculty presence on the Advisory Board, faculty consultants to the executive director, women's studies course development and delivery, and faculty leadership in the design and execution of conferences, including Menopause Re-imagined and the Capital District Feminist Studies Consortium Conference.

Programming associated with mentorship is described under Goal 5, Tactic 4.



Empower Through Signature High-impact Experiences and Projects (Goal 5, Tactic 4)

At the Women's Institute, we define high-impact experiences as immersive, mentored learning opportunities that invite students out of the classroom and into settings where history, leadership, and identity come alive. These experiences often involve travel, encounters with women leaders, and moments of reflection that help students connect their passions and lived experience to a larger sense of purpose.

Each experience becomes part of a growing portfolio of leadership and civic engagement for our ambassadors.

Networking with Women@Work in the Opalka Gallery in September

The Women's Institute and the college's Office of Career and Self-Discovery partnered to create "Mapping Leadership Journeys: A Guided Networking Experience," designed to connect our students with accomplished local women leaders across diverse industries.

Juniors, seniors, and graduate students participated in facilitated networking rounds, heard inspiring career stories, received professional headshots, and explored mentorship opportunities. The professional women learned the power of mentoring, and the ambassadors reported that the experience fostered confidence and gave them an opportunity to explore their career options with leaders in their fields and those from other professions.

Girls Inc. Intergenerational Mentoring in October



The ambassadors created a program for a group of 24 middle and high school students from Girls Inc. of the Capital Region, an organization led by an alumna. Alongside mentors from Girls Inc., our ambassadors shared stories, answered questions, and engaged the girls in a meaningful conversation about their lives, answering questions like: "How did you choose your major?" and "What activities did you do in high school to prepare to apply for college?"

Women@Work trip to the Hearst Tower in October

Through the Times Union's Women@Work partnership, ambassadors traveled to Manhattan with professional business women from the Capital Region to meet with seasoned professionals from the Hearst Corporation. These executives offered honest reflections on leadership, risk, and resilience. The conversations extended beyond networking to become spaces where students could ask, "What might a life of meaningful work look like for me?"





Forum for Executive Women (FEW) in November

With support from Ronnye Shamam '64, from the college's board of trustees, and Beth Beshaw, retired market president at M&T Bank, ambassadors engaged in small-group conversations spanning three generations of women from the Forum for Executive Women (FEW).

In preparation for the event, we discussed the benefits of networking with professional women at the top of their fields. The discussion was enlightening: The students believed the only mentors they would need were those in their fields. After processing who the women at FEW were and how a network operates, there was new excitement.

The FEW members were impressed. Attendees said, "These women asked really deep questions, making me think about my experiences," and "This was the most engaging interaction we've had as a group in quite some time."

Bring On the Spectrum (BOTS) in March

The ambassadors mentored girls from Bring on the Spectrum (BOTS), an organization that brings kids and young adults who are neurodiverse and neurotypical together, in a Mirror Decorating event focusing on mental and emotional wellness and confidence. The girls were encouraged to write or draw something on their mirror that represents a strength or something that makes them feel confident and powerful. They were encouraged to focus on their personality and character, rather than physical appearance.

The ambassadors supported and participated in the activity alongside the girls, engaging in conversation and tying in personal experiences about what it means to be a Women's Institute ambassador.

Women's History Month "Becoming" event in March

Saying yes to unexpected opportunities. Not defining yourself by one mistake or bad experience. Asking for what you want. Becoming is a lifelong journey.

Those were just some of the lessons over 60 students learned at "What is Your 'To Be?': Personal and Professional Journeys and the People Who Shape Us," our Women's History Month event featuring three of our incredible alumnae.

We thank Kaweeda G. Adams, a leader in P-12 and higher education; Nicole (Hanks) Leblond, chief of staff for the New York State Thruway Authority; and Kristin Seaburg, an executive director for Trinity Health/St. Peter's Health Partners, for sharing their inspiring experiences, then sitting down with students in a workshop format to help them walk through their own paths to "becoming."



After the interactive workshop, students shared their "becoming map," identifying goals and ideas for how they could overcome obstacles and outdated ways of thinking. Particular thanks to Dr. Jermaine Privott, executive director of HEOP, and Erica Faas-Li, associate athletic director/senior woman administrator at Russell Sage, for encouraging their students to participate.



Archivist presentation on Margaret Olivia Slocum Sage in April

Many of the ambassadors have chosen a women's studies minor, while others have selected women's studies courses as electives when there have been topics that resonate with the mission of the institute.

In our weekly discussions, there was one repeating theme — the Women's Institute is at the heart of the historical roots of Russell Sage College. This was a great opportunity to invite Marcella "Marcie" Falquez, senior library specialist-access services at the college, to give a presentation on our founder, Margaret Olivia Slocum Sage. Marcie set up a table of items from the archives for students to explore and engaged them in a conversation about women's history and the history of our beloved college.

Study Away Seneca Falls in April

Our study away trip to Seneca Falls in April was generously funded by the Laurie Halloran '82 Leadership Fund. Seneca Falls, New York, home of the first Women's Rights Convention, continues to be a touchstone experience. Ambassadors, joined by some Russell Sage alumnae, walked the same streets and entered the same spaces where women once gathered to demand recognition, rights, and representation.

The Women's Rights National Historic Park's visitors center offered an inspiring journey through the history of women in the United States. We also visited the National Women's Hall of Fame, a museum dedicated to celebrating the achievements of distinguished American women.



An unexpected opportunity arrived when we were invited to participate in a social justice gathering on the front steps of the visitor center that afternoon. They warmly welcomed our group, sharing signs, stories, and fellowship as we stood beside them in solidarity. One ambassador reflected, "We just learned about women's history, and now we are making it!" as she held her placard high.

End-of-year Celebrations in May

In May, we honored the work of our Women's Institute ambassadors and friends at our end-of-the-year celebration. It brought together our community to celebrate leadership, scholarship, and service with three research presentations from ambassadors Gianna Viscusi, Joanna Chan, and Dua Sadiq. You can read more about their projects on page 16.

We also thanked Michelle Napierski-Prancl, former institute faculty director, for her service. (Shelly Calabrese, former Women's Institute executive director, was later honored at Reunion Weekend.)



Deliver career-aligned microcredentials (Goal 5, Tactic 5)

Leading the way in the area of stackable, career-aligned micro-credentials (Goal 5, Tactic 6), the Women's Institute at Russell Sage College-Women@Work Leadership Development program was launched in May 2026.

The microcredential program includes three two-week modules designed for busy professionals that focus on change and innovation, relationships and persuasion, and entrepreneurial thinking. Utilizing in-person instruction, online discussions, and simulations, the modules are taught by Russell Sage's School of Management faculty and practitioners from the community.

Each module delivers valuable, immediately applicable tools, whether they continue in a graduate program or complete the certificate as a stand-alone credential.

It also offers a stepping stone to a master's program at Russell Sage by offering three credits toward the graduate programs in the School of Management to those completing all three leadership development program modules. Students in the program can also receive an evaluation for three more prior-learning credits based on their professional experience.

As of this date, one of the women who completed the first module has enrolled in the master's in Health Services Administration program.

The leadership development program also provides students with a valuable network, as they move through the modules together. The program has two more modules planned for October and November 2026. And we'll begin anew in the spring semester.

OTHER PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Livestream: Leadership the Eleanor Roosevelt Way

November 2025

This intergenerational storytelling event co-sponsored with the Alumnae/i Association featured author Robin Gerber. Robin talked with our alumnae/i community about Roosevelt's personal and public life, sharing research and stories in a conversational style that engaged the audience. What was fascinating was the way Robin shared her research and insights about Roosevelt's personal and public life — she was a complex person leading and shaping women's lives at a time when there were numerous obstacles ahead of her. Thank you, Robin, for sharing your work with us not only in this session but in the previous livestream on Barbie.

Women's Institute Co-sponsors Menopause Conference

March 2026

In March, the Women's Institute co-sponsored the Department of Nutrition's 14th annual conference, "*Menopause Reimagined.*" The event was designed to empower women — and the clinicians who support them — through perimenopause and menopause.

Offered both online and in person, the conference provided participants with the latest scientific insights and practical strategies for navigating the metabolic, hormonal, physical, and mental health changes of midlife. Faculty from Russell Sage and Albany College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, along with invited speakers, represented a range of disciplines including nutrition, physical therapy, psychology, pharmacy, public health, and clinical practice, underscoring the importance of an interdisciplinary and comprehensive approach to care.

Keynote and panel presentations are available on the Russell Sage YouTube channel. Kudos to Dr. Sonya Hauser and her conference team for orchestrating an outstanding, highly instructive event.



Valetta Gallery Opens at Finard House

May 2026

During Reunion Weekend 2026, we celebrated the opening of the Denise Taber Finard '80 Women's Institute Gallery and the extraordinary generosity of artist Valetta, whose work will now inspire the Russell Sage community for generations to come.

Valetta, who directs the nonprofit organization, Regional Center for Women in the Arts in West Chester, Pennsylvania, is a graduate of Pratt Institute, New York, and has done graduate work at Tyler School of Art and the University of Pennsylvania. She has been included in numerous juried and group shows in cities across the United States and Europe, where she has won top prizes.

Valetta was introduced to the Institute and Russell Sage by former college trustee and Women's Institute Advisory Board member Ann Duffield, and we are so grateful for the connection.

Located in the Finard House on the Troy campus, this Women's Institute Gallery is a place for creativity, reflection, conversation, and connection — values that are central to the institute's mission of empowerment and advancing women's leadership.



Reunion Weekend Book Club

May 2026

The Correspondent by Virginia Evans was the topic of discussion with 22 alumnae/i at the Women's Institute Book Club. Many thanks to Katie Davis and Kate Cohen, who agreed to be part of the organizing committee and shared provocative questions. At the close of the session, each person recommended summer reading. We're looking forward to a Fall Book Club Discussion in November.

LinkedIn Workshop

May 2026

MaryAnn Publicover Kniska '91, president of the Russell Sage College Alumnae/i Association Board, has been working with the institute to create programming to support professional development for alumnae/i.

Teaming up with Carleen Pallante, director of the Career and Self-Discovery Center, Geoff Miller, executive director of strategic partnerships and chief values officer, and Susan Lynch '71, we invited Brittany Lawton from Lawton Social to present, "Harnessing the Potential of LinkedIn." Over 40 people signed up.

WHAT'S NEXT:

We're thinking about a workshop on artificial intelligence in the 2026-27 academic year.



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND SERVICE LEARNING

Civic Engagement and Service Learning are a key component of the ambassadors' commitment to our community. This year, the emphasis was on women's health and children and how the ambassadors can support these two populations with both their attention and a supply of goods.

The October Breast Cancer Walk was a Russell Sage College community event. The ambassadors joined in with students from the baseball team, the softball team, and a number of campus organizations.

The Gator Claws-It Period Pantry Drive in November was a huge success. The ambassadors collected boxes of tampons, pantyliners, and other menstruation products and received generous donations from the Forum for Executive Women (FEW).

Thanksgiving Food Drive: Donations to feed four families was the goal of the Thanksgiving Food Drive.

The Blanket-a-thon, in which the ambassadors created blankets for charity, was a huge success. The ambassadors started this project last year and wanted to deliver more blankets to children in the pediatric ward at Albany Medical Center.

CONGRATULATIONS TO OUR AMBASSADOR GRADUATES

Jaclynn Coviello graduated with a School Health Education M.S. Jackie played a significant role as an ambassador, coordinating Thanksgiving food baskets for the community, serving meals at Joseph's House, and leading discussions in our weekly meetings. She demonstrated leadership in the Esteves School of Education as a graduate assistant and founder and co-president of Kappa Delta Pi.

Olivia Peter graduated with a B.S. in Nursing. Olivia participated in several service projects and played a key role in the creation of the new design of the Women's Institute card, *Listen to Your Inner Voice*, emphasizing the importance of self-love, stillness and trust. Olivia was also in the college's honors program and presented her research paper, "Counting Sheep: Sleep Health – Challenges in School-Aged Children," at the New York Capital Honors Exchange conference in March.

Ava Judd graduated with a B.S. in Business Administration. Ava joined the ambassador program in her last semester and volunteered to be the institute's social media coordinator. She was critical in planning our Women's History Becoming event.

Thanks to the faculty, Advisory Board members, and ambassador alumnae who shared in the celebration and provided feedback to the research presenters. The evening concluded with the traditional feminist parade around the Troy campus, suffragette flag raised high.



HIGHLIGHTING OUR AMBASSADOR SCHOLARSHIP

AMBASSADOR RESEARCH PRESENTATIONS 2025-26

Adrianna Denio

False Memories in Bilinguals: A Meta-Analytic Review of Cross-Linguistic Interference and Memory Distortion

2026 Northeast Conference for Teachers, for Languages, for Cultures in NYC

Sophia Pearl

The Gendered Nature of Humor, Do Men Truly Hold the “Funny Bone?”: A Content Analysis of Top Recommended Male and Female Comedy Specials Streaming on Netflix

Capital District Feminist Studies Consortium Conference at Russell Sage

Ava Judd

She and her teammates designed a business plan to support first-generation college students/graduates with a financial support network.

New York State Business Plan Competition at University at Albany

Gianna Viscusi

When Survivors are Victimized: The Exoneration of Women and Misinterpretation of Self-Defense

WST 405: Women’s Studies Capstone presentation

Olivia Peter

Counting Sheep: Sleep Health – Challenges in School-Aged Children

New York Capital Honors Exchange Conference

Joanna Chan

Reimagining Education: How Bilingual Education Can Help Change the Future

New York Capital Honors Exchange Conference

Dua Sadiq

CRISPR Gene Editing and the Current Political Climate

New York Capital Honors Exchange Conference, Russell Sage College Undergraduate Research Day

Zaynah Aparece (with Shannon Hartwell)

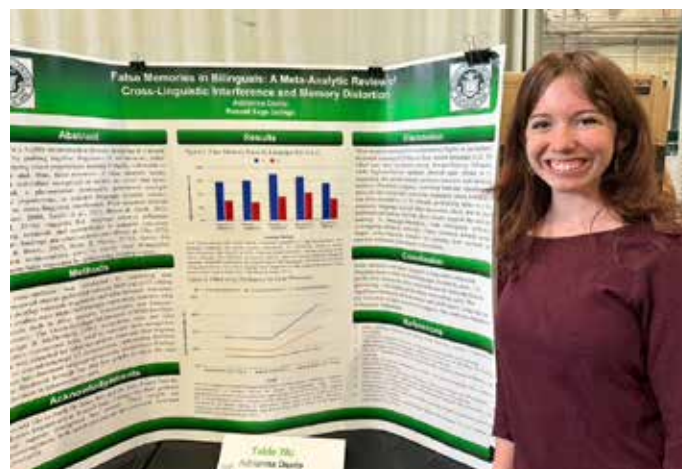
The Effects of Exercise on Memory Retention

Russell Sage 2026 Undergraduate Research Day

Bridelle Toumani (with Jamie Leon, Janiyah Hewins, and Alexis Gouldsbury)

Understanding the Role of clec-60 in Innate Immune Response to Vibrio parahaemolyticus

Russell Sage 2026 Undergraduate Research Day



Adrianna Denio

WOMEN'S INSTITUTE IN THE COMMUNITY AND WORLD

As executive director, my presence in the community extended across both local and international settings. Through the *Times Union's* Women@Work monthly breakfasts, I connected with professional women — many from nonprofit organizations — who are actively grappling with the ethical implications of artificial intelligence. Our conversations focused on developing policies that reflect organizational values and protect the primacy of human-centered service. Other women shared their excitement about their own professional development and the ways this network is strengthening their confidence, leadership, and systems of support.

My work this year also included a personal and spiritual pilgrimage that deepened the Institute's commitment to women's stories across time and place. In Bath and Glastonbury, England, I explored ancient practices and historical landmarks such as Silbury Hill and the stones of Avebury, reflecting on the deep roots of women's lives and spiritual traditions.

In Rome and Gaeta, Italy, I interviewed women about their daily work and vocations: shopkeepers, artisans in a small studio hand-embroidering linens and baby clothes and a 97-year-old woman who continues to work in the fields and sell fruits and vegetables in the town marketplace. These encounters, along with reconnecting with alumnae/i and listening to their stories, continue to inform how I lead the Women's Institute — grounding our programs in lived experience, intergenerational wisdom, and a global vision of women's resilience and leadership.





LOOKING AHEAD: FUTURE PROGRAMMING

These initiatives represent the early stages of a larger vision — a connected sequence of high-impact experiences that, over time, will form a leadership portfolio for each ambassador. (Goal 5, Tactic 2). As we continue to develop additional travel, mentorship, and capstone opportunities, we remain committed to experiences that are not only impressive on paper, but genuinely transformative in the lives of our students.

Women and Politics

The ambassadors will go on a New York State Capitol Tour and have a meeting with New York State Sen. Pat Fahy on September 16.

Living in the Grey, a documentary by Heidi Latsky

This November 17 program is co-sponsored by the Women's Institute, the Christopher Ames Women in Film and Media Endowed Speaker Series Fund, the Russell Sage Visual and Performing Arts Department, and the New York State Council on the Arts and includes two experiences for students:

- A Morning Movement Workshop, where a dance instructor will lead a workshop during the 9:30 a.m. class block, inviting all students into embodied exploration of movement, limitation, and possibility. This session will prepare participants to engage the evening film not only intellectually, but through their own bodily awareness and reflection.
- An evening film screening of *Living in the Grey*, a 35-minute documentary featuring Heidi Latsky and her company. After undergoing an 11-hour brain surgery as a dancer, Latsky realized that many dancers live with neurological and physical challenges that are often invisible. In response, she created a community and artistic vision that centers these experiences rather than hiding them.

Women, Food, and Culture

We're working on plans to take the ambassadors to the Beard House in New York City. In collaboration with Women's Institute Advisory Board member Tania Capaz Topping, who works for the James Beard Foundation, we want to weave together the themes of food, culture, hospitality, and leadership. This component remains in development but represents the kind of layered, cross-disciplinary experience we're creating for our institute ambassadors.

Hearst Corp./Women@Work Partnership

Ambassadors will travel to the Hearst Tower in Manhattan, where they will join women leaders from Hearst and members of the *Times Union's* Women@Work network. Through panels, informal conversations, and networking, students will encounter real-world stories of career paths, leadership challenges, and ethical decision-making in media and business.

Coming this academic year!

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2026

C.J. Kettler, president of King Features and scout for HearstLab, will join us for a webinar conversation. From eco-friendly startups to landing classic characters on Netflix, Kettler has built a powerful career in media.

THURSDAY, MARCH 4, 2027

We're bringing Jodi Kantor, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and New York Times bestselling author to Russell Sage for two speaking engagements, including a discussion of the reporting that reignited the #MeToo movement.

