DENISE TABER FINARD '80
WOMEN'S INSTITUTE
AT RUSSELL SAGE COLLEGE

Women's Institute Newsletter
October 2026



A Letter from the Executive Director

Welcome, friends of the Denise Taber Finard '80 Women's Institute!

"Every leaf speaks bliss to me/Fluttering from the autumn tree," writes Emily Brontë in her poem, "Fall, Leaves, Fall."

This fall, the Women's Institute has created programming in "wild internal alignment," to capture Brontë's spirit, with our purpose and mission. Our engagement in the community connects us with young women, professionals, our partners, campus clubs, faculty, and staff, as well as our beloved alumnae/i, and creates a bountiful harvest.

We recently celebrated **SageGives**, the annual college fundraiser, and we thank everyone who continues to contribute to this harvest coming to fruition. Colette, the iconic French writer and feminist, described the autumn season as not a decline, but a beginning.

Welcome to the transformed Women's Institute. Enjoy reading about how our 26 ambassadors and WI Advisory Board have been instrumental in this new beginning, and be sure to scroll to the bottom and check out the upcoming events (including a webinar this week).

Warmly,
Eileen

Dr. Eileen V. Brownell
Executive Director



Webinar: “Modernizing Brands, Purpose-Driven Media, and the Winding Road to Leadership”

Wednesday, October 28, 6 p.m.

In this interactive one-hour webinar, you’ll learn how C.J. Kettler, president of King Features (a division of Hearst Newspapers) and a Hearst Lab Scout, navigated career pivots, brought legacy brands to new audiences, and stayed true to her purpose through it all.

Pictured on left: Women’s Institute Executive Director Eileen V. Brownell, left, with upcoming speaker and Hearst Executive C.J. Kettler during the ambassadors’ trip to the Hearst Tower.

Enjoy Our 2025-26 Annual Report

The Institute’s 2025-2026 annual report is now available. Please celebrate the past academic year with us by taking a look. We’re excited about our progress and growth.



Welcoming First-Year and Transfer Students at Our Ice Cream Social

Each year after the Convocation ceremony, the college’s incoming first-year and transfer students find their way to the Finard House courtyard and celebrate their new start at Russell Sage.

On August 26, the ambassadors welcomed the students and President Matt Shaftel for ice cream and conversation. New students explored the Valetta Gallery and learned more about the Women’s Institute and the student ambassador program.





Study Away: A Day at the Hearst Tower Funded by the Laurie Halloran ’82 Leadership Fund and Women@Work Innovators

Creating opportunities for college students to network, listen to successful people tell their stories, ask questions about career paths, hear when leaders fail and pivot, and discover how professionals manage work-life balance is essential to their success.

In October, four students visited the Hearst Tower in New York City, where Dr. Kimberly Gilmore, chief historian and senior vice president of corporate social responsibility at the History/A+E Global Media Channel, recounted her work and path as part of the Hearst family of enterprises. The ambassadors engaged with business professionals during a facilitated conversation that shared perspectives about the Capital Region’s most pressing needs.

The ambassadors were asked, “What does it mean to participate in an event meeting women from the C-Suite of Hearst Corporation, Capital Region professionals, AND join in a one-on-one conversation with George R. Hearst III?”

Here are their answers:

- “I now know I want to try different things; my path may not be a straight line but one that opens unexpected experiences.”
- “I never used a handheld mic to introduce myself to a group of business professionals at an event.”
- “I had a great time today at Hearst. I sat at a table during lunch with Mr. Hearst and a group of women professionals at the top of their careers listening to George talk about strategy and answering a question about AI and data centers.”
- “I expanded my network and asked questions about choices ahead of me.”
- “I was slightly nervous meeting so many important people, but it got easier, and it became very fun to hear their stories. I felt mentored as they encouraged me to join in. By the end, I was very comfortable with them and had zero problems engaging in conversation.”



Study Away: A Visit to the James Beard Foundation Funded by the Laurie Halloran ’82 Leadership Fund

The day before their trip to the Hearst Tower, our ambassadors met with alumna Tania Capaz Topping ’09, director of institutional giving at the James Beard Foundation in New York City. She provided an experiential leadership visit designed to introduce students to the intersection of nonprofit leadership, entrepreneurship, food, culture, and community impact.

The students, in a behind-the-scenes look at one of the nation's leading nonprofit organizations, explored how leadership, relationship-building, and purpose-driven careers can create meaningful change. After the tour of Beard House, we walked to Platform by JBF at Pier 57 for lunch and to learn how the foundation has evolved from celebrating culinary excellence to advancing entrepreneurship, workforce development, sustainability, advocacy, and independent restaurants across the country.

The ambassadors asked questions about nonprofit leadership and the Beard Foundation, and also asked Tania about her experiences at Russell Sage, how to handle situations as college students, and for advice on their future career paths. Thank you, Tania, for mentoring these women and making a lasting connection.





Study Away: Capitol Tour and Meet-up with NYS Senator Pat Fahy

A goal of the Women's Institute is to serve as a catalyst for women's leadership and community engagement through structured mentoring, both on and off campus.

In September, 14 ambassadors, along with Faculty Fellows, Dr. Tonya Moutray and Professor MaryEllen Tedesco, toured the New York State Capitol and met with New York State Senator Pat Fahy for a conversation about women and politics and Fahy's career path.

They also connected with two Sage graduates working at the Capitol: Resa Ostrander '05, who serves in the Executive Chamber of New York State, and Mayleen Rivera-Burrell '14, who works at the New York State Assembly in the Office of Intergovernmental & External Affairs.

Post-experience evaluations showed the day's themes – politics, role modeling, leadership development, civic engagement, and networking – strengthened the ambassadors' personal confidence and deepened their attitudes about community service.

Participants also expressed appreciation for the Capitol's history and architecture, describing the "study away" tour as both "interesting and enlightening," more than some had anticipated.

As one ambassador eloquently noted: "One thing that really made an impact on me was meeting Senator Pat Fahy and learning about her experience as the first woman from the Albany area to hold public office. Hearing about her journey made me think about how important it is for women to have a voice and place in spaces where decisions are made. Touring the Capitol also made the government feel more real to me rather than something I only hear about in class or see on the news. It was inspiring to see the history behind the building, while also hearing from a woman who helped create history herself. It reminded me that women can break barriers, and that our voices and experiences matter."

Thank you to our donors for funding meaningful programming like this.



Intergenerational Mentoring with Girls Inc.

The Women's Institute's relationship with Girls Inc., a nonprofit dedicated to developing girls as leaders, continues to deepen as our ambassadors lead and model what it means to be a mentor.

Under the direction of our Faculty Fellows, Professor MaryEllen Tedesco and Dr. Tonya Moutray, the ambassadors created a service project team, Sage for Girls, knowing the importance of sharing their experiences with girls from Girls Inc. and other community organizations.

The Girls Inc. girls who participated in this experience recognized the value of this relationship. In a post-event evaluation, 89% of the girls responded they were mentored and saw examples of mentoring between them and the Women's Institute ambassadors. In addition, 66% reported they personally demonstrated leadership at the event and felt comfortable asking questions about leadership, college life, mentoring, and building confidence.

Building Leadership Through Professional Branding Workshop

Building leadership skills that go beyond the classroom is one of the goals of the Denise Taber Finard '80 Women's Institute ambassador program. Jennifer Morrill, associate director of the Career and Self-Discovery Center, delivered a session on professional branding, LinkedIn, and networking. Students identified their strengths, values, skills, and experiences and how important this understanding is to how they present themselves professionally.

The 15 new ambassadors learned how to strengthen their LinkedIn profiles by highlighting experiences, such as employment and community service, building meaningful professional connections, and navigating expectations around communication, digital presence, and professional appearance.

The ambassadors completed an evaluation form. The response was overwhelmingly positive with all participants reporting that they felt more confident identifying their professional brand, improving their LinkedIn presence, building their professional network, and recognizing professional expectations after the session.

The Sage Forward Mentoring Program: Connecting RSC Alumnae with Ambassadors

Intergenerational mentoring continues to be a focal point of the Women's Institute. The partnership with the Russell Sage College Alumnae/i Association (RSCAA) has become an integral part of the Women's Institute. And so, we expanded our work with the college's Career and Self-Discovery Center to create a mentoring pilot program with 12 ambassadors and 12 alumnae for the fall semester.

The mentoring program team includes: Dr. MaryAnn Kniska '91, president of the Alumnae/i Association; Carleen Pallante, director of the Career and Self-Discovery Center; Susan Moyle Lynch '71, fundraising and events consultant; Dr. Geoff Miller, assistant vice president for external relations and chief values officer; Deb Foley '95, who will be president of the RSCAA as of July 1, 2027, and Dr. Eileen V. Brownell, executive director of the Women's Institute.

"Alums ask how they can give back to Sage in ways that are both meaningful and manageable within their busy lives," Dr. Kniska said. "Mentoring offers just that. Virtual meeting platforms and tools like LinkedIn make it easier to build genuine connections, bringing together graduates possessing valuable experience with students eager to explore ideas and receive personalized guidance. Helping to create this program has been deeply gratifying, and I'm excited about the connections and opportunities it will foster."

The team will evaluate the pilot program and create a model that can be used for all students at Sage.

SHOUT OUTS!

Research Projects

Several Women's Institute ambassadors presented research at the New York State Association for Foreign Language Teachers conference in October. Their presentations were part of a poster session, "Curious Minds: Undergraduate Research and Projects."

- Adrianna Denio presented "The Power of Words: Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz and Women's Education in Colonial Mexico"
- Dua Sadiq presented "Feasibility of 3D Printed Dental Instruments"
- Bridelle Toumani presented "Beyond Listening: What Interactive Read-Alouds Can Do for Elementary Oral Language Development."



A Student Emcee

Michelle Horton, author of the memoir Dear Sister (pictured above on the left), spoke on the Albany campus on October 22 for the Hoffman Lecture in Sociology and Social Policy.

She was interviewed by Women's Institute ambassador and Forensic Psychology major Elizabeth Mastrantuono.





Muscle Mommies Holds Fitness Class at Finard House

Before she became a Women's Institute ambassador, Dailanny Hernandez founded the Muscle Mommies, a student club at Russell Sage that "empowers college women to build strength, confidence, and healthy habits."

She and several of the other ambassadors organized a Pilates class on the Finard House courtyard while the weather was still warm, and it was a huge success!

Microcredential Program Takes Center Stage

Dr. Jen Murphy, a member of the Women's Institute Advisory Board, presented at the Times Union's Women@Work October breakfast. The topic? Our very own Russell Sage College-Women@Work Leadership Development program.

Dr. Murphy took a very engaged audience through several case studies, similar to the experience students have in the leadership development microcredential program. Thinking about the microcredential program yourself? Module 3 will kick off on November 9, and there's still time to register.



UPCOMING EVENTS

Film Screening and Talk: “Living In the Grey” with Heidi Latsky

Tuesday, November 17
5:30 p.m. meet and greet
6-7:15 p.m. screening and discussion

In the moving, 35-minute documentary, “Living in the Grey,” dancer Heidi Latsky discusses her neurological disorder and features the stories of four other dancers. The film is a tribute to people living and thriving with non-apparent disabilities.

The event is co-sponsored by Christopher Ames Women in Film and Media Endowed Speaker Series Fund and The Denise Taber Finard '80 Women's Institute. It is one of the many events supported each year with funds from the NYS DanceForce, a partnership program of the NYS Council on the Arts with the support of New York Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature.

Save the Date: Jodi Kantor, Pulitzer Prize-winning Journalist and Bestselling Author

Thursday, March 4, 2027



On March 4, in the Schacht Fine Arts Center on the Troy campus, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author Jodi Kantor will speak about her book How to Start in the afternoon and then give a talk in the evening on her investigative reporting for The New York Times, which helped re-ignite the #MeToo movement. A livestream of both events will be available for a limited time to those who pre-register.

Stay tuned for event details!

Prepare for Kantor’s Visit: Announcing Our Book Club

Thursday, February 4, 2027, 6:30 p.m., online

On February 4, join Professor of English and Women’s Institute Faculty Fellow Dr. Tonya Moutray for a book talk on She Said by Kantor and fellow New York Times journalist Megan Twohey. The book details how the pair unearthed the Harvey Weinstein scandal. We encourage you to read the book this winter, and invite you to join Dr. Moutray's online discussion on February 4.