Montclair State University is grateful to Mr. and Mrs. James Patterson for establishing the James Patterson Teacher Education Scholarships to support the next generation of teachers as they work to foster a love of reading and learning in their students.

Montclair State University is pleased to present the 12 recipients of the 2016-2017 scholarships. They were selected by the dean of the College of Education and Human Services, in consultation with members of the faculty. The recipients are among the most qualified and accomplished students who were admitted to the prestigious Teacher Education program this year.

The application process includes a review of academic records, an essay, references from professors and others, a writing sample and an interview before a panel of faculty from both the Teacher Education program and a major area of study. Of critical importance in the review process is the student’s ability to demonstrate a strong dedication to the profession of teaching and an ability to articulate his or her inspiration for becoming a teacher. Based on the responses to this intensive application process, the 12 students profiled on these pages are well on their way to becoming educators who will instill in their students a love of reading and positively impact the lives of the children they teach.
When Ceelea Graham first entertained the idea of becoming a teacher, a part of what drew her to the profession was the similarity between performing and teaching. As time went on, she began to realize that the real appeal of teaching was not how it made her feel but, instead, how she could make her students feel.

Ceelea realized that the best teachers she's ever had not only provided her great learning opportunities, but also supported her and genuinely cared about her growth and well-being. She loved school because she felt surrounded by people who truly wanted to see her succeed. She wants to provide that same love and support to her future students because she understands firsthand just how life-changing it can be.

“Knowing that I care very deeply about the advancement of children, first and foremost, and the importance of literacy in our culture, I feel that being a teacher would be an extremely fulfilling job for me. I could not possibly see myself doing anything else! Thank you for helping me to achieve my goal!”

Stephen Fichter says that although there are many reasons behind his decision to become a teacher, chief among them is his mother, who is an inspiration to him. Stephen says that she has been a special education teacher for 35 years and embodies every great quality a teacher should possess. Stephen says that he has seen her inspire her students to reach new heights both in and out of the classroom. Even when students have trouble believing in themselves, she motivates and encourages them, inspiring them to try and achieve.

Witnessing firsthand how a teacher can help students push through self doubt and insecurity to reach their goals has been a powerful motivator for Stephen. He hopes to empower his students to dream big and to believe that those dreams can become a reality with hard work and dedication, just as his mother has done.

“Mr. and Mrs. Patterson: The financial assistance that this scholarship provides goes such a long way in supporting my goals and dreams. It allows me to focus more on my time for studying rather than worrying about the educational expenses. Thank you.”
KATHERINE MCCOLE
Sussex, New Jersey

Katherine McCole has always known that she wanted a profession in which she would be free to create, but she was unsure of exactly how to channel her passion for art into a career until she took a job as a day care teacher. Working with preschool students during her first two years in college helped her to understand that she wanted to teach. Helping young children to explore and channel their innate creativity was enormously fulfilling. She can imagine no better job than one where, every day, she helps children to express themselves through art.

Katherine is looking forward to student teaching in the spring and to securing a position as an art educator next fall. Because she understands exactly how significant the support of a teacher can be, she looks forward to mentoring students herself, helping them to find and hone their artistic voices.

“Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Patterson, for your support and aid this year. I am working hard and will graduate this May, ready to give back to others in both support and knowledge. Your assistance is helping me to concentrate less on finances and more on learning to educate my students. I look forward to helping them to discover the vision and creativity that lives in each of them.”

ALLISON MYERS
Rutherford, New Jersey

When Allison Myers was a small child, she used her chalkboard to teach imaginary students how to add and subtract. She even made up a class roster and took daily attendance.

Allison believes that children have an interesting way of processing the world around them. She hopes to play a part in encouraging students to develop their unique perspectives. She looks forward to sharing with her classes her interests in foreign cultures, music, animals, reading and writing and to empowering her students with the tools they will need to be happy and creative adults.

“Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Patterson for this scholarship. I believe deeply in the importance of literacy and I hope to be an example of the power of your generosity, promoting literacy in my classroom and in my community.”
There are two very personal reasons why Gabrielle Raccosta is working toward dual certifications in elementary education and special education. She has two younger brothers, both of whom live with a spectrum of special needs, and she has watched as they have experienced both exclusive and inclusive methods for delivering special education.

Because of her brothers’ varying experiences, Gabrielle believes that she has unique insight into the diverse cultures of the special needs community. That insight has been invaluable in her job as a teaching assistant in a Mercer County elementary school. She assists the teacher in an autistic classroom and has the opportunity to observe daily student-teacher interactions and short-term student development, and believes that she has gained an understanding of some of the creative and alternative methods the teacher has used to satisfy curriculum standards.

“I understand that a part of your goal in creating this scholarship is to increase literacy and I want you to know that I share that goal. As a teacher, I hope to discover innovative countermeasures to illiteracy, to advocate for improved literacy education and to foster a lifelong love of learning. I am very grateful for this scholarship and I hope that I am able to help you to fulfill your goals.”

As the oldest of eight children, Victoria Rakus has always been a little bit of a teacher. But it wasn’t until a music teacher took Victoria under her wing, that it became her career goal.

As a senior in high school, Victoria planned to attend college and major in trombone performance, even though her trombone instructor had often suggested that she consider becoming a music educator. In her last semester of high school, she won a scholarship from a music education association and was asked to play at the banquet at which she would receive her award. There she met a music teacher who invited her to attend an end-of-the-year concert of middle school musicians. She went, played with the students, got a glimpse of what it was like to be “on the other side of the desk” and, just like that, her vision of her future changed. Now a junior with a 4.0 grade point average, Victoria hopes that, one day, she will be able to have the same kind of impact on a student’s life that teachers have had on hers.

“I hope to foster a love of music and a passion for creativity in my students as a middle school band director. I hope to pass on a strong work ethic, perseverance and critical thinking. I have a sister who has just started at Montclair State and this scholarship lightens the financial burden on my family. Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Patterson!”
Jessica Rivas arrived at college without having a clear idea of what her career path might be. But that changed quickly when she landed a part-time job as a teaching assistant at a local preschool. In very short order, Jessica discovered that she simply loved teaching. She says that there is never a dull moment in the classroom, each day is different and exciting and there is nothing like the feeling she has watching her students learn, develop and grow.

In that same classroom, she had her first experience with special education and early intervention. A handful of students were showing signs of delayed development. Early intervention therapists visited the classroom to work with those students and offer suggestions and tips to the classroom teachers about how to support development and create an inclusive classroom environment that would foster growth for all students.

“It’s incredible for me to see how the changes I make in the classroom have an impact on student development. I feel lucky to have found a career about which I am so passionate and I am looking forward to finishing my degree so I can continue making a difference, fostering growth and creating opportunities for my students. Thank you for your generous support, which is helping to make all of this possible.”

Ashley Roxas has been a storyteller for as long as she can remember. But it wasn’t until sixth grade, when her language arts teachers responded so enthusiastically to her creative writing assignments, that she began to think about writing as something other than a hobby.

She still credits the encouragement that she received that year, which she recalls as profound and genuine, for setting her on the path to becoming an English teacher. She hopes to be able to instill in students an appreciation for novels and poetry and to help them translate their thoughts onto paper. Above everything else, she wants to help students to believe in their own talents and to recognize and celebrate those talents.

“Mr. and Mrs. Patterson, your generosity pushes me to work hard for my academic and career goals. This scholarship is helping me to achieve those goals and I hope I will also be able to give back to the community and help my future students achieve their goals.”
TIFFANY SOARES
East Brusnwick, New Jersey

Tiffany Soares is a linguistics major who is working toward a K-12 English as a Second Language certification, with a minor in Spanish in the five-year Dual Degree/Dual Certification Program. It is a little surprising that someone with her feet planted so firmly in the humanities says that tutoring algebra and geometry in high school made her realize that she wanted to teach. For Tiffany, the gratification came not from the subjects she was teaching, but from how teaching made her feel. She recalls that she felt as if she was helping her students to accomplish something great – as if she were helping them to climb a mountain.

She is particularly interested in teaching non-native speakers about the beauty of English. Her parents emigrated from Portugal when they were young and attended ESL classes to learn English. She hopes to help recent immigrants to learn English while also creating a safe space in her classroom where they can “find joy in learning.”

In addition to her very full academic plate, she is a student ambassador as well as a sister of Phi Sigma Sigma, and she is interning with Teach for America this year as a Campus Campaign Coordinator.

“I cannot thank you enough for your generosity. The James Patterson Teacher Education Scholarship is something I could have only dreamed of receiving and now that dream is a reality. I want to share my love of learning and education with every student I meet. I hope to be an amazing educator and you will have helped to make that happen. Thank you.”

AMANDA VIETRI
Dumont, New Jersey

One reason that Amanda Vietri, a mathematics major who is enrolled in the Dual Degree/Dual Certification Program, hopes to become a special education teacher is that when she was in school, teachers often seemed to think that she was the student who did not understand what was going on. Those experiences gave her insight into how students with learning challenges might feel. That sense of empathy only grew when she became a “buddy” to a boy with autism spectrum disorder, spending lunch hours helping him to learn how to interact with his peers.

Because she has always loved math, even when it seemed as if none of her friends shared her passion, she wants to teach math to her students in such a way that they see the fun and the beauty of it. She also hopes to show her students how prevalent and how important math is in their everyday lives.

“I am so very grateful for this scholarship, which has made my education attainable. It is inspiring to know that someone of your talent and stature values the work of teachers so much.”
ARDRICA-FATIM WILLIAMS  
Montclair, New Jersey

Like many people who find their way into the teaching profession, Ardrica-Fatim Williams had a teacher whose mentorship changed her life. The single mother of two recalls that the educator who had an enormous impact was a teacher who always encouraged Ardrica to push herself, especially to accomplish those things about which she felt most insecure.

For instance, Ardrica had a fear of public speaking. So her mentor made sure that young Ardrica enrolled in an after-school program that would help her to develop her public speaking skills. When Ardrica struggled to get her thoughts across in a clear and cohesive manner, her mentor would spend free periods helping Ardrica to organize her thoughts. Ardrica often thinks of her mentor now, as she works to become the nurturing and effective teacher that she aspires to be.

“This scholarship provides me with powerful motivation to continue to work my hardest so that, one day, I will be able give something back to others, not only as a teacher, sharing with my students my passion for learning and reading, but also as an advocate for literacy and early childhood education.”

RACHEL LOTT  
Harrington Park, New Jersey

As a senior in high school, Rachel Lott observed and assisted a middle school physical education teacher for six weeks as part of a high school senior service program. As a result of the experience, Rachel not only picked up many pointers on teaching physical education but also learned some very valuable lessons about fostering an environment that encourages fair play and teamwork.

Rachel says that she saw how easy it is for young children to become quickly upset when they lose a game. But, she remembers, she also saw how a seasoned teacher could diffuse those feelings, by stressing teamwork and collaboration. As a physical education and health teacher, she hopes to create an environment where students can learn to cope with and learn from both winning and losing.

“I am so honored to receive this scholarship, which will assist me in paying my educational expenses and allow me to concentrate on my studies to further my education. It is meaningful to me to know that you believe in the power of great teaching and you have made this investment, not only in my future, but in that of my future students.”

THE JAMES PATTERSON TEACHER EDUCATION SCHOLARSHIPS