They are engaged in remarkable work at this School of Arts and Sciences center, from developing new ways to diagnose schizophrenia and autism to studying the brain’s role in producing religious beliefs to examining how and why people make decisions. Computer scientists work on algorithms for more efficient robots. Philosophers, meanwhile, engage with the ethical issues inherent in our increasing reliance on robots. A recent talk by noted roboticist Angelica Lima sponsored by the center was titled: Building Robots with Emotional Intelligence.

"Children have the same understanding about object-hood, or is there something they are noticing that we as adults have tuned out?" Suthren said.

"The essential question is: ‘Do children understand the world in the same way we do, and can we get at that through word meaning?’" Fried, meanwhile, sees a connection to her chosen calling of social work. "Language and cognitive science have a lot to do with social work," said Fried, who is mirroring in cognitive science. ‘This research makes me far more aware of the ways in which I, as a social worker, would talk to clients, and the ways in which clients would talk to me.’

Sutherland is a Rutgers University-New Brunswick student whose passionate pursuit of knowledge impressed his teachers and earned him good grades but made it difficult to decide on a major. Strong in the STEM disciplines, Sutherland also has a penchant for pondering deep philosophical questions. "I enjoy questions like: ‘Why are there so many different expressions of God or evil?’" says Sutherland, a School of Arts and Sciences senior. "I am interested in the bigger picture that might tell us about the way the mind works.

"We are a place that bridges humanities and the sciences,” says Brian McLaughlin, the center director and a professor of philosophy. "The goal of cognitive science is to understand the mind and mental abilities, and the applications span the academic spectrum."

With enrollments on the rise, this year the center launched an undergraduate major, broadening Rutgers students in the emerging discipline and drawing a devoted community of students. Ashley George, a senior who switched her major seven times—taking courses in finance, linguistics, religion, and dance—says she has found the perfect fit in cognitive science. George plans on becoming a neuropsychologist and doing research on Alzheimer’s and Huntington’s diseases.

"I came to Rutgers wanting to study everything." George says. "It took me four years to find my field, but I have never felt more excited to be a student."

"Cognitive science is typically defined as the interdisciplinary study of mind, thought, and learning. Rutgers has long been a leader in the field. Harvard recently announced it was exploring a proposal to offer a concentration in cognitive science. At Rutgers, students from many majors conduct research in cognitive science that stretches their intellectual capabilities and makes them stronger in their fields." Greg Fried, a junior, works in Professor Kristen Syrett’s linguistics lab, observing first-hand how children name and categorize simple objects. For Syrett, the research sheds light on complex questions about when children gain adult-like understanding of words.

"We’re interested in the limits on what allows an object to be considered part of a category and how the context and a speaker’s goals play a role," Syrett said."