This fall, the College of Human Ecology will open the Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research (BCTR), an initiative that will merge two longstanding and successful college centers: the Family Life Development Center and the Bronfenbrenner Life Course Center.

The BCTR will place the college in the vanguard of one of the most dynamic and exciting recent developments in the scientific community—translational research as a means to link research with outreach and education. The BCTR will operate as a “living laboratory” for the extension of research-based knowledge into practice and policy settings and for the incorporation of problems from those domains into researchers’ agendas.

In the spirit of its namesake, Urie Bronfenbrenner, the new Bronfenbrenner Center will bridge the gap between research and practice, helping Human Ecology to solve a problem that exists both at Cornell and in society at large. Too often, practitioners view research as esoteric and irrelevant, while researchers perceive application as trivial and unscientific.

Science can help solve many pressing human problems, yet much research is never used. Many programs intended to benefit children, youth, elders, and families are not scientifically tested, and insights from basic research are rarely used systematically to guide the development of new programs. When research is translated into practice, the process is too slow. It is precisely these problems that translational research is intended to address and this is where the BCTR will make unique contributions.

We aim to make Cornell a nationally recognized leader in the translation of social and behavioral science into practice and policy. The initiative will build on cutting-edge research already in progress in the college and across Cornell in which social scientists are collaborating with clinical researchers, community agencies, and policy experts on studies designed to bring research findings to bear on improving health and well-being.

The BCTR will work closely with Cornell Cooperative Extension and the Cornell Office for Research on Evaluation, and build on established links to the Cornell Edward R. Roybal Center for Translational Research on Aging, Weill Cornell’s Clinical and Translational Science Center, the Cornell in Washington program, and other Cornell research and training centers.

Examples of activities that will be promoted by the BCTR include:
- integration of translational perspectives into basic research, by encouraging innovative research designs with practical applications in mind, or by integrating practitioner perspectives that enhance effective translation.
- systematic reviews of the scientific literature to inform new research and guide practitioners and decision-makers.
- the development and rigorous testing of interventions to promote healthy development and change unhealthy trajectories.
- community outreach and community participation in behavioral science research on risk and protective factors, prevention research, and the development of interventions.
- research on the implementation, dissemination, and sustainability of evidence-based programs, practices, and guidelines.
- research and development on the translational process itself, studying how best to move research findings into practice and policy.
- community-based participatory/action research conducted in partnership with practitioners and stakeholders.
- engagement of undergraduates in BCTR projects and through coursework, as well as providing training opportunities for graduate students and postdocs.

We are at a critical juncture in the development of the social and behavior sciences and in their potential to solve pressing human problems. Over the past decade, major changes in research priorities, funding for the scientific enterprise, and extension and outreach have created a new environment with both serious challenges and exciting opportunities. Human Ecology is uniquely situated to take advantage of this novel situation. The BCTR will help to make the college a national and international leader in creating a new paradigm for rigorous scientific research that addresses human needs, breaks down traditional barriers between “basic” and “applied” science, and forges a closer connection between research and extension/outreach activities.

John Eckenrode, professor of human development and director of the Family Life Development Center, leads the Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research initiative.