

# FGLI Community Initiative introduces student ambassador office hours

*A new office hours program tailored for first-generation, low-income students has sparked conversation on the role of mentorship at Yale.*

BRIAN ZHANG 11:36 PM, FEB 06, 2023

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A new office hours program for first-generation, low-income students will station student ambassadors throughout various residential colleges. At the forefront of the program is a drive to up inter-student connections and build stronger intra-residential college communities.

Spearheaded by the FGLI Community Initiative at Yale — an administration-led effort that seeks to empower socioeconomic diversity within the student body — the program is slated to open on Feb. 7 and assume a biweekly schedule for the remainder of the spring semester. This year's ambassadors are Drake Prince '24, Natalie Sangngam '23, Huda Siddiqui '25, Sayda Martinez-Alvarado '23, Reece Maccaux '24 and Linh Pham '24. Information on their stations and schedules [is available online](#), and each station will have light snacks and laptop stickers for visitors.

“As FGLI students, we are often the leaders for our siblings and others in the community,” Prince said. “We are used to being the one that others come to for help, but now you need to be the person who ... knows how to seek help. Yale has a lot of resources, and the problem is oftentimes ... [knowing] how to access them.”

Knowing firsthand the challenges of travel and family emergencies as a low-income student, he looks forward to using his own experiences to help others and publicize the University's Safety Net program, which grants short-term funding for unexpected hardship related directly to one's Yale education.

In a conversation with the News, transfer student Kayla Wong '25, who hopes to stop by office hours, also pointed to the fact that eligibility for University resources does not necessarily equate to accessibility. Compiling a list of student resources that are not well known or discussed, such as the winter clothing grant and calculator loan, would particularly benefit first-year students who are still completing their transition to college, she said.

For Prince, however, the greatest challenge that follows a FGLI student is navigating social relationships on a campus where students' different financial abilities are often compared against each other in both direct and subtle ways. The office hours initiative tackles this problem by introducing a human element to mentorship — not only

can students ask for concrete help on their respective financial situations, but they can also gain a friend.

The need for networking and building stronger cultures is also on Jorge Anaya '19's mind. Anaya currently serves as the assistant director of student engagement at the Yale College Dean's Office, and has worked alongside ambassadors to launch the new program. He wanted to provide another avenue for communication aside from residential college deans, first-year counselors and peer liaisons.

"As FGLI students, we're missing a lot of the social capital that is needed for working in careers that don't have straightforward paths," said Mariah Najera '25. "I also think general affirmations can be useful in this setting. ... Just having a space to acknowledge that our experiences at Yale and in the world are valued and can be nuanced is really important."

The struggle of finding adequate career support hits close to home for pre-med student Siddiqui, the ambassador for students in Morse and Ezra Stiles Colleges. She expressed gratitude for the support she received from programs, groups and friends on campus. She looks forward to returning the favor by connecting future visitors to her station to support systems that can help them thrive.

But among Najera's worries is that at Yale, there is a "tipping" of ideas, work and emotional labor onto student mentors when it comes to University support for FGLI students. She is curious as to how the Dean's Office will partner with the ambassadors to engineer creative solutions and adapt to student needs.

Joanna Ruiz '25, who typically goes to her head of college at Jonathan Edwards and fellow FGLI peers for advice, said she is happy to see a heightened focus on human resources. However, she urged University-led efforts supporting the FGLI community to be less afraid of being "political," suggesting that ambassadors should also

serve as advocates who empower students to take action and make change at Yale regarding financial aid and admissions policies.

“I think being political is essential to our being and our existence here at Yale,” Ruiz said. She wants to see “guidance on more tangible ways we can take action and let our presence be known, whether that is by connecting us with other FGLI orgs and clubs on campus or by giving us more tips on how to go about starting a movement ... [like] who to email, how to organize, [or] where to get funding.”

Office hours will allegedly also be an opportunity for students to suggest improvements, accommodations and project ideas. In a Feb. 6 newsletter from the Community Initiative, staff members wrote that a defining part of their jobs is to learn about the “current” struggles confronting FGLI students, emphasizing that the FGLI identity is nuanced, continuous and intersectional.

In recent years, the Community Initiative has been actively working with both on-campus and alumni-affiliated organizations — namely 1stGenYale and the Yale First-Gen and/or Low-Income Advocacy Movement — to effect cultural change on the way that the University understands and approaches FGLI student concerns.

Barb Protacio '81, the Vice President of 1stGenYale, takes pride in hearing about and contributing to the University's evolving commitment to creating a culture of visibility for underprivileged and underrepresented students on campus.

“Students have come to us expressing a need for regular, normalized, and easy access to a physical, welcoming space where they can go for answers to their questions, share experiences, and connect with others who are the first in their families to navigate college,” she wrote in an email to the News. “If [office hours] will provide for a welcoming space in addition to friendly and understanding upperclassman student Ambassadors at times that are considerate of

extracurricular schedules of FGLI, like work-study job hours, this sounds like it would be a positive approach.”

Drawing attention to the simultaneous universality and individuality of the FGLI experience, Protacio hopes that every ambassador will tailor Yale’s opportunities and services to the unique situation of every student, and then go back to the governing bodies and have “unmet needs collated” and addressed systematically for the benefit of Yale’s entire low-income community.

The FGLI Community Initiative Office is located on 55 Whitney Avenue, Suite 240.

*Correction 2/9: A previous version of the article had misidentified an interviewee’s job position at the Dean’s Office. Jorge Anaya is currently the assistant director of student engagement, and served as a Woodbridge Fellow for the first two years following his graduation from Yale College. The article has been updated to reflect this change.*

#### **BRIAN ZHANG**

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