

1stGenYale helps FGLI students grapple with pandemic's effects on summer plans

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Summer Plans and COVID-19

Courtesy of Yale Office of Career Strategy

As Yale continues to come to grips with the novel coronavirus pandemic, 1stGenYale — an alumni-led program that supports Yale students who are the first in their family to attend college or graduate school — hosted the webinar discussion “When Plans Change” to provide support for first-generation low-income students and alumni.

For many students, COVID-19 is both a public health crisis and crisis of certainty. Many students, such as Dereen Shirnekhi '23 — a staff columnist for the News — are “unsure how long the virus will last and to what extent summer plans will be foiled.” The summer’s uncertainty, however, creates heightened anxiety for students who identify as first-generation and/or low-income.

“If you are FGLI, chances are you do not have a personal connection to someone who could give you an opportunity for the summer”, Shirnekhi, who identifies as FGLI, told the News. “External internships are a necessity. We cannot always resort to a personal connection.”

Lise Chapman '81, chair of 1stGenYale, organized “When Plans Change” to respond to such concerns. Featuring Derek Webster of the Office of Career Strategy as the chief panelist, the webinar provided instructive recommendations for recalibrating summers plans as well as a question and answer period.

“The goal is to create a safe space for FGLI students to express concerns and receive guidance for what the summer will entail,” Chapman said to begin the seminar, which was held on Zoom on March 26. Webster proceeded to guide students to OCS resources and outlined his presentation of “what to do when Plan A is no longer an option.”

According to Webster, flexibility is key. “Students should understand that they are in a partnership with their employer. We want to have respect for the idea that employers and programs are in the same position that we are in,” he said.

The next step, then, Webster suggested, is to maintain contact with your employer and “be able to talk through flexibilities involved such as remote possibilities.” For many employers, he said, “the intention and the interest is to provide internships.”

But when Plan A is no longer feasible, Webster suggested tapping into your local community for summer opportunities in order to create a “responsible back up plan.”

He said that engagement in local communities can “open up new channels.” He added that “though we traditionally think of using the summer to move our career forward,” there are other opportunities for skill acquisition and enrichment that can be valuable.

Such enrichment, Webster continued, can come from sharpening computer programming abilities, learning a new language or spearheading local projects to improve project management and teamwork skills.

Before answering questions, Webster reminded students that OCS provides full remote operation. Webster urged students to take advantage of resources such as advising appointments, CareerShift and the Employer Directory.

In the question and answer segment of the seminar, students were primarily concerned with how to respectfully source new opportunities if their original internship is not definitively cancelled. Webster appealed to the universality of the pandemic and reminded students that we are living a moment of unprecedented

understanding in which everyone, students and employers alike, is experiencing some level of the unknown. When dealing with a position on hold or in hiatus, however, Webster suggested “communicating that you are likely to look for other positions in the meantime.”

Like many Yale students, Shirnekhi said she finds the virus “destabilizing.” However, she remains hopeful for an eventual return to normalcy.

“Even though I don’t know what is to come, it is reassuring that everyone is dealing with some kind of ambiguity about what the summer and future will hold,” she said. “I am grateful for everyone who is doing what they can to comfort and support one another in this time of need.”

For the past three years, 1stGenYale has partnered with and promoted Yale Day of Service sites for the annual day of service in May.

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