It is my pleasure to welcome you to the 2014 edition of Update, the annual newsletter of the Center for Academic Programs. Serving as a compendium of activities and events, this newsletter is an excellent vehicle to inform the UConn community and external friends and partners about exciting news taking place at the Center.

This past summer following a successful collaboration with UConn’s President, alum Dr. Kathleen Reardon, University faculty and staff, and the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF), we were able to implement the UConn First Star Academy. This Academy is one of only four nationwide that provides academic preparation to high school students in foster care. The primary purpose of this program is to equip foster children with the necessary academic preparation while in high school so they can pursue a college education.

In our last Update we conveyed the excitement of been awarded a Ronald McNair grant to establish a McNair Scholars Program at UConn. I’m happy to report that after several recruitment efforts were conducted, in the spring of 2013 thirteen sophomores and juniors became the first McNair Scholars at UConn. This group of Scholars plans to pursue doctoral degrees in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) fields and our program will be there to help them in fulfilling this dream. In October, fourteen additional students were accepted as the second cohort of McNair Scholars. Nine of the accepted Scholars participated in the two week summer McNair Fellows Program which was designed specifically as a recruitment tool. Fifteen UConn STEM faculty shared their research projects and allowed the Fellows to spend time in their laboratories. The UConn McNair Scholars program currently serves twenty-nine students.

Another interesting piece in this edition describes an initial meeting that took place in Storrs with individuals that played critical roles in the evolution of federally funded college access programs for low income and first generation students at UConn.

This project aims at documenting the history of TRIO programs at our university.

I would also like to take this opportunity to welcome three excellent professionals to the Center’s staff. Hired in 2013, Christina Rivera and Tony Omega are no strangers to working with low income and first generation students in high school and college settings. Prior to coming to UConn as the ConnCAP Program Advisor, Christina worked with students at the Capital Preparatory Magnet School in Hartford. An alum of the SSS program, Tony has been a tutor, resident assistant and hall director in
our summer programs and served as academic specialist in the Stamford SSS program. He joins CAP as an Academic Advisor for the SSS program. David Mrotek joined CAP in early March 2014 as the Program Coordinator for our newest program, First Star Academy. David brings extensive experience working with foster youth as a Social Worker for the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF) for the past seven years and is very excited to return to UConn, his alma mater.

As in previous newsletters, the articles about the success of our students are the most gratifying to all of us at the Center. I’m sure you’ll share our opinion once you read them too. The pieces about Nelson Delpilar receiving the outstanding academic achievement award at Yale’s Summer Medical and Dental Education Program (SMDEP), Janiel’s study abroad experience in South Africa, and Melody Gonzalez’ volunteer work in the community demonstrate the diversity of experiences being afforded to our students so they can achieve their full academic potential.

As always, on behalf of our staff and students I want to thank you for your support and highly recommend you take a few minutes to read all of the articles inside - You will enjoy every story!

SSS PUPPETRY ALUM WALKS WITH THE DINOSAURS

From the back of the arena, Frankie Cordero taps a keyboard. About 300 feet away, a 42-foot-long, animatronic T-Rex lets out a ferocious roar, simultaneously thrilling and scaring the wits out of thousands of kids in the audience—exactly what they came for.

Cordero ’04 (SFA), a UConn puppetry grad and SSS alumnus, was one of seven puppeteers on the Walking with Dinosaurs world-touring arena show. Based on the BBC documentary series of the same name, the show uses life-sized animated dinosaur puppets to tell the story of the evolution and extinction of some of the world’s most fascinating creatures. (A 3-D Walking with Dinosaurs movie was also released late last year.)

Between September 2012 and September 2013, Cordero performed in nearly 400 shows in cities throughout Europe and Asia.

“I’ve been able to see so many different places,” he marvels.

Besides the travel opportunities, he also appreciated having steady employment for a year—a rarity in a profession where most performers work for a few months at a time and then have to look for their next gig.

The show covers 200 million years in a few hours, introducing the audience to 20 dinosaurs from the Cretaceous, Jurassic and Triassic periods. Featured dinos include huge plant eaters like the long-necked Brachiosaurus (36 feet tall and 56 feet long) and terrifying meat eaters like T-Rex (a mere 23 feet tall).

It takes three humans to operate each of the 1.6 ton puppets: A driver steers the chassis; a second operator is in charge of head, body, neck, and tail movements; and a third performer controls facial movements and sounds using a joystick and a keyboard. Cordero performed this last role for three different dinosaurs, including the coveted T-Rex. Its huge fight sequence is “very popular with the crowd,” he shares.

Mover and Shaker

In the world of puppetry, Cordero is a real mover and shaker—and not just when he’s operating a life-size T-Rex puppet. He has worked as a puppeteer, director, producer and editor on numerous TV shows, films and theater productions, mainly in New York, where he lives now, and in Chicago, where he grew up.

In addition to “Sesame Street,” he has worked on the Noggin TV series “Oobi” and “Jack’s Big Music Show,” as well as the PBS Kids series “It’s a Big, Big World.” He has also performed...
at Carnegie Hall and in *Madama Butterfly* with the Metropolitan Opera. Besides producing and appearing in several music videos, he created his own series on Vine (an app for creating 6-second video) called “Corduroy Cat,” which currently has 25,000 followers from around the globe. He and fellow UConn puppetry alum Ken Berman also formed their own production company in 2008, Frankenstudio.

**Puppetry in His Genes?**

Cordero says he always loved watching shows like “Sesame Street” and “The Muppet Show.” His parents nurtured his early interests in puppetry and filmmaking, taking him to puppet shows and letting him hang out behind the scenes at Chicago’s AnimART Puppet Theater.

At the tender age of 8, Cordero joined the Chicagoland Puppetry Guild. He soon began performing his own puppet shows for birthday parties, at first working alongside his dad, a clown and magician.

When it came time for college, Cordero knew UConn was the place for him. UConn’s puppetry program, one of the few in the nation, came highly recommended by alums David Rudman—well-known as a performer of Cookie Monster and other Muppet characters—as well as Milford-native puppeteer Jim Napolitano. UConn puppetry grads have a good reputation in the field, according to Cordero. Almost every project he is involved in has UConn people on it, he says.

Cordero entered UConn through the SSS program in 2000. He is the only puppetry major ever to be part of SSS. He thrived at UConn and was twice awarded the Jim Henson Memorial Prize in Puppetry.

Thanks to Cordero, UConn’s future puppetry majors have some mighty big footsteps to follow.

**TRIO ACHIEVER HELPS HARTFORD YOUTH**

Anthony Byers, a SSS Storrs alumnus, was selected as one of three TRIO Achievers at the 27th annual conference of the Connecticut Association of Educational Opportunity Programs (CAEOP), held at UConn’s Greater Hartford campus on November 15, 2013. CAEOP’s mission is to promote post-secondary educational opportunities for populations traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

Byers was recognized for his dedication and his work with the Hartford Youth Scholars Foundation (HYSF). HYSF develops academic programs that aim to increase access to higher education for Hartford children. Byers started his career at HYSF as a college admissions advisor. Currently he serves as Co-Director for Programs, overseeing placement and support services.

Byers completed the SSS summer program in 2002 and graduated from UConn in 2007 with a Bachelor’s of Arts in Economics. His special focus was the socioeconomics of race and gender. As a first generation college student, he appreciates the mentors and advisors that provided him with the opportunity to successfully complete college.

The entire CAP staff congratulates Anthony for his accomplishments and contributions to Hartford youth!
CARL DEAN LEADS VOYAGE OF SELF-DISCOVERY THROUGH POETRY

Some of them have been writing since they were in grade school. Others had never written a word of poetry in their lives. But they all have one thing in common. As students in Carl Dean’s First-Year Experience (FYE) class, they are getting to know themselves—and each other—through poetry.

Dean, a longtime counselor in the Student Support Services (SSS) program, has been teaching an FYE Performance Poetry class each spring for nearly 10 years. Students come away from the class with much more than the one credit they earn for taking it. “It has allowed me to open myself up,” says Kadijah McGehee. “I hope to leave with everyone in this class knowing me as a person.”

FYE Performance Poetry is not your typical English literature class. Yes, the students do research poets and write poems in specific styles. But the purpose, Dean explains, is “to see poetry from a different perspective.” It helps students to be whatever kind of poet they are, not necessarily a performance poet, he says.

The class of about 15 students, many of them from the SSS program, meets once a week for an hour. Initially, many are self-conscious and hesitant about opening up. Dean leads them through exercises to help them get to know and feel comfortable with each other, and with performing.

“I’m always nervous, no matter how many times I present,” shares Casey Ellis.

Students are supportive of each other, snapping their fingers to encourage each other during performances. Dean often accompanies them on his djembé (African drum). They don’t have to perform at every class, but they do have the opportunity. Each class ends with open mic time for extra credit.

The open mic feature of the class grew into an independent, student-run poetry organization called Poetic Release. Members host regular poetry performance evenings and serve as mentors to the class.

Dean, who often attends and performs, started writing himself in 1996. While working in business he began dabbling in poetry. When his father passed away, he processed the situation by writing a poem. It opened the floodgates, and he never looked back. He has since published two books of poetry: Life … Through the Words & Between Lines and the recently released Rhythm.

Now he enjoys bringing that self-discovery process to his students. He says his favorite part of teaching the course is watching the students grow, “awakening something in them they didn’t know they had.”

CONN CAP STUDENTS VISIT THE UCONN SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING

As part of the 2013 ConnCAP Academic Day series, students spent an exciting, activity-filled day with volunteers from the UConn chapters of the Society of Professional Hispanic Engineers, the National Society of Black Engineers, and the Society of Women Engineers. These up-and-coming engineers showed ConnCAP students the different career paths available to engineering majors.

The students were able to test their engineering knowledge with some fun activities. First, they built towers out of newspaper and tape. Each student tried out their own unique design. After all the towers were built, the engineering volunteers huffed and puffed on the towers, trying to blow them down. The tallest surviving tower was 3 ½ feet! ConnCAP students then competed to build the longest bridge out of ten bricks and rubber bands. It was tough to build a stable bridge out of such limited materials. Students had to design three or four bridges before building one that didn’t fall apart. These hands-on tasks showed students the kinds of problem-solving skills engineers use every day.

The ConnCAP students then toured the engineering facilities on campus, including computer labs, mechanical workshops, and science labs. After the tour, ConnCAP students participated in a presentation by the UConn volunteers about their paths to college and why engineering mattered to them.

We extend our thanks to UConn’s School of Engineering and all the university organizations that made this experience so exciting and relevant for our students!
**UCONN FIRST STAR ACADEMY STUDENTS SHINE!**

On July 7th, 2013, youth from different cities and towns in Connecticut arrived on the Storrs campus as part of the initial UConn First Star Academy (FSA). Many had never been to a college campus. UConn's newly implemented program is one of only four nationwide that provides academic preparation to high school students in foster care. The goal of the academy is to remove obstacles from the path of many foster children who would otherwise not even think of going to college.

FSA is part of a national movement to improve the lives of children in the foster care system. Currently, less than 3% of foster youth pursue a college education. This appalling statistic stems from the stressful circumstances that many foster youth face: unemployment, teenage pregnancy, homelessness, inadequate health care, mental illness, abuse, neglect, and prison.

Last spring, FSA students entering their sophomore, junior, and senior years of high school were recruited to participate in a summer residential program at Storrs. They took five classes a day (English, science, mathematics, study skills and special projects), two hours of study hall in the evenings, and many extracurricular and enrichment activities, college preparation seminars, workshops, and field trips.

During the summer program, students not only participated in a rigorous academic component, but also enjoyed spending time with their peers who share similar backgrounds and life experiences. This sense of safety and camaraderie allowed the students to focus on their academics. The summer program was very demanding and expectations were high. Still, the students not only met those demands and expectations, but also shined in their academic and personal development. They expressed how much they loved being at UConn! During the school year, the staff continues to work with the students, providing them with academic advising, enrichment seminars, workshops, online tutoring, mentoring, and career exploration.

There are three Academies at other educational institutions in the country: UCLA, the University of Rhode Island and George Washington University. The establishment of the UConn First Star Academy is the result of a collaborative effort involving UConn’s President, University faculty and staff, and the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF). The program is housed in the Center for Academic Programs under High School Initiatives with Susana Ulloa serving as the director. Currently a second cohort of students is being recruited to participate in the 2014 summer program. So far, funding for this initiative has been provided by the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF), private donors and UConn.

**TURN UP FOR COLLEGE GETS ETS HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS CHARGED UP**

UConn’s Educational Talent Search (ETS) is dedicated to making college a viable and attractive option to traditionally underrepresented first generation to college students. During the first two days of UConn’s fall semester, ETS hosted Turn Up for College, a two day event inviting high school students to the Storrs campus. Forty 10th, 11th, and 12th graders from New Haven’s Wilbur Cross and James Hillhouse high schools were exposed to the residential campus life, an experience most high school students will never have.

In maintaining its goal to prepare students for college, ETS participants toured the Storrs campus and attended an informational session and presentations held by the Schools of Engineering, Pharmacy, Business, Nursing, and Allied Heath. A panel of the members from various undergraduate organizations was held Monday night. ETS students were able to learn more about college life and gain valuable advice from the UConn students. Organizations who participated included the UConn All-Stars, Encore dance team, Voices of Freedom, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., the African Student Association, Lambda Theta Alpha, Latin Sorority, Inc., the West Indian Student Association, Ladies of Distinction, and the National Association of Black Accountants.

Breakout sessions, tailored to the needs of each high school grade level, were held on the second day. Representatives from admissions assisted seniors with their applications to UConn and spoke to juniors about college preparation. Sophomores learned about criminal justice and crime scene investigation. Makiyah McArthur, a senior from James Hillhouse High School said, “the sessions were very informative; Turn Up for College made the college application process and undergraduate life seem less scary and more attainable.” A similar one day event was held for Windham High School seniors in October.
AWAKENING IN SOUTH AFRICA
By SSS Student Janiel Green

One would think that because of the ongoing hardships that many South Africans face, the grace of the people and their love for humanity would be diminished. However, when I arrived in Cape Town, I was shocked by people’s sense of community and their eagerness in welcoming outsiders. South Africans would say, “We are the children of the world, therefore you will never be without a mother, a father or countless aunties and uncles.” For this reason, I felt absolutely safe in an unfamiliar place located almost 8,000 miles away from my American home. The sense of ubuntu, a South African phrase which means “I am because we are,” was carried by the wind, felt in peoples’ words and echoed in the surrounding mountains.

People ask me, “Why did you choose South Africa?” Initially, I chose to go because of my Jamaican heritage, and my desire to learn the history of my African ancestry. It was such a learning experience that my answer now keeps changing. This experience altered everything I thought I knew about myself. I participated in parades and riots. I helped to start an afterschool program and worked in a prestigious hospital. I roamed the tall grasslands and even accidentally encountered the world’s tallest animal, a giraffe. I became reacquainted with the joy of interacting with different people and analyzing human nature. Simple experiences breathed new life in me: taking part in a class discussion, conversing with a sales clerk, spending an extra ten minutes with a bedridden child, or buying handmade jewelry and paintings from a local street vendor. I realized that it pays to listen and learn from the advice and experiences of other individuals, no matter their age or accomplishments. Everyone carries a message in his or her words.

I was inspired by those who fought against the horrors of apartheid and, in the future, I want to journey back to Cape Town to volunteer. Going to Cape Town awakened me. I now value freedom, democracy and peace. I know how important it is to get an education and appreciate life’s simple joys. I recognize that a person must contribute to their society and spread love wherever they can. It all leads back to ubuntu: I am because we are.

Janiel Green
MCNAIR FELLOWS GET EARLY JUMP ON STEM RESEARCH

Last May, a cohort of 17 freshman and sophomore UConn students considering careers in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) fields spent two weeks shadowing researchers, attending workshops, and participating in STEM-related field trips as part of the McNair Fellows Program. Born out of the McNair Scholars Program, the Fellows Program came about after several McNair information sessions with faculty, during which professors stressed the importance of providing research opportunities early in students’ undergraduate careers.

The program kicked off with Fellows attending a presentation in which faculty discussed their research projects and labs. The Fellows then selected a faculty member to shadow based on their academic interests. When not immersed in the lab, Fellows were exposed to library resources, attended writing and career development workshops, completed biological and chemical safety training, and received information on the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) and the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT). They also visited the Connecticut Science Center.

At the end of the summer program, Fellows presented on their research experience to STEM faculty/researchers, their peers, and invited guests. Considering they had only two weeks to study the complex material, the Fellows’ presentations were truly impressive. In that short time, they learned the language of their field of study, and grasped the basic concepts of the research.

Like the McNair Scholars, the Fellows are UConn students who are underrepresented in higher education, especially in the STEM fields. The program aims to expose students to research and academia as a viable career path. The fact that nine former Fellows were selected to be McNair Scholars this year is a testament to the dedication of the faculty they shadowed, and the program experience as a whole.

The McNair Scholars and Fellows Programs would like to acknowledge the following departments and faculty for their time and mentorship: the Departments of Physiology and Neurobiology (Dr. Joanne Conover, Dr. Joseph LoTurco, Dr. Anastasios Tzingounis), Molecular and Cell Biology (Dr. Andrew Pask), Pharmaceutical Sciences (Dr. Jose Manautou, Dr. Marcy Balunas), Animal Science (Dr. Kristen Govoni, Dr. Sarah Reed), Ecology and Evolutionary Biology (Dr. Eric Schultz, Dr. Margaret Rubega, Dr. Elizabeth Jockusch), Allied Health Sciences (Dr. Valerie Duffy), Clinical Psychology (Dr. Stephanie Milan), Materials Science and Engineering (Dr. Bryan Huey), Department of Sociology (Dr. Elizabeth Holzer) and Mechanical Engineering (Dr. Baki Cetegen).

SSS WATERBURY STUDENT ATTENDS YALE’S SUMMER MEDICAL AND DENTAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

Nelson Delpilar, a biology major in the Waterbury SSS program, was accepted into Yale’s Summer Medical and Dental Education Program (SMDEP) last summer. SMDEP introduces highly motivated underrepresented college students nationwide to the medical sciences so they become better applicants for medical school. Yale’s SMDEP is one of the most competitive and we were very excited to hear about Nelson’s acceptance. Nelson spent six weeks attending lectures and seminars and shadowing physicians. An additional accomplishment was that he received the outstanding academic achievement award in the program. He hopes this experience helps him get into medical school.

Nelson is a motivated scholar and is involved in campus life at Waterbury. He has served as president of the Collegiate Health Services Corps (CHSC), helping organize health awareness campaigns, blood drives, CPR training, and nutrition classes.
A SINKING SITUATION

Some cardboard and plastic pieced together with duct tape, love, and lots of hope. That’s what it took to compete in the Third Annual Cardboard Boat Race at UConn’s Avery Point campus in Groton. Campus Director Michael Alfultis and Aaron Collins, SSS Program Coordinator, took part in this fun event hosted by Student Activities and the Associated Student Government (ASG).

Staying afloat was the most obvious objective for everyone. The construction of the cardboard boat began a week prior to the event. Immediately, Alfultis and Collins realized that they were going to need lots of tape, and layers upon layers of cardboard, to stand a chance at competing for the trophy, made of—you guessed it!—cardboard. To avoid being mocked by students, Alfultis and Collins built what they thought was the ultimate human vessel. Christened the Battleship, it weighed about 100 lbs. and was reinforced with a cardboard rebar.

During the days prior to the event, students took turns in some good-natured, competitive trash talking while they worked on their own cardboard boat called the SSS. “I bet they [Alfultis and Collins] win the Titanic Award,” Rafael Perez, one of the boat’s designers, said. There were other fun-filled sarcastic remarks from team members Andy Wú, Aracelis Martinez, Alan Siphaxay, Juan Gilbert, and Gabby Morales-Perez.

As the ambitious boaters took to the waters moments before the fog horn sounded, Alfultis and Collins quickly scanned the other boats and felt confident about their chances. Unfortunately, within seconds of the horn, their boat rolled over at the starting line. They quickly entered last place as the boat rolled over a second and a third time. Finally, after the fourth capsizing, the Captains of the Battleship called it quits and spent the remaining time cheering on the other boaters. The SSS came in a respectable fourth place. Next year, the Battleship’s goal is to at least get beyond the starting line.

CONN CAP STUDENTS VOLUNTEERING IN THE COMMUNITY

This past summer, students in the Connecticut Collegiate Awareness and Preparation Program (ConnCAP) learned more about community service. Two local activists talked to the students about the kinds of service opportunities available to them. Dr. Len Krimerman, UConn philosophy professor and representative for the Windham Area Hour Exchange, was the first speaker. The Hour Exchange is an innovative program that creates a mutual support network in the Windham community. Dr. Krimerman explained the program through an example: “A volunteer might mow the lawn of an elderly person or a single mother. The person who received services might “pay back” the volunteer by providing equivalent time tutoring, providing transportation to school or medical appointments, or cooking dinner.” He also mentioned that volunteers can also donate their accumulated hours to a central “time bank,” which can provide for those who are in need but are not able to give back.

Students also heard a presentation from ConnCAP alum Levar Mitchell. He is now the Sports Fitness and Recreation Director of the Hartford Boys and Girls Club. Levar shared information about the different services that the Boys and Girls Club provides to children and adolescents in the Hartford community. He described how they teach kids to make better health-related choices. They also tutor children and offer sports lessons.

The two presenters encouraged the ConnCAP students to reach out to both the Windham Area Hour Exchange and the Boys and Girls Club and some of the students have already started to volunteer their time.
SSS WATERBURY STUDENT’S PASSION FOR COMMUNITY SERVICE

Many college students question the relationship between their academic course work and the “real world.” Melody Gonzalez doesn’t see it that way. An Allied Health student in the SSS Waterbury program, she has been able to combine her academic work with volunteering to improve the quality of life in her community.

Melody joined the Collegiate Health Services Club (CHSC) at the UConn Waterbury Campus and is able to use her knowledge in the health field when volunteering for community initiatives. Through CHSC, Melody helped organize blood drives, a Health Day, and the This is Public Health campaign project. She also helped Catholic Charities distribute Christmas presents to low-income families.

THREE SSS STUDENTS SELECTED FOR LEADERSHIP LEGACY EXPERIENCE

CAP is pleased to announce that three SSS students were selected for the prestigious 2014 Leadership Legacy Experience: Nordia Meggie, Rubby Koomson, and Kiana Gonzalez. This program invites exceptional student leaders to participate in a year-long leadership experience designed to build their personal and professional portfolio. Selected students must demonstrate personal accomplishment, academic commitment, integrity, and community participation.

Nordia is a junior psychology major who has worked closely with students in UConn’s First Star Academy, a program that serves high school youth in foster care. Her Legacy faculty mentor is Dr. Maria D. Martinez. Rubby is a nursing major and an honors student who served as a member of UConn’s Global Medical Brigades in Ghana in 2012. She is being mentored by Dr. Jessamy Hoffman. Kiana is a junior art history major who hopes to become a librarian. She has provided leadership to freshmen as a peer advisor and resident assistant in the SSS summer program. Her mentor is Ms. Joanna Rivera Davis. All three students are very involved with numerous campus organizations.

The three young women will be working closely with their faculty and alumni mentors, as well as participating in various workshops, lectures, and mentoring activities. CAP would like to congratulate them on their accomplishments, and for being selected to participate in this highly regarded program.
MCNAIR SCHOLARS: RESEARCHING THEIR WAY TO PHD PROGRAMS

Our UConn McNair Scholars have successfully embarked on some ambitious research projects. The first group of Scholars—Tiahna Spencer, Robert Stickels, Angelina Hernandez, and Luis Organista—are making great gains. With the help of their faculty mentors—Dr. John Salamone, Dr. Rachel O’Neill, Dr. Crystal Park, and Dr. Jason Vakoun—these students had the opportunity to participate in diverse, cutting-edge research on Parkinson’s Disease, male reproductive organ development, the stresses for incoming college students, and the maintenance of local bass populations.

The Scholars have also been sharing their research within academic circles at UConn and beyond. They presented at the McNair Summer Research Symposium and the Frontiers Undergraduate Research Symposium, among others. Luis will present his work at the Northeast Fish and Wildlife Conference, an event that is not normally open to undergraduate students.

The next group of McNair Scholars is sure to continue these promising developments. Some Scholars are already applying to highly competitive summer research opportunities that will help them develop professionally. The McNair Scholars Program thanks all the faculty and graduate student mentors for their help.

SSS STUDENTS CONNECT WITH FIRST-GENERATION-TO-COLLEGE PROFESSIONALS

Ten SSS students from the Storrs and Hartford campuses had a unique opportunity to connect with professionals at Travelers Insurance Company who were once in their shoes.

1st Generation Team, an internal organization of first-generation college graduates who now work at the company, created a Day at Travelers to provide first-generation and underrepresented college students with exposure to careers and professional guidance. Each student participated in two job shadow experiences, met with leaders from the company, and began taking steps to build networks vital to securing internships and jobs.

“This was my first job shadow experience,” SSS student Brandon Madden said. “It wasn’t what I expected. Everyone was down to earth, and we [the students] were engaged in hands-on learning.”

Michael Petro, Assistant Director of the Center for Career Development (CCD) at UConn, has worked with Travelers the past four years to organize the annual event exclusively for SSS students. It is just one of many partnerships SSS has developed with the CCD to provide career and educational opportunities to its students.
UConn’s History of Serving Connecticut’s Neediest Citizens

The year was 1967. As part of Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty, declared three years earlier, federally funded college access programs for low-income students, known as TRIO, were being launched at colleges and universities all over the nation. Eager to contribute to Johnson’s vision of a “Great Society,” UConn applied for and secured a federal Upward Bound grant to serve students enrolled in Connecticut’s urban high schools. At the same time, the Connecticut Department of Education approached UConn President Homer Babbidge about developing a TRIO-like program for disadvantaged high school youth. Babbidge agreed, and the two funding sources were combined to create the University’s first educational opportunity program, CONNPEP (Connecticut Pre-Collegiate Enrichment Program).

CONNPEP was unique in the nation because it was funded in part by the state. This commitment to serving Connecticut’s neediest citizens enabled the University to hire full-time, permanent staff, which was essential to building a high quality, long-term program. The program ran a summer component on campus each year for about 30 high school students, the goal of which was to prepare them for success in higher education. CONNPEP advisors spent the academic year working with students in the high schools and even visiting their homes. Eventually, the program grew to serve nearly 100 students.

Also in 1967, an initiative for college students called Summer Program was developed at UConn. Its purpose was to prepare incoming low-income and minority freshmen from the state’s urban areas for the rigors of University academics. The intensive, six-week summer program offered courses, workshops, enrichment activities, and advising to 100-125 students each year at the Storrs and regional campuses. Students were required to successfully complete the program in order to matriculate at UConn in the fall. In 1970, the University obtained its first federal Student Support Services (SSS) grant to supplement the funding of the program. In 1971, The Committee for the Education of Minority Students (CEMS) was established alongside the Summer Program. At the time, it was UConn’s only program designed specifically for minority students. CEMS worked with about 30-35 incoming freshmen each year who were identified as having academic need. The students arrived on campus three days prior to the start of their freshmen year for an extended New Student Orientation. CEMS staff continued to work with the students throughout their tenure at UConn.

All three programs were managed separately and reported to the Vice President of Student Affairs until 1980, when they were organized under the Department of Special Academic Enrichment Programs (DSAEP). In 1981, in response to the high dropout rate among underrepresented students, a university-wide advisory committee was created to address the issue. It recommended that DSAEP be structured as a center for academic programs. Thus, the Center for Academic Programs (CAP) was established in January 1983 and structured to reflect the University’s commitment to coordinating support services across the campus. Under CAP, Summer Program and CEMS merged into one access and retention program, known as SSS. Eventually CONNPEP’s name was officially changed to Upward Bound and it continued to provide services to students until 2012, at which time federal funds were not renewed.

Today, UConn’s TRIO and educational opportunity programs continue to be overseen by CAP. Under the leadership of Dr. Maria D. Martinez, they have grown to include Educational Talent Search, the McNair Scholars Program, ConnCAP (Connecticut Collegiate Awareness and Preparation Program), and First Star Academy. SSS now serves over 1,100 students at all six campuses. The programs receive funding from multiple sources, including the U.S. Department of Education, the state of Connecticut Office of Higher Education, and the University. Although program names have changed, and grants have come and gone, UConn continues its long standing commitment to serving the state’s neediest citizens.

CAP would like to thank the following people for their contributions to access and educational opportunity at the University of Connecticut: Homer Babbidge, Sandy Plante, Trudy Johnson, Professor David Ivry, John C. Norman, Robert L. Brown, Antoinette Moran, Joe Grant, H. Fred Simons, David G. Carter, Iris Kinnard, Alma Maldonado-Cordner, Carolyn McDew, and Bernice Taylor. Over the years, many dedicated people have supported these initiatives, providing thousands of Connecticut students with a college education. We will continue identifying other individuals who were also part of UConn’s history of serving low income and minority students in Connecticut. Stay tuned!
The Center for Academic Programs provides educational opportunities and access to higher education for students who are first generation to college, from underrepresented populations, and/or from low income backgrounds.