A MESSAGE FROM
THE DIRECTOR

BIDYA RANJEET
DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

Welcome to the spring 2020 edition of the Center for Academic Programs Update, our annual publication featuring stories about the exciting activities our students and staff have been engaging in this academic year.

This has been a big year for CAP. In the fall, we said farewell to our longtime leader, Dr. Maria D. Martinez, who retired after 33 years with CAP. She leaves behind a tremendous legacy of leadership in supporting underserved students and serving as CAP’s devoted leader. Although we are sad to see her go, we wish her the best in her well-earned retirement. CAP also welcomed two new staff members who are supporting SSS students. We are pleased to have our own SSS alumna Rawan Shilleh as our SSS Stamford regional coordinator, and Sterling White as a new SSS advisor in Storrs.

We implemented big changes in the McNair Fellows Program, transforming our two-week summer program into a semester-long experience that helps Fellows delve more deeply into STEM research through more comprehensive faculty shadowing. We also saw our students involved in the communities around them: UConn Rising Scholars students practiced environmental activism, SSS Hartford student Nadia Abdul Munem led tenant rights discussions in Hartford as part of a six-month Obama Foundation Community Leadership Corps Project, and SSS Storrs student Amber Smith was selected to attend the Obama Foundation Summit in Chicago, where she had the exciting opportunity to meet Barack and Michelle Obama.
CAP students also are engaging with the University, legislators, and alumni in new and exciting ways, and we are proud to share their stories throughout this newsletter. Eric Bueno, Virgen Guadarrama, and Amber Smith testified at a Connecticut General Assembly’s Appropriations budget hearing about the impact CAP has had on their lives and the need to continue funding for college access and opportunity programs. Khaiisha Robinson, William Aleman, and Cesar Espaillat presented to the UConn Foundation Board of Directors meeting about their experiences studying abroad and the tremendous impact international learning has on traditionally underserved populations. SSS alumnus Emmanuel Omokaro contributed to the CAP Education Abroad Scholarship Fund to help SSS students study abroad. Several alumni also came back to the CAP family, whether in giving career talks or in getting directly involved with current CAP students through mentoring.

The spring semester brought an unusual challenge with the COVID-19 global pandemic and the University’s necessary decision to close campuses for the remainder of the academic year. Though working in the unchartered territory of remote-only services, the CAP staff was quick to adapt their programs to provide a full menu of live student support options through video conferencing technology. Although the method of communication is different, our students continue to receive the same level of support we are proud to offer: staff moved their UNIV classes that help first-year students transition to college life to online sessions; they continued to offer one-on-one advising through video conferencing; and they remained connected to students through email and phone calls. Despite the obstacles that come from not having in-person access, the CAP community has truly come together in this time of uncertainty and continues to support each other and our core mission. I am proud of how resilient our staff and students have been in facing this challenge, and I am proud of how we continue to evolve as a department.

Thanks to all who have made 2019-2020 another successful year for CAP!

Message from the Director cont.

In 1995, Dr. Martinez became the director of the Center for Academic Programs (CAP), which oversees SSS and other TRIO and educational opportunity programs at UConn. Under her leadership, CAP secured additional federal and state grants and institutional funding to expand its programs for first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented middle school, high school, and college students. In addition to SSS, programs have included Upward Bound, Educational Talent Search, GEAR UP, McNair Scholars, ConnCAP, ConnCAS, Rising Scholars, and PASS (Promoting Academically Successful Students). Thousands of low-income students have completed high school and earned bachelor’s degrees as a result of participation in CAP’s programs, allowing them to break cycles of generational poverty and positively impact the urban communities in which they were raised.

For many people, this professional accomplishment alone might have been enough, but UConn and the universe had bigger plans for Dr. Martinez. In March 2011, she was appointed Assistant Vice Provost (AVP) of UConn’s Institute for Student Success (ISS), becoming the only Hispanic female to hold a managerial position at the University. In this role, Dr. Martinez provided leadership and administrative oversight to CAP, the Academic Center for Exploratory Students (ACES), First Year Programs and Learning Communities, the Academic Achievement Center, and the Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation (LSAMP). She worked collaboratively with all divisions at...
the University to develop programming for undergraduate students, with a focus on retention strategies and increasing high-impact educational opportunities, including education abroad, undergraduate research, service learning, and peer mentoring. Additionally, she served in numerous leadership positions on boards, committees, and organizations that promote diversity and equity in higher education.

Despite her increased responsibilities, Dr. Martinez found time to stay connected to the students. On numerous occasions, she accompanied SSS students on the short-term education abroad programs she had helped to develop for SSS over 20 years ago, observing their classes, going on excursions with them, and evaluating the programs to see how they might be improved. She congratulated and celebrated with high school and college students who had successfully completed their on-campus summer programs at UConn. She regularly attended students’ research and poster presentations, awards ceremonies, and other special events. She was always available to serve as a mentor and voice of wisdom to the many students who sought her advice.

At her retirement reception, attended by University faculty, staff, and CAP alumni, Dr. Martinez was recognized for the tremendous impact she has had and continues to have on so many people. Dr. Bidya Ranjeet, current CAP Director, noted that “Maria’s impact will be remembered for many years to come, by both her students and her staff. She has been a mentor, role model, and guiding light for so many. Her life’s work and legacy will live on, not just through the many lives she has touched and transformed over the course of her career, but through the passion and purpose she has inspired in each of our hearts.”

The CAP staff congratulates Dr. Martinez on her well-earned retirement, thanks her for her many years of service and leadership, and wishes her all the best as she embarks on this new life phase. Lo mejor está por venir!

SSS STUDENTS EXPERIENCE LUZIA
Students participating in the SSS Summer Programs at the Storrs and Hartford campuses had the unforgettable experience of attending Cirque du Soleil’s Luzia under a big top tent on Market Street in Hartford on July 20, 2019. Luzia transported the students into an imaginary world through its music, costumes, and awe-inspiring circus acts celebrating the culture and people of Mexico. For most of the students, it was their first time experiencing a Cirque de Soleil show.

SSS student Brianna Chance described it as, “bold, bright, and vivid! I loved experiencing the Mexican culture through art. It made me want to join the circus!”

While none of the students ran off to join the circus, they did agree it was an incredible show and an amazing way to spend a Saturday afternoon with their peers.
UCONN WATERBURY SSS ALUMNI SHARE MAJOR DECISIONS

Two UConn SSS alumni returned to the Waterbury Campus to share their undergraduate and career experiences on a panel titled *Everything HDFS at UConn Waterbury*, held on September 17, 2019. Brittany Smith and Paola Vargas, who both majored in Human Development and Family Sciences while undergraduates, described to audience members, made up mostly of undergraduate students, why they chose the major.

Brittany shared, “Majoring in HDFS broadened my horizons to work within the human services field, assisting those looking for work and being able to find the right candidates to work directly with refugee children. Being a part of [helping to solve] this humanitarian crisis that is going on really gives me a rewarding feeling that I am doing my part.” Currently, she works as a People Operation Recruiter.

Paola, who works with The Western Connecticut Area on Aging, chose to major in HDFS because “I loved learning about the different moving components, both micro and macro levels, that impact individuals and their communities.”

Many thanks to Brittany and Paola for volunteering their time and sharing their experiences!

SSS ANNOUNCES NEW STAFF HIRES

Rawan Shilleh began her position as the SSS Coordinator of the UConn Stamford campus in January 2020. Having previously served as an ACES advisor in Stamford, Rawan has worked to develop Stamford’s

EMERGING LEADER TURNED SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR

Kudos to third-year SSS student Erdit Abedini for being the recipient of the Emerging Leader Award at the Student Life Awards Ceremony, held in April 2019 in Storrs. Erdit was awarded for his initiative in starting a summer soccer club for underserved students in Hartford. He, along with several volunteers, coached and ran the club. The idea for the club formed when Erdit, an immigrant from Albania who played soccer at Hartford’s Bulkeley High School, saw a need for funding so that interested students could play the sport year-round. The club has since evolved into the Hartford Sports Foundation, a non-profit organization Erdit founded to offer soccer training as well as college preparation workshops. Erdit is looking to expand the Hartford Sports Foundation this summer to include training for girls’ volleyball. If COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted by then, summer activities will begin in the final week of June.

SSS WATERBURY ALUMNA BRITTANY SMITH, SSS WATERBURY ALUMNA PAOLA VARGAS

SSS AVERY POINT STUDENTS PARTICIPATE IN FIRST-GEN DAY

SSS AVERY POINT STUDENTS EMPOWER EACH OTHER ON FIRST-GEN DAY

SSS students at the UConn Avery Point Campus celebrated their status as the first in their families to pursue a Bachelor’s Degree during National First-Generation Day, held on November 8, 2019. Throughout the day, SSS and other first-generation students shared their stories of navigating obstacles and gaining independence, as well as college knowledge with peers, faculty, staff, and community members, including those from the college access program Higher Edge. According to Avery Point SSS Coordinator Aaron Collins, hearing from other students who faced similar struggles and successes left many SSS students feeling empowered and ready to take on challenges.
SSS program, including a recent “Re-Launch” of the SSS program in its new office space. Rawan holds an MA in Counseling from the University of Bridgeport. She earned her BA in Human Development and Family Studies and Psychology at UConn Stamford, where she also participated in the SSS program.

Sterling White officially joined the SSS Storrs team in December 2019 as an Academic Success Advisor with the program. Sterling previously worked with SSS Storrs beginning in August 2019, when he served as a temporary Academic Success Coach for the Promoting Academically Successful Students (PASS) program. Prior to joining SSS, Sterling worked in various roles at Western New England University, Gateway Community College, and Southern Connecticut State University. Sterling holds a Master’s degree in Sociology from SCSU and a Bachelor’s degree from Central Connecticut State University.

CIVIL ENGINEERING STUDENT BUILDS A FUTURE AT UCONN

UConn SSS student and McNair Scholar Leana Santos’ move to Hartford, CT, from the Dominican Republic during her senior year of high school was not an easy transition. Although her family moved to provide better opportunities for Leana and her siblings, such as the chance to go to college, as a first-generation student struggling to learn English and adjust to a new culture, Leana had to work hard to make her dream of college a reality. Still, she never imagined that not only would she be accepted to her dream school, the University of Connecticut, she would also be admitted to a fully-funded Ph.D. program there. Leana attributes the SSS and McNair programs with helping her dreams come true.

Through SSS, she gained access to the University and developed positive study habits. “Being connected on campus was just a part of my journey,” she said. “Adapting elements of the SSS Summer Program was key to my academic success. Taking advantage of SSS tutoring, creating a study plan based off the Academic Achievement Center’s guidance, and making my own study hours helped me manage my time during my first year.” Studying abroad with the SSS Summer in Prague program, she encountered endless inspiration after seeing firsthand the architecture and construction methods in a foreign country, further increasing her aspiration to become a civil engineer.

It is through the McNair Scholars program that Leana developed her love of research and, ultimately, the desire, experience, and preparation to pursue a Ph.D. As a McNair Scholar, Leana spent nine months completing research in the Geoenvironmental Laboratory of UConn Professor Chrysochoou, where she contributed to a project sponsored by the National Science Foundation and presented research data at the annual McNair Scholars Summer Program Exhibit. She plans to take what she learned from her McNair research and apply it to her graduate studies.

Beginning in fall 2020, Leana will enroll at UConn for a Ph.D. in Civil Engineering with a concentration in Structural Engineering. She hopes to design and construct safer roads, bridges, and buildings to make a difference in people’s lives. Having seen how natural disasters can devastate poorer countries, Leana hopes to redesign old infrastructures to make them disaster-resistant, thereby preventing future damage and loss of life. Her ultimate goal is to become a professor so that she can teach future civil engineers the proper methods of construction to avoid casualties related to natural disasters.

Despite Leana’s rigorous program as a Civil Engineering major and Environmental Engineering minor, she has also found time to join a number of student groups and organizations such as the Dominican Students Association, Lambda Theta Alpha Sorority, and UConn’s chapter of the American Society of Civil Engineers, and become a mentor for the Academic Achievement Center.

Leana graduates with a Bachelor of Science Degree in May 2020. CAP congratulates her on her hard-earned successes and looks forward to following her graduate school journey!
UConn Student Support Services (SSS) alumnus Emmanuel Omokaro almost didn’t have the international experience that changed his life. As a first-generation undergraduate student majoring in sports management, he was intrigued after attending a presentation on the SSS Summer in Liverpool program. Still, he didn’t think the program was possible for him. His family did not meet federal low-income criteria that would qualify him for need-based grants and scholarships, yet their income was not high enough to cover the full cost of studying abroad. He brushed aside his desire for an international learning experience, deeming it a luxury out of his reach.

Enter SSS Director Dr. Bidya Ranjeet. She remembered Emmanuel asking questions during the Liverpool presentation and encouraged him to apply to the 2010 program. Emmanuel declined, citing finances. Dr. Ranjeet refused to take no for an answer. She introduced him to the Director of Education Abroad and helped him obtain a scholarship to offset the cost of the program. From there, it was onward to England.

“Liverpool opened my eyes and was an experience I enjoyed so much and really valued,” said Emmanuel, who has since traveled to 38 countries.

A few years ago, Emmanuel decided it was time to pay it forward and make studying abroad possible for other SSS students whose family incomes render them ineligible for need-based financial aid, but who still cannot afford the full cost of studying abroad. Since then, he has donated annually, in Dr. Ranjeet’s honor, to the Center for Academic Programs Education Abroad Scholarship fund, via the UConn Foundation.

“I want to do for them what Dr. Ranjeet did for me,” he said. After graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree from UConn in 2011, Emmanuel continued at the University and earned a Master’s degree in Sports Management. Currently, he is a Corporate Citizenship Coordinator at ESPN in Bristol, CT.

SSS has offered affordable, short-term, summer study abroad programs exclusively for UConn SSS students since 2001. Locations vary from year-to-year based on factors such as cost, country conditions, and students’ needs. Sadly, the summer 2020 programs, which were to include Prague, Czech Republic, San Joaquin de Flores, Costa Rica, and Cape Town, South Africa, were canceled due to the world-wide COVID-19 pandemic. They will resume in summer 2021.
The day ended with a group dinner featuring authentic Greek cuisine, which challenged the students to explore foods outside their comfort zones. Students returned home full, not just of the kabobs and baklava but of excitement about starting their college journeys.

It is not every day that the student becomes the teacher, but this is exactly what happened when UCAP alumna Javante Danvers was looking for a way to fill her time between completing a Bachelor’s Degree in Allied Health Sciences at UConn in December 2018 and starting nursing school in spring 2020. After an outstanding performance serving as a tutor/counselor for the 2018 UCAP summer program, Javante was hired as a temporary Program Assistant for the fall 2018 and continued in this role for one year.

“Returning to UCAP as a Program Assistant was an amazing experience and a great privilege,” said Javante. “It allowed me to build connections and relationships with our students every single day where they allowed me into their personal lives and trusted me to guide them. This opportunity also allowed me to see a different part of the program – all of the behind-the-scenes hard work and dedication that goes into providing a college access program, which is something I had no idea about when I was in the student seat.”

Valedictorian of her high school graduating class in 2015 and recipient of multiple scholarships, Javante knows how important it is for UCAP students to excel academically to increase their post-secondary opportunities. As program assistant, she devoted countless hours to preparing lessons around SAT math and reading comprehension, tutoring students in various subject areas, and assisting them with test and exam preparation. Utilizing her background in Allied Health, she led discussions on nutrition and its impact on communities. A first-generation student who grew up in a low-income family, she facilitated conversations on the challenges students might face when they venture off to college. Most importantly, she made time to get to know each student individually.

The opportunity to return to the program that “became my second family,” and to serve as a role model and mentor for the current UCAP students was meaningful to Javante, especially as she embarks on a new educational journey. In spring 2020, her goal of becoming a nurse came within closer reach when she was accepted and enrolled in UConn’s highly selective Certificate Entry into Nursing (CEIN) Accelerated Second Degree program at the Storrs Campus. Though her courses and practicums have taken her away from her “second family” temporarily, Javante knows that she is never too far away to return home.
UCONN MCNAIR FELLOWS PROGRAM EVOLVES

The fall 2019 semester brought exciting changes to the UConn McNair Fellows Program. For six years, the STEM-based program, designed to provide second- and third-year students an opportunity to learn about research and to shadow researchers, was a two-week experience that took place in mid-May. It is now a semester-long program that allows participants to delve deeper into research through more comprehensive shadowing and a UNIV 1820: Exploring STEM Research course.

Ten McNair Fellows participated in the newly structured program, gaining insight into research, what it is like to be a doctoral student, and careers in research. Each Fellow was paired with a faculty mentor in their field of interest and spent the semester shadowing a research team and gaining skills in research, critical thinking, research writing, and communicating data findings. As a final class project, students presented on their observations and what they learned.

Early immersion into research is key for students to gain clarity on what type of project to pursue and future career steps to be competitive for graduate school. The new program format provides greater opportunity for participants to explore options and make connections. The 2019 Fellows completed the semester more confident in their future plans and energized to continue as independent researchers, flourish as potential McNair Scholars, and pursue graduate studies.

CAP STUDENTS TESTIFY AT STATE BUDGET HEARING

Three UConn students who participated in various CAP programs were selected to represent the University before the Connecticut General Assembly’s Appropriations Committee budget hearing held on February 18, 2020 in Harford, CT. Eric Bueno, Virgen Guadarrama, and Amber Smith spoke about the impact CAP has had on their personal and educational journeys.

Amber, a senior, said, “The UConn Storrs campus is less than an hour away from Hartford but I felt so isolated and alone…Student Support Services became my home away from home.”

Third year student Eric expressed similar sentiment, “UCAP [UConn College Access and Preparation Program], Student Support Services, and McNair Scholars are three of the most well-run and successful programs I have ever had the privilege of being involved in. They consistently produce students who are able to thrive in an academically competitive space like UConn, despite overwhelmingly coming from disadvantaged backgrounds.” Bueno participated in all three CAP programs.

Virgen, a sophomore, said, “As a first-generation college student, I did not have much support…The SSS program at the Hartford campus has continuously provided me support so that I could truly understand the responsibility and commitment that comes with being in college.”

The students ended their remarks urging the Appropriations Committee to fund UConn’s access and opportunity programs. To quote Smith, “None of this would have happened if I was not invested in…I hope that you will [continue to fund these programs] because if you give the community the resources to succeed, they will succeed.”
Three students who studied abroad with the SSS Summer Education Abroad programs in 2019 had the unique opportunity to present their experiences at the UConn Foundation Board of Directors meeting held in Stamford, CT, on March 6, 2020. The presentation was arranged by Dr. Daniel Weiner, Vice President of UConn’s Global Affairs and a strong proponent of providing access to education abroad for students who, like those in SSS, are first-generation to college, from low-income families, and from populations underrepresented in higher education. Weiner, along with Dr. Bidya Ranjeet, Director of the Center for Academic Programs and pioneer of the SSS Education Abroad program, described to The Board the tremendous impact studying abroad has on this traditionally underserved student population.

SSS student Khalesha Robinson, a junior from Bridgeport, CT, shared that her education abroad program in Croatia was not only her first international travel experience, but it was also her first time on an airplane. The flight from New York to Europe transported her to a new world that changed the way she views how people can impact one another. While working with children with special needs as part of a service learning project in Croatia, she realized, “In a culture that is so focused on the amount of followers we have on social media, I learned that impacting just 10 kids can have an important and lasting effect.”

William Aleman, a junior and SSS participant from New Haven, CT, told The Board that his program in Costa Rica was humbling. “At UConn, those of us from low-income families are among many affluent students. I thought I had so little in comparison to them. Going abroad, I now realize I have so much more [than other people].” As an example, he shared that he never expected to be able to afford to study abroad, but the short-term program supplemented by grant and scholarship aid made it possible.

Junior Cesar Espaillat, an accounting major from New Haven, CT, said that traveling to Prague with his SSS peers taught him a lot about determination and autonomy. He shared that through this program, he developed time management and problem solving skills by learning to depend on himself. He knows these are two key skills that employers seek in their applicants.

SSS sent its first student abroad in 2001. Since then, more than 600 SSS students have had their lives transformed by studying abroad. According to Dr. Ranjeet, students not only gain confidence and a sense of purpose, they graduate from the University at a rate of 94 percent. The opportunity to testify at the Board of Directors meeting demonstrates UConn’s continued commitment to providing SSS students with high-impact educational opportunities, such as international learning.
FORMER SSS STUDENT BUSY BUILDING COMMUNITY WITH THE CONGRESSIONAL HISPANIC CAUCUS INSTITUTE

Xavier Arriaga, who graduated from UConn with a bachelor’s degree in economics in May 2019, has spent the last nine months participating in the Public Policy Fellowship with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute (CHCI) in Washington, DC. The CHCI is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that provides leadership development and educational services to emerging Latinx leaders by forging critical pathways to congressional, nonprofit, and corporate spaces. During the paid fellowship, Xavier has been working with the House Appropriations Subcommittee for Transportation and Housing and Urban Development (THUD), where he has been supporting professional staff working to pass the 2020-2021 THUD bill.

As part of THUD, Xavier has had many opportunities to see how social safety nets and development programs are funded, as well as to be part of that funding process. He helped draft questions that Chairman David Price and other Appropriations Committee members asked HUD Secretary Ben Carson and the CFO of HUD’s Disaster Recovery Block Grant Program about the 2021 HUD budget request. Through this process, Xavier was able to provide input on what he believed was important to hold elected officials accountable for, especially regarding efforts to support natural disaster clean-up efforts in Xavier’s native Puerto Rico. Xavier also was part of this year’s CHCI Annual Award Gala, the country’s largest celebration of Hispanic leaders, which celebrated Dr. Ellen Ochoa, the first Hispanic woman to go to space, and Robert Rodriguez, the famed film director. Additionally, Xavier met members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus.

Xavier credits SSS with helping him become competitive for this fellowship by providing him the support and resources to ensure his time at UConn was focused on pursuing his education and leadership opportunities. He credits SSS counselor and Leadership Legacy Mentor Chelsea Cichocki with encouraging him to pursue studying abroad in Cape Town, South Africa, as well as an Alternative Break in Detroit. Xavier was also involved in several community revitalization projects in Hartford. In 2019, he was awarded Spier/Dueker Student Humanitarian Achievement Award at UConn’s Student Life Awards Ceremony. When his fellowship ends, Xavier plans to remain in DC to support community and urban development efforts by advocating for and driving public and social policy.

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM REOCCURRING THEME FOR UCONN RISING SCHOLARS

Summer 2019 kicked off a year-long environmental activism theme for high school students participating in the UConn Rising Scholars program. During their summer program English and Science courses, students read and discussed several pieces of fiction and nonfiction that approached environmental activism through multiple perspectives. A visit to UConn’s Thomas J. Dodd Research Center introduced students to environmental issues such as urban land reclamation, migrant deportation, and anti-war protests through the lens of art.

Fall 2019 had students engaged in multiple activities related to the environment. September took the students to UConn’s Spring Valley Student Farm, where they toured the farm, greenhouses and forest and worked alongside UConn students harvesting produce. There, they learned about composting, proper ways to recycle, sustainable farming, and zero-waste practices. In October, students immersed themselves in nature at the Department of Children and Families (DCF) Wilderness School, located in East Hartland,
When SSS alumna Begum Abadin participated in her own SSS Summer Program Closing Ceremony in August 2011, the UConn Hartford Campus was located in West Hartford, CT and she had only been in the United States for approximately four years. Fast forward to the August 2019 Closing Ceremony: the campus was now located in downtown Hartford and Begum, a college graduate and experienced professional, was tapped to give the keynote address to an audience of incoming first-year SSS students, their families, faculty, and staff.

Begum, who had moved to the United States from Bangladesh at the age of 14, entered UConn in 2011 as a participant in the Hartford Campus SSS Summer Program. She eventually transferred to the Storrs campus to complete her degree in Communications while also pursuing a minor in Professional Sales. Her awareness of diverse cultures, along with fluency in English and Bengali, helped her develop a broad professional network both while in college and after graduating. Currently, she is an Account Executive at the Travelers Companies in Hartford and a licensed real estate agent. She was an honoree at The 100 Women of Color Gala and Awards Ceremony held on June 19, 2019 at the Bushnell Theater in Hartford.

In an address at the Hartford Public Library on August 9th, Begum urged approximately 70 SSS students to take advantage of opportunities as they moved along their special and unique journeys. She challenged them to work hard, and to be ready to do whatever it takes to succeed in both their professional and personal lives. Once, she had been in their shoes: about to start college, wondering what her future held and what role she would play in shaping it, listening to a keynote speaker encouraging her and her peers. Now, she was the one doing the encouraging, hoping to inspire the new SSS class to set and achieve their goals. She had come full circle.
HARD WORK AND DETERMINATION PAY OFF FOR UCAP ALUMNA

As a youth growing up in the foster care system, UConn College Access and Preparation Program (UCAP) alumna D’Ziyah Mitchell was determined to create a successful future for herself. She worked hard at her studies, graduating third in her class at Hartford Public High School Law and Government Academy in June 2019. Her efforts paid off; not only was she accepted to Howard University in Washington, D.C. for fall 2019 on a full leadership scholarship, she also received additional private scholarships, and secured an internship and a mentor in her area of study, Political Science and Pre-Law.

D’Ziyah was among over 300 applicants to apply for The Hartford County Bar Association Scholarship, and the only senior to whom it was awarded. During the award ceremony reception, she met New Britain Superior Court Judge Tammy D. Geathers, who also attended and graduated from Howard as a Political Science and Pre-Law student. Judge Geathers offered to mentor D’Ziyah throughout her college and law school career, and to provide her a summer internship with the Katz & Seligman Law Firm in Hartford, CT.

Additionally, D’Ziyah applied for and was awarded the Together We Rise Foundation Scholarship, which awards motivated young adults who were foster youth with up to $90,000 to improve their lives through education. As part of the award process, D’Ziyah participated in a week-long retreat with other scholarship recipients in Colorado. The group bonded through activities such as zip lining through the Rocky Mountains, canoeing on Grand Lake, journaling, and meditation, making it a truly once-in-a-life experience for D’Ziyah.

Admitted to the UConn College Access and Preparation (UCAP) program in May 2016, D’Ziyah was an active participant who took full advantage of the program’s services and resources, including tutoring, assistance with completing college applications and applying for financial aid and scholarships, and community service and networking opportunities. D’Ziyah is a phenomenal role model for future UCAP students and the CAP staff are extremely proud of her.

RISING SCHOLAR ALUMNA TAKES CENTER STAGE AT PRESS CONFERENCE

UConn Rising Scholar alumna and current SSS student Maria Kelley took center stage at a recent press conference celebrating the success of the Rising Scholars program with an impassioned speech that highlighted the impact the program has had on her life and educational journey. Held on February 27, 2020 at the UConn Hartford Campus, the event included Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont and Lieutenant Governor Susan Bysiewicz, Department of Children and Families (DCF) Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes, and UConn Vice-Provost for Academic Affairs Dr. John Volin, all of whom lauded the program’s outstanding high school graduation and college enrollment rates.

Maria joined Rising Scholars in summer 2018. The program, a partnership with DCF that provides high school youth in foster care with academic and college preparation, had a transformational impact on her. “The summer before my senior year of high school, I was given the opportunity to participate in UConn Rising Scholars (known as First Star Academy at the time), and spent one of the most enriching summers at the University of Connecticut,” she told attendees. “Here, I was able to receive free college credits, four weeks of high-quality education, and meet one of the most influential mentors I have yet to have, URS Program Coordinator Alex Katz. Rising Scholars prepared me for college life while giving me hope for my post-secondary
education goals, and managed to change the future course of my life within one summer.” Maria also used her speech as an opportunity to advocate for the needs of other foster youth, and to stress how imperative it is to have programs that provide necessary resources and support for this population.

A pre-social work major at UConn, Maria currently works as a Program Assistant for Rising Scholars. She is also president of Creating Caring Communities, a new student organization that aims to create a sense of community for independent and foster students at UConn. Both roles have given her a platform to advocate and spread awareness on topics such as foster and independent students on campus, and the disparities they may go through. “Having the ability to help in the process of creating campus-wide change, while working with such dedicated people has taught me a lot about myself and what I hope to achieve while here at UConn and my future,” Maria said.

Maria is also grateful for the continuing support she receives through the UConn Student Support Services (SSS) program. “I was able to get an amazing [SSS] advisor, Summer Spaderna, and found a group of life-long supports. SSS has given me a stable foundation, which propelled me through an easy transition to freshman year, meanwhile continuously helping me grow and flourish.” The wrap-around support from the multiple UConn programs Maria has been a part of has helped her excel during her first year of college.

Maria’s speech made an impression on the hearts of the distinguished guests and other attendees. Governor Lamont, Commissioner Dorantes, and Dr. Volin noted the improvements being made by DCF to obtain better outcomes for foster youth, the importance of post-secondary education and resources for children in foster care, and the significance of programs like Rising Scholars to support the success and post-secondary achievement of youth in care. As for Maria, her heart remains with her Rising Scholars family, where she hopes to continue to use her voice to inspire change.

ROCKY START LEADS TO HIGH HOPES FOR UCONN RISING SCHOLAR

Reflecting on her high school experience, CeCe, a senior in the UConn Rising Scholars Program, admits she had a rocky academic start. An opportunity to create positive change came at the end of her junior year, when she heard about the UConn Rising Scholars Program. CeCe decided to apply, despite worrying that she wouldn’t meet the criteria for admission. To her surprise, she was accepted to the program and soon found herself on UConn’s campus, earning college credits, making friends, participating in extracurricular activities, and developing the motivation, mindset, and skills that would prepare her for college.

She found the four weeks she spent in Goodyear Residence Hall during the summer of 2019 to be a transformational experience. “Going to UConn changed my life for the better,” said CeCe. “Right now I have three college credits and almost all straight A’s.”

CeCe is outgoing and likes to help in the community. She started volunteering at the Mark Twain Adult Daycare and says it is helping prepare her for her future career. She currently also holds the title of President of the Gay Straight Alliance at her high school and has held various fundraisers. Her work has led her to be nominated for and receive the Random Acts of Kindness Award from Shop Rite.

CeCe recently applied to UConn’s Neag School of Education. She has high hopes of acceptance to her first choice school so that she can pursue her dream career of being a special education teacher while continuing to receive invaluable support from the UConn Rising Scholars staff.
SSS LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE ENCOURAGES A FRESH START MINDSET

Nearly 60 students participated in the 14th annual SSS Leadership Conference, held on the Storrs Campus in late August 2019. The conference theme, Developing a Leadership Mindset, encouraged participants to develop a growth mindset as developing leaders throughout the three-day event.

UConn SSS alumni Isaiah Mohammed kicked off the conference as keynote speaker by underscoring the importance of taking charge of one’s professional goals and building a support network. He inspired conference participants to have a vision and purpose toward a healthy life by sharing his community involvement experiences. Mohammed earned a B.S. degree in Management Information Systems from UConn in 2016.

Dr. Robin Coulter, Department Head for Marketing in UConn’s School of Business, presented a plenary workshop, Fresh Start Mindset: Transforming Lives, in which students explored what it means to be a leader, how to cultivate a leadership mindset, and how to think about the people one leads.

SSS alumna Ginnie Rae Clay shared her academic and personal journey as a UConn student in the 1980s, as well her career path after graduation. As both the first woman and the first African American to hold the position of State Director of the Connecticut Small Business Development Center, she noted that her career path was not always easy. From her, students learned that no one’s journey is perfect, and that everyone makes mistakes, but this should not prevent them from rising to the challenge of becoming a leader.

SSS ALUMNA SEANICE AUSTIN RECEIVES CAEOP ACHIEVER AWARD

CAP congratulates SSS alumna Seanice Austin for receiving the distinguished Achiever Award at the Connecticut Association of Educational Opportunity Programs (CAEOP) conference, held on Friday, December 13, 2019 at Central Connecticut State University. Seanice’s experience with SSS as an undergraduate student, and her continued professional involvement with the program, earned her not only the award, but the admiration of all who were present at the event.

Seanice entered UConn in 1989 as a participant in the SSS Summer Program at the Avery Point Campus. As an undergraduate student, she worked in the SSS office and even went to Washington, DC with SSS staff to testify to Congress about the importance of increased Pell Grant and TRIO funding. Since graduating from UConn, Seanice has stayed closely connected to SSS, both as an alumnus and in her current role as Director of UConn’s School of Business Office of Diversity Initiatives. Seanice is dedicated to supporting SSS students who are enrolled in, or who are seeking admission into, the School of Business, offering
them advising, guidance, and unique opportunities to excel. As manager of the Travelers EDGE Scholar Program, Seanice works closely with SSS EDGE students to ensure their success. For years, she has supported and celebrated SSS students’ professional development and academic successes through sponsorship of the annual SSS Leadership Conference and Academic Achievers and Seniors Awards Ceremony. She has served as trip co-director for SSS education abroad programs in Cape Town, South Africa and London, England. As a committee member for CAP’s 50th Anniversary Gala, Seanice played an integral role in making the event a success.

In her award acceptance speech, Seanice shared her personal story of being a young wife and mother while attending the SSS Summer Program and pursuing her college degree. She attributed her success to the opportunities provided by the SSS program. CAP is proud of Seanice for the grit and resilience she has displayed and her professional success, and grateful for the selfless and countless ways she gives back to SSS.

Twenty SSS students from the Storrs and Hartford campuses were invited to spend a day meeting and job shadowing professionals at Travelers Insurance Company on April 5, 2019. The annual event, developed exclusively for SSS students, began in 2010 through a partnership with the Center for Career Development (CCD) to expose first-generation students to career opportunities and professional advice from one of the largest employers in the state.

“Travelers Day has been a great way to show UConn students the myriad opportunities in the world of insurance and has inspired many of these students to pursue rewarding careers right here in the state of Connecticut,” said Eran Peterson, the CCD Career Consultant who helps organize the event. “With incredible industry partners and campus collaboration, events like Travelers Day serve to showcase the many career paths that our graduates can be excited to explore and establish networking and mentorship opportunities.”

SSS SENIOR AMBER SMITH AT OBAMA FOUNDATION SUMMIT

SSS student Amber Smith had the rare opportunity to represent her hometown of Hartford, CT at the Obama Foundation Summit held in Chicago, IL in October 2019. Amber, who was selected to participate in the Obama Foundation Community Leadership Corps (CLC) for the latter half of 2019, was one of 10 Hartford Corps members chosen to attend the Summit. She was selected because of her strong engagement with her local community, and her demonstrated potential to affect positive change in Hartford.

While at the Summit, Amber had the chance to meet people from all over the world, including President Barack and First Lady Michelle Obama. Amber describes the once-in-a-lifetime experience “an absolute dream come true.” The CLC also allowed Amber to begin her life’s work of fostering community involvement earlier than planned. Amber shared, “I learned more about my community in the six months of the program than I encountered in my almost 21 years having lived in it.”

Now that her term with the CLC has ended, Amber is continuing her corps project with fellow group members,
which includes educating the community leaders who are touchpoints for Hartford’s youth homelessness population. As a Political Science and Sociology double major in her final year at UConn, Amber plans to turn her community involvement into a full-time career in Hartford.

Amber has been an active member of the SSS program since she entered the University in 2016. She has been a featured speaker for the SSS Academic Achievers Ceremony, a Community Leader for the SSS summer program, and a peer advisor. SSS congratulates Amber for her work with the CLC and for her many accomplishments at UConn.

Visiting Travelers for a day gave students an introduction to the insurance industry and insight on what it would be like to work in the field. Most students who attended were in business-related majors and enjoyed seeing firsthand what they are learning in the classroom. SSS student Cesar Espaillat, Jr., an accounting major, said, “Visiting Travelers taught me that beyond the classroom is a wealth of knowledge for us to uncover and a group of friendly future coworkers to help along the way. I would highly recommend for all students to participate in the Travelers experience.”