

# GAINING

# LOLFE

# EXPERIENCE

Real-world work experience offered by WISE and college programs help students prepare for life beyond high school

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After a few minutes of compulsively reloading the page, '16 South graduate and '20 Cornell University graduate Nighat Ansari saw in dismay that she had gotten a C — her first since high school. After studying for weeks, she had just taken one of her hardest college exams yet. After her experience in South's rigorous academic environment, Ansari said she went into Cornell expecting to perform just as well in a similar atmosphere.

"I had a very narrow mindset because being a kid in high school, I felt like the world was going to end if I didn't get this GPA or if I didn't get a five on my BC Calc AP," she said. "When you get to college, it puts you through a lot of different challenges and failures. It taught me to care more about the important things in life, and it made me very okay with failure."

Ansari's experience is representative of the grade-based attitude many students have toward education in high school. While stress can be essential to academic growth, many factors, including familial and self-imposed pressure, lead students to become fixated on the college application process while failing to plan for the possibilities of life after high school.

To help with this, resources like those in South's WISE Individualized Senior Experience (WISE) Program, at community colleges and in specialized college programs provide experience-based opportunities that set students up for a successful post-secondary life.

Senior Jake Levy said that while some programs may help students prepare for life beyond high school, students must first reflect on their goals in life. He said that by defining success based on a numerical scale, students can lose sight of their end goal.

"You might have people that got 4.0s and 1600s. That's great for them, but that's not all [of] who you are," he said. "What else do you do? Who are you as a person?"

## The Price of Success

As senior Olivia Wong got ready for one of her most important dance performances, she thought about the satisfaction she would feel after adding it to her college resume. Then, guilt kicked in as she realized that her motivation behind succeeding was the pressure to reach high standards to boost her chances of admitted to a prestigious college.

"My love for dance faded away, and it was more so that I was dancing because of college. The pressure that college put on me to get into an Ivy League school ruined what I used to love," she said. "I felt a lot of times like, 'Am I good enough?' or, 'What can I do to try hard?'"

According to a study from the American Psychological Association, young people are more overloaded with pressure than their parents, with a steady increase in stress levels from the late 1970s to today. Psychologists Thomas Curran and Andrew Hill found that unhealthy perfectionism and self-criticism has increased among teenagers, both directly attributed to the high expectations that parents have of their children. Junior Hanna Liauchonak said that much of the South-specific pressure is not caused by the school, but rather by parents.

"It's less so Newton South than the upper-middle-class community associated with South, in the sense that parents put a lot of pressure on us to succeed," she said.

While students like Wong may feel as though they need their futures immediately sorted out, South's College and Career Counselor Kathleen Sabert said that learning through experience can open doors to new career opportunities.

"A lot of people think that as long as they have the most prestigious [school], that it doesn't matter, and we know that's not true," she said. "With more information that you have about yourself and that you gain through exposure to different careers or through courses, the trajectory of where you see yourself can sometimes change."

## WISE-ing Up

When '21 graduate Jocelyn Wong filed into her first accounting class at Bentley University, she felt prepared for the class, despite its notoriously difficult tests and overbearing homework. In her senior year at South, Wong completed an accounting internship for WISE, a program that allows seniors to participate in and earn credit for large career-oriented projects during their second semester. She said that WISE helped prepare her for more challenging courses, like her foundational General Business 112 accounting class, without feeling overwhelmed.

"I had a better basic foundation than everyone else," she said. "They're cramming all this basic accounting knowledge into you because they have to build that foundation within one semester of college before you go on. If you don't know this stuff, you can't build up to learning more about accounting and all the other industries of business, but WISE gave me time to learn about accounting before I came to Bentley."

Beyond the academic and personal growth that comes from designing your own project, WISE also helps with cultivating important relationships: Wong worked with her mother, building off of their existing connections, which enabled a prime environment to foster growth; however, Jessica Engel, a WISE Program Coordinator, said that it is important to assist students that lack these connections.

"In terms of equity not only between schools but within schools, internships tend to be something that people often get out of connections," she said. "We've worked to both foster the connections students already have and to make sure that students who don't have connections already are getting opportunities to have internships."

Senior Jessie Traxler said that when she begins her WISE project this semester, she hopes to form connections in a structured environment.

"Within WISE, the built-in support system allows you to do something more independent that maybe you wouldn't be able to figure out on your own," she said. "It's about networking and practicing these skills of getting an internship that will be beneficial."

In addition to WISE's support in building foundational knowledge and connections, Engel said that students can benefit from its grading strategy, which encourages experience-based rather than grade-based learning.

"It's more about the experience itself and less about what comes out of it. In school, we're often so focused on the project or the test or the grade, and it's all about the outcome," she said. "For WISE, it's focused on the moment and the experience that students are having and what they're gaining from the experience."

## College Opportunities

While WISE serves as a resource in the realm of secondary education, many colleges also provide students with a variety of opportunities that encourage career exploration and experience, helping them to gain skills that they can transfer to their post-college life.

'20 graduate and MassBay Community College sophomore Abishek Seelam said that he has found unique opportunities at his college, through which he's been able to discover his interest in the STEM field.

"There's a STEM mentorship program where a STEM leader assigns you a mentor from pharmaceutical companies or college professors," he said. "My mentor right now is the head of a pharmaceutical company in New York, and I wouldn't have gotten that connection without my community college."

'19 Sharon High School graduate and current junior at Northeastern University Krishanu Datta said that he has been able to work at different technology companies through the Co-operative Education Program, otherwise known as a "co-op," at Northeastern. The program runs for six months in two different cycles, allowing students to have a school-year internship.

"My first co-op was at Wayfair, and I worked on the Com-

petitive Intelligence Team. Currently, I'm working at Akamai, a technology company in Boston, and I'm on their data science team working on bot detection," he said. "When you're in a co-op, you don't pay for tuition, and on top of that, you get paid for work. Most people can pay off at least a semester and maybe two semesters, depending on what major and what job they're doing."

Like Seelam, '18 Northern Essex Community College graduate and Regis College freshman Josue Matias said that he found both foundational and advanced resources at his community college that helped advance his career in social work. In a college that is 42% Hispanic, he said that Northern Essex supported him as an English-Language Learner coming from a Spanish-speaking background.

"They had a writing tutor that could help you with writing and grammar, and the professors let the students know about those resources," he said. "With English not being my first language, I was there a lot of the time not just trying to get good grades, but trying to understand the subject. I was there as much as I could afford to be there, and now I'm in a master's program."

## Academic Adaptation

Resources from WISE and in college prepare students like Matias for life beyond academics, helping to bridge the immense gap in life experience between secondary education and adulthood; however, some degree of unease during the transition is unavoidable. '21 graduate and freshman at University of Massachusetts Amherst Stephanie Tian said that academically adjusting to college was generally straightforward, but new factors like large class sizes were major adjustments for her.

"My psych class this semester is 500 people, which I personally like, but that's really different because at South, I felt like I was always with the same kids," she said. "It's harder to make friends in bigger classes because you're not sitting next to the same person every time. It's easy to meet people, it's just hard to stay connected with them."

As a first-generation South Asian immigrant, Ansari said that attending Cornell, where 43% of the student population belongs to a racial minority, she felt seen; however, she said that Cornell's academically rigorous environment made it easy for her to compare herself to her peers.

"When I finally did go back to an environment where there were people from all over the world, I strived in that [environment where] people could say my name properly and everybody understood where I was coming from," she said. "It was like a double-edged sword because it was a difficult environment to succeed in. I was in a place where the impostor syndrome was the worst I've ever experienced in my life."

The stressful environment in college is inevitable, but Matias said that a student's experience largely depends on their goals going into college. He said that while there isn't a singular path a student must take, students should use their resources to achieve "success," no matter how an individual may define it.

"People have to have the right mindset and worry about their education. You can still have fun, party and play around, but it should be a balance," he said. "Surround yourself with people that have the same goals as you, people that want to make it in their industry or want to make it in their profession, and stay consistent. If you can't do full-time at a college, try to do part-time. Those years are going to pass really quick."