

The needs that the project addressed:

College access is hidden behind many barriers, often more present in students that are first generation, lower income, or time constrained. Even with the support that students may receive from their first generation and/or low income status, these aids are often hidden beneath bureaucracy and require time and knowhow that is unintuitive. Cornerstone set out to be a college admissions advising program for local Waltham High School Juniors and Seniors that were looking to apply to colleges. By providing insight as students that have, in the past, applied ourselves, and corralling/organizing information into a single, digestible place, we aim to streamline the college admissions process for students that may not have intimate knowledge and infinite time to learn how admissions offices may think.

Spring 2020 semester:

The Cornerstone College Advising Team attempted to enable WPHS in their college application process by providing a series of in-person and virtual resources. The plan was to host a series of workshops that compartmentalized the college application process into a series of core competencies and skills from which the high schoolers could effectively demonstrate their qualifications to college admissions departments. With some preliminary plans in place, we set out to gather a group of Brandeis students as volunteers to provide a wider array of perspectives and marshall the necessary manpower. Emails were sent out to target groups of college students and a table was set up during the Waltham Group's recruitment night. At full strength, our volunteer base consisted of roughly 22 college undergraduates. Each volunteer would be CORI'd by the Department of Community Service, and Cornerstone-specific training was administered through 1 in-person session, and 1 virtual session through Zoom. Coordination with WPHS took place through Dr. Nadene Stein and Brenda Peña, who would provide access to prospective candidates and the spaces necessary to host them in exchange for our services. By mid spring 2020, we had a serviceable model and began recruitment of high school students. A series of flyers were distributed by Branda Peña to the student body of WPHS, and informal in-person informational sessions were held during lunch at the high school. Roughly 9 students had signed up by the end of our first week. Unfortunately, by the weekend, WPHS had implemented a series of restrictive COVID-19 policies that made in-person programming impossible, and all Brandeis students able to return home were ordered to do so. We knew that a new programming model needed to be created quickly, and began brainstorming ways that a fully virtual curriculum could be administered by the fall semester.

Fall 2020 semester:

The Fall 2020 semester was marked with a shift in focus for Cornerstone. Our initial plans for having mentors and mentees meet each other, tours for high school students at Brandeis, and in person panels with Brandeis faculty and the WPHS students were no longer possible. Additionally, due to the unprecedented change for all students, many Brandeis volunteers did not return to campus or were no longer available to volunteer with the project. As such, we ran into a personnel issue as well as a logistical one. Through some brainstorming at the beginning of the fall semester, we decided to pivot to a website, instead of individual Brandeis and WPHS student mentor pairs. This allowed us to shift to a COVID safe model, while simultaneously creating a program that required fewer volunteers. At around the beginning

of October, with a paired down team of dedicated volunteers, we began construction of the Cornerstone website. Throughout the months of October and November, we were able to create a functioning website at this link: <https://www.cornerstoneadvising.org/>. The website is primarily broken down into two main subheadings. The first being weekly tasks that seniors during the application cycle can break down the CommonApp into manageable chunks. The second section is a set of resources that provide links and instructions on how to apply for financial aid, a guide on college fit considerations, a guide to using the CommonApp, essay writing tips, and creating a list of potential colleges. Moving forward, we would like to use a pilot group of students at the WPHS that could try out the website, and follow along with the weekly tasks, and see what potential resources we may need to add, or some that may be unnecessary. During the spring semester, Han will continue to lead the team of volunteers in development of the website and hopefully recruit underclassmen leaders who can continue the project into the future.

Our journey was fraught with obstacles. We struggled to communicate effectively with our community partners over at WPHS for the duration of our fellowship. However, our capacity to coordinate with WPHS drastically improved after we began to plan more directly with Brenda Peña. Another major obstacle was the unexpected introduction of a competing nonprofit organization, Let'sGetReady, early in the spring semester. WPHS wanted to determine whether collaboration between the two programs was possible. After several meetings, we determined that collaboration with Let'sGetReady would not be possible without subsuming Cornerstone into their organization. This would have violated the terms of our fellowship and, in our perspective, damaged the integrity of the program we had envisioned. We communicated this to WPHS and they gave us the thumbs up to continue with our original plans, much to our relief.

A series of surveys were prepared to compare baseline competencies, perspectives, and sentiments of our participants at the beginning, middle, and end of the program. As no high schoolers were formally recruited to participate in the program, we did not have a proper opportunity to submit these surveys. During the Fall 2020 panel with Dean of Student Affairs, Jamele Adams, student demeanor was informally assessed to determine (1) the need for our program and, more specifically, the website being produced and (2) the willingness of students to participate in said program. Students seemed willing to participate, but no formal commitments were made. We received several questions from both WPHS students and parents about the college application process and the website, and were confident that the resource would both be used by and be helpful for future generations of college applicants.

The future of Cornerstone Advising remains flexible. For the immediate future, we would like to continue developing the weekly goals list and recruit underclassmen Brandeis students to train them to take the reins after the current set of volunteers graduates. We would also like to work with the WPHS during the spring and recruit current juniors planning to apply next year so we can begin receiving more feedback and pilot the website and our weekly goals for when we roll out for the next application cycle. In the far future, perhaps we can create a club at Brandeis or make it a Waltham Group program to ensure its longevity. Han will begin talks with the current president and DCS staff about those prospects.

Han:

The fellowship certainly taught me a lot about managing what I am personally capable of and being realistic about plans. Our original spring semester plan was extremely arduous and perhaps we may have dreamed a little larger than we can handle. While we never knew the outcome of that, being able to scale back, not just for what we were capable of handling but of the changing circumstances of the world, showed some growth on my part. It also taught me to think on my feet. There were a lot of unforeseen setbacks in our programming and we managed to adapt to every challenge. I am excited about the future of Cornerstone and am extremely grateful to the fellowship for providing the support on both a program and personal level that made this growth possible.

Nick:

The R/C Fellowship was, almost necessarily, an interesting experience. The overlapping of our program with the COVID-19 pandemic was a major struggle. I am incredibly grateful to have had this experience as it sharpened my capacity to bring service initiatives to marginalized populations as well as serve in a managerial role. However, I would be remiss if I did not speak to some of my personal failures during the fall semester. My ability to serve as a leader was severely compromised by a series of factors. Han stepped up and took over the project, navigating the struggles of the semester well and creating an amazing website that, hopefully, will serve WPHS for years to come. I am proud of the work that we completed throughout our two difficult semesters, and endeavor to support Cornerstone's continuation as a service initiative moving forward.