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WEEKEND

Is it dead? Yale mentorship



AN INQUIRY INTO THE REALITY OF MENTORSHIP AT YALE

// BY HANA TILKSEW

In my 10 weeks as a Yale student, I've received 10 emails from Cross Campus, an online platform facilitated by the Yale Alumni Association. For those of us who don't bother opening the emails, the basic premise behind Cross Campus is that you fill out a LinkedIn-esque profile and connect with alumni mentors who can help guide you through your undergraduate journey and beyond.

I have yet to complete a Cross Campus profile, and I don't know of anyone who has. However, the knowledge that Yale makes something like that available to students is comforting. After all, part of the draw of elite schools is the presumption that you'll make connections with thoughtful, intellectually challenging mentors.

But "mentor" is a vague word. What's the proof that you've been mentored? Is it achieving the 500 plus mark on LinkedIn? Is it having a resume with no white space? Is it being best buddies with that professor who won a Pulitzer?

Even approaching mentors can feel like a zero-sum game. Reaching out is intimidating enough. And once they agree to a coffee chat, what's next? Asking them questions you could easily Google is a waste of time. Asking about internships off the bat is taboo. Telling them who you are and why they should invest time in you is conceited. It seems like every step you take is cursed.

Over the past few weeks, I have sat down with students and faculty to orient myself with respect to mentorship culture at Yale. A part of me had expected the career-oriented advising and quick zips in and out of class that materialized, but I wanted to know if the hours-long philosophical office hour discussions were more than just a thing of the past. These conversations gave me a window into community members' thoughts on whether mentorship at Yale is dead. The answer? It's complicated.

Haley Cohen Gilliland '11, the director of the Yale Journalism Initiative, suggests treating prospective mentors like anyone else you're just getting to know. "My experience at Yale as a student was that there were ample opportunities for mentorship, but it was something that you had to proactively cultivate," she said, recommending the cold email as a way to connect with mentors both within Yale or outside the campus bubble.

Cold emailing freaks out many Gen Zers. Reaching out to people we don't know? Isn't that weird? Won't we look desperate?

"The worst that happens is someone doesn't answer," Cohen Gilliland said. "The best that happens is they do answer and you have an interesting conversation, and maybe that does blossom into an enduring mentorship relationship where they are aware of opportunities you weren't and point you towards them."

But anyone at any university can send a cold email. Where's the special Yale sauce in all this? What's our return on investment for all those admissions essays and nerve-wracking interviews?

Ashley Yim '27, a sociology major in Jonathan Edwards College, felt that Yale provides more personalized opportunities for social mentorship than academic mentorship. "They have TroCos and FroCos," she said, referring to first-year counselors and transfer student counselors. "They have Peer Liaisons. In JE, they have big sibs, little sibs," she said. Yim transferred to Yale this semester from Cerritos College, a two-year institution in Los Angeles County, and observed a sharp contrast between mentorship at Cerritos versus at Yale.

"It's zero at community college. There's no big sib, little sibling. There's no counselor that's a student," she said.

On the other hand, Jasmine Rossetti '27 found academic mentorship at Yale in professor Woo-Kyoung Ahn of the Psychology Department, who she connected with while taking one of Ahn's courses this summer. "Her lecture style was charismatic and engaging, so I felt comfortable chatting with her after class," Rossetti wrote in an email. "Sometimes professors can be really intimidating, but I didn't feel that way with her."

Yale professors are a diverse bunch. Some seem like they might break out in hives if you don't address them by the proper title. Others sign their emails with "Sent from my iPhone." One may be eager to discuss your entire life story in their office hours, while another wants you to get straight to the course material.

For any mentor in this diverse pool, the English Department's Director of Undergraduate Studies Stefanie Markovits draws a clear line between short-term help and long-term guidance. "There's a distinction between mentorship and advising. They're easily conflated, but they're different," she said. Mentorship "depends much more on a personal connection between the mentor and the mentee. That's something hard to arrange institutionally."

Perhaps that's the root of our disconnection to mentors at Yale: Maybe we're drowning in such an abundance of advising that we struggle to find genuine mentorship. All of us are assigned a faculty advisor our first year at Yale. We have a director of undergraduate studies for our major. We have a residential college dean. There are endless opportunities for half-hour meetings about our academic roadmaps and postgraduate plans. But when it comes to building deep, personal connections, we don't always have a strategy. When you're used to eating at the drive-thru, you feel out of place at a Michelin star restaurant.

Part of this dilemma has to be a lack of time. At a university where even lunch with a friend needs to be logged into the GCal, it may not seem efficient to consistently carve out the time to sit with a professor one-on-one on a regular enough basis for them to become a true mentor. Having deep talks in a professor's office over tea for a couple hours may have been more common in the old days, when Yale's students were the Waspy sons of America's elite who went to university to discover themselves. Now, the average Yale student's goal is to get a cushy job after graduation. As a result, we're often more focused on connecting with hiring managers than our professors.

"The students who most need mentorship are the ones who are hard to reach," Markovits said. "You can't force mentorship on someone. It just doesn't work that way."

Many of us are guilty of not taking advantage of our professors' availability as much as we should. They carve out time every week to lend an ear to their students, and although we know where and when to find them thanks to the handy syllabus, we don't always show up. The first step of building a consistent connection is consistent presence. If we can't get past that threshold, is it any wonder that mentors feel few and far between?

"Everyone who teaches at Yale teaches here because they want to mentor young people," Cohen Gilliland told me. But do Yale's young people want to be mentored? Are we taking our classes to engage with an expert in a specific subject and glean all their wisdom, or are we just trying to meet our graduation requirements so we can go out into the corporate world with a shiny Yale degree?

There's no question that students' priorities have changed — the world is a very different place than it was in 1701. As career stability becomes more shaky than ever for a new generation of young adults, we have no choice but to ditch office hours for career fairs, or skip our assigned readings to write a cover letter. Can we really say mentorship at Yale is dead? Or has it been buried alive, waiting for us to dig it up?

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