male Latinos in the sciences,” he’d felt pressure to proceed, sacrificing his passions for music and education. (Gable’s research revealed that first-gen students had greater difficulty choosing an academic field—for diverse reasons, like López’s.) Yet his continuing engagement with FSY and with friends from the program has helped put his choice into perspective and encouraged him to redirect it. He has added education courses to his studies, to prepare for work in schools—perhaps in his home community.

April Ruiz, dean of FSY and of the Hopper College residence (and a first-generation, low-income Yale graduate), said the cumulative effect was to give students the sense, “I am not weird.” Combining an “intentional academic component” with the equally intentional creation of community, she said, helped such students adapt to utterly new circumstances. Her weekly conversations with FSY students explored what it would feel like to balance four demanding college courses, pursue extracurriculars, manage time, and, generally, “take advantage of these privileged opportunities while the folks at home never could—you advance, they don’t.” Along with the peer mentors like López, Kauffman, and Almonte, she sought to help the students understand both “how things work” and “how things feel” in a setting where some of them would have experiences as traumatic as “coming out as poor.”

The program aims to help the students understand both “how things work” and “how things feel.”

Quoting Ruiz’s predecessor, Howard said of those challenges, “Students should never struggle alone.”

“Roadblocks are not deficiencies”

If Yale is newly committed to supporting undergraduates from under-resourced high schools, Georgetown established the playbook.

• In 1968, amid the country’s convulsive urban traumas, it launched an effort to enroll and support underrepresented students—the forerunner of its Community Scholars Program (CSP), a summer academic immersion, like FSY, for 75 students.

• A Georgetown Scholars Program (GSP), launched in 2003 (a response to the Harvard Financial Aid Initiative and other well-endowed schools’ aid enrichments), increased

Michelle A. Williams attracted a great deal of attention last year when she was appointed dean of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health (HSPH)—less for her career as a distinguished epidemiologist than because she is the first African American to lead a Harvard school. In person, her soft-spoken disposition doesn’t appear to invite public attention. Was the symbolism of her appointment personally important to her? “It was my first exposure to a massive amount of public attention,” she recalled at a recent interview in her Kresge Building office. “And it did set me back a little bit. So much focus on my race, my gender, and the fact that I’m foreign born” (her family emigrated from Jamaica to New York when she was a child). “I’m proud of all of those. If I can be a positive symbol, that it’s possible to overcome minority status and that there are no limits to the capacity to excel and achieve leadership roles at the highest institutions, then it’s important to me.”

Williams, who earned her Sc.D. in epidemiology from HSPH in 1991 and whose research has focused on maternal and infant health, assumed office last July, succeeding Gregory professor in cancer prevention emeritus David Hunter, who had temporarily taken up the post following the departure of Julio Frenk (now president of the University of Miami). HSPH had exceeded its capital campaign goal of $450 million, thanks to an unrestricted $350-million gift that transformed its financial structure—the largest-ever donation to a public-health school. Williams says the central goal of her tenure has been to use the gift to “position the school to soar to even greater heights,” particularly as federal funding as a share of the school’s research funding has decreased. “It’s an urgent area of concern,” she said. “After the 2008 crisis, it became very evident that we as an institution had to work diligently to diversify our funding streams. Seventy-five percent of our funding comes from sponsored research; 85 percent of that comes from the federal government. We are the most dependent of the Harvard schools on federal funding.”

HSPH’s campaign aimed to position the school as a premier center of research into the determinants of human health in the twenty-first century: old and new global pandemics; harmful physical and social environments (including industrial pollution and gun violence); poverty and humanitarian crises; and failing global-health systems. Williams’s expertise at the intersection of epidemiology and biology, as well as her sensitivity to the social context of health, position her well to lead across those domains. The campaign also aimed to raise funding for new professorships, student financial aid, and renewal of the school’s infrastructure. The latter, according to Williams, might sound boring, but remains essential to promoting interdisciplinary work: “We’re spread out across 25 physical addresses, which means we don’t benefit from having the enormous talent represented in the school collocated in a way that fosters collaboration.”

To those ends, the naming Chan gift, along with new partnerships with the for-profit sector and foundations (what she called “non-traditional collaborators”), have augmented HSPH’s re-
means every woman should have a right to the full array of repro-
ductive health services, including birth control, screening for repro-
ductive disorders, and abortion rights.

“There has to be recognition, when community outreach is being done,” she said, “that the history [of the field] is not ignored. Because of that history, public health needs be to attentive to the diversity of its workforce, needs to be attentive to the fact that the philosophy of public health is that it’s a social movement that is designed to optimize maximum human potential at a population scale, that it is about honoring individual human rights.”

—MARINA BOLOTNIKOVA

Michelle A. Williams

These forms of soft support, combined with the students’ resilience and drive, are associated with tangible results in the classroom. During a morning session of CSP’s critical reading and writing course, a student volunteered her draft for review—among the hardest experiences for most young learners to endure. Twenty minutes of peer critiques, kindly expressed but tough and extensive, ensued. Their recipient then thanked everyone and said she looked forward to incorporating their suggestions in her revision. Most teachers of undergraduates would testify to how much they would value the kind of learning such give-and-take enables for everyone in a class. (The writing class continues into the fall, with the same teachers, and students take a second summer course, related to their intended concentration—also for full credit. They register for freshman classes before the term begins, assuring access to their preferred options.)

Achieving such an environment is not serendipitous. In a faculty meeting after that morning class, led by Bishundat, the

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