So often it’s a fellow Eph who opens the door to what turns out to be the rest of your life and says, come on in.

the alumni network
Aaron “A.J.” Jenkins ’03 made his first Williams connection at age 16, during a visit to campus. Naturally outgoing, he stopped a student at the snack bar to ask about the college. She not only answered his questions, she also treated him to ice cream at Lickety Split. To this day, Jenkins remains friends with Geraldine Shen ’01, who now works as a fundraiser and event planner. When Shen was a prospective student, Jenkins brought her to Williams. As an undergraduate, Jenkins interned with Peter Peyser ’76, a D.C.-based public affairs and strategic business consultant who remains a friend and mentor. As a legislative aide to U.S. Sen. John Kerry, Jenkins hosted Williams interns including Jessica Wing ’17 (now New England’s chief, Denver and Healthy Schools coordinator for the Environmental Protection Agency) and Alex Bain ’16 (now a law student at the University of Pennsylvania). He also connected Latesha Smith ’06, whose Williams roommate knew Jenkins when she was a prospective student, with Daisy Johnson, her first job at Meridian, helping international ambassadors get acclimated to the U.S. Smith is now a freelance event planner. Jenkins recently became executive director of the nonprofit Operation Understanding DC, which educates African American and Jewish high school students about civil rights and social justice. He recruited Billy Green ’96 to speak to the group about LGBTQ issues. And Natasha (Friedman) Whitman ’96, a Washington, D.C., lobbyist with whom Jenkins has an internship as a student. Their generosity was transformative and sparked in him the realization that “Williams is more than just a college, more than just an institution,” he says.

“There’s a familial connection,” he says. “People are looking out for my best interests, so I should do the same.”

Jenkins returned to D.C. after graduation to work on Capitol Hill and was happy to pursue the way for an ever-widening circle of Ephs. As a legislative aide to Sen. John Kerry, he offered them apartments. He helped students find internships in his office and learned in the Purple Valley, the networks cut across class years, geographic lines and industries. And Williams is devoting new resources to expand access to those networks. In addition to maintaining a database of 28,700 alumni, fostering 70 regional associations that host networking events around the globe, overseeing 95 internship opportunities supported by alumni and having an active LinkedIn presence, the college last fall hired Wendy Webster Coakley ’83 as its first-ever director of alumni career networking. It’s her job, working in concert with the Career Center, to ensure that members of the Williams community see the college—and each other—as resources at every stage of their lives.

“We have an alumni network that’s the envy of other schools,” Coakley says. “And the college is dedicated to supporting that network, providing resources that everybody can access to help them find jobs or become more successful in their careers.”

THAT FIRST INTRODUCTION

A professor who connects students with alumni to launch a nonprofit, a mentor who points the way after an unexpected job loss, a benefactor whose support provides a foothold in a tough industry, an employer who understands the power of a Williams education—so often it’s a fellow Eph who opens the door to what turns out to be the rest of your life and says, Come on in.

That was the case for Tracy Heilman ’81. Twenty-six years ago, as a Williams senior, she was capped out in the Career Center, wading through binders in search of alumni working in management consulting back home in the Midwest. She wrote down the name Bill Holt ’81, the youngest person listed who met her criteria—and, in her mind, the least intimidating. She had no idea that Holt would help set the course for the rest of her professional life and inspire her to do the same for others.

Holt worked for a small health care information company in Chicago called The Sachs Group and responded warmly to Heilman’s letter of introduction. He suggested a meeting, which turned into an interview, and before she knew it Heilman was shaking hands with Sachs’ president and going out for a beer with Holt’s colleagues. Within three days she had a job offer. Holt sent Heilman apartment clippings while she was finishing up at Williams and, later, introduced her to the city’s running community. One Thanksgiving when Heilman was bogged down with work and couldn’t make it home to Holland, Mich., Holt welcomed her at his own family’s table.

By Amanda Korman ’10
At Sachs, Heiniman got involved with Internet product development, an expertise she eventually used in her current position.

In developing the proposal, Fischer spoke with Magnus Bernhardsson, a professor who eventually led her and several colleagues to launch the consumer health information startup Subimo, which they sold to WebMD in 2006. Today she is the co-founder and consumer behavior strategist of ConnectedHealth, which helps educate consumers about health insurance options.

Fischer and Dey navigate the Arabic-speaking world—including Omer Khalayleh ’13, a high school student who helped them have their ideas taken seriously in Jordan.

“From the moment we made the connection,” says Bernhardsson, “but it’s the person who has to then capitalize on that opportunity. And I had total faith in them.”

Dey and Fischer originally planned to hand over the camp to King’s Academy volunteers after the $10,000 Davis grant they’d received ran out. But after their first summer in Jordan, they decided to form a nonprofit, Reclaim Childhood, and expand the program to include year-round camps, clinics and sports programs for refugee girls, as well as coaching clinics for women.

Williams connections were crucial to keeping the organization afloat. Ephps had the community support and contacts that evolved into Reclaim Childhood. Bernhardsson helped students and alumni find their own paths. Last year at Williams and Fischer began a job at Bain & Co.

The Williams engine that powers Reclaim Childhood also inspires students; 46.7 percent would do the same to support fellow alumni.

In a survey of alumni volunteers last summer, 59 percent said they were willing to participate in career-based initiatives supporting students; 46.7 percent would do the same to support fellow alumni.

A MID-CAREER MENTOR

The Williams engine that powers Reclaim Childhood also inspires A MID-CAREER MENTOR.

In almost every career there are shifts—whether because of a job loss, personal circumstances or the desire to pursue a new direction. Coakley is particularly attuned to the unexpected turns professional lives take. At the age of 50, she needed a change from her 17-year career.

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corporate career in the financial services sector, where she most recently was public relations manager for a Fortune 300 insurance company. The opportunity to serve as director of alumni career networking for Williams was one she couldn’t pass up.

“Very few, if any, Williams grads are going to find a job or career path that’s financially, mentally and emotionally rewarding for 40-plus years,” she says. “And for those whose careers are disrupted by a job loss, there can be a stigma. I want Williams grads’ first instinct to be to tap into the alumni network, particularly when they’re at a fork in the road 10, 15, 30 years in.”

That was lawyer David Futterman’s ’87 instinct when he reached a crossroads in his own career. After working as a litigator for a large New York City firm for 10 years, he had a yen to do something different in the field. A friend put him in touch with finance lawyer Steve Brody ’83, who met with Futterman to discuss their work. Brody told him, “I don’t have a position to offer you, but I like you, and I’m going to help you.” Not long after, Brody—who Futterman still considers a mentor—kept his promise, putting in a good word with a former colleague who interviewed Futterman for a position with Bank of America. Futterman got the job and worked there for eight years until, he says, his position was “restructured out of existence.”

Futterman again turned to Williams, sharing his experience in his class notes in an effort to lessen the stigma associated with losing one’s job. “As with other crucial phases of my life,” he wrote in the Carol Smith ’64 alumni blog, “Williams friends were there to support me. Too many to mention from our class and others eagerly shared their connections, served as references, took meetings, listened to my whining and more. “And it was an Eph,” he wrote, “who introduced me to the contact that ultimately produced my new role as U.S. director of litigation for TD Bank.”

Futterman is also a resource for those just getting their start in law. He’s also a mentor to young lawyers. Hoyoon Nam ’01, a banking associate who met with Futterman to discuss their work. Brody told him, “I don’t have a position to offer you, but I like you, and I’m going to help you.” Not long after, Brody—who Futterman still considers a mentor—kept his promise, putting in a good word with a former colleague who interviewed Futterman for a position with Bank of America. Futterman got the job and worked there for eight years until, he says, his position was “restructured out of existence.”

“Your Williams degree is a ticket to an incredible network of people willing to do anything to help you, to talk to you, to be a sounding board, to be a mentor.”

— DAVID FUTTERMAN ’87

ENTRÉE TO AN INDUSTRY

To map the relationship between majors and careers (see http://bit.ly/Devadoss), math professor Satyan Devadoss and student researchers combed through 15,600 alumni records and grouped them into 15 fields. They found that, not unexpectably, certain fields attract a large number of Ephs. 26 percent work in K-12 or higher education, 15 percent in health care and medicine, 12 percent in law, and 9 percent in banking or finance. The concentration of Ephs in other industries is lighter, and the college’s Alumni-Sponsored Internship Program is helping to feed these smaller but no less active professional networks.

Since its creation in 1991, the program has funded 1,500 students in fields where internships would otherwise be unpaid. According to Career Center Director John Nohle, 95 students this summer are receiving $3,200 stipends from 15 different funds, most of them geared toward nonprofits, public service and community service.

“The Arts & Entertainment Internship Program is unique among the 15 fields in that it’s specifically designed to expose students to the entertainment industry,” Devadoss says. “In recent years, Ephs have predominately majored in the performing arts, film and music. So we’re happy to see that Ephs are now majoring in communications, related fields and everything in between.”

Mathew Williamson ’77, executive producer and creator of the TV series Touched by an Angel, established the fund in 1991 with Peter Warne ’76, a senior partner with entertainment law firm Nelson Davis Weinstock. They were looking to host a unique event for the college’s L.A. regional association and decided on a fundraiser to support Ephs seeking work in Hollywood.

Kate Flinn, who moved there after graduation, said she put her efforts into a fundraiser to support Ephs seeking work in Hollywood.

She is now developing her first feature with an independent film producer, and one of her short films was shot and directed by a friend in June.

In an industry where who you know can seem more important than what you know, the Arts & Entertainment program and alumni network provide sturdy footholds for students and young alumni. “We went to Williams,” says Williamson, whose latest TV show, Touched by an Angel, was the one he created with Matthew Littman Wetzstein, and who was a producer for the TV series Touched by an Angel, “for an entertainment finance degree with Herbert Blach, who created the Arts & Entertainment Internship Program at Williams to support students seeking experience in Hollywood. This program has provided $3,200 stipends for 33 students, including Evan Wright ’08, Eric Anderson ’06, Eva Flamm ’03, who interned with Guy Daniels ‘85, VP of production at Gold Circle Films. Wright became a full-time script reader for Gold Circle before attending film school, he now writing, teaching and developing his own screenplay in Berkeley. Anderson works for Family Guy creator Seth McFarlane and writes and acts on the side. Danella helped Flamm find her first two paying jobs in the industry, she now freelance writing and script developing while working in her own shows with an independent film producer.

A TWO-WAY STREET

Williams’s statement underscores a very important point about the power of the alumni network. Those in a position to help often benefit from the relationship as much as those who reach out to them.

That was the case for Pittsfield, Mass., Police Chief Michael Wynn ’83, who was creating the department’s first crime analyst...
position when he heard from Amanda O'Connor ’10. O'Connor joined the Army National Guard after graduation and spent two years on active duty. But when her dream of working for the FBI was sidelined by the U.S. government sequestration, she returned home to the Southern Berkshires to look for a job. She sent dozens of résumés “into the abyss,” she says, but got little traction.

On the recommendation of a former boss who knew their Williams connection, O'Connor contacted Wynn to pick his brain. That’s when she learned about the crime analyst position and applied for the job. With her training in military intelligence and her Williams background, her résumé quickly rose to the top of the more than 50 Wynn considered. She started work this past December, building the Berkshires' first police intelligence unit.

Police and military work are unusual career choices for Ephs; Devadoss' research shows that fewer than 5 percent of alumni work in “government,” which includes the two. Says Wynn, “I would be thrilled if more Williams grads chose public service. So if I can influence that in any way, then that’s part of my responsibility as both a Berkshire County resident and as a grad.”

Wynn and O’Connor met not only because they are Williams alumni, but also because they had the Berkshires in common. And Coakley is hoping to make it possible for alumni in every profession, in every geographic location and at every stage of their careers to easily find one another.

“There are some directions in which alums tend to go, at least initially,” she says. “But a liberal arts education is designed to give you the wherewithal to consider a variety of paths or areas in which your skills can be adapted. So it’s incumbent on us here at Williams to enable alumni across all industries to connect with one another and to learn from one another.”

**HOW CAN I BE HELPFUL?**

When Coakley started work as director of alumni career networking last fall, her first order of business was knitting together the network of Ephs online. She created a Williams College LinkedIn page (http://bit.ly/WMSLkedIn), connecting more than 15,000 alumni. She and fellow members regularly share career- and college-related information. Members can find each other with a search by field, city and class year.

“Ephs live everywhere,” Coakley says, “and you can’t always be in a city where a big event is happening. You may not be employed in an industry where there happens to be an active career affinity group.”

So she’s also working on developing a hub for alumni careers on the Williams website to complement the alumni directory. She imagines the site as an employment marketplace as well as a resource center for sharing advice and experiences related to career building—a giant map where alumni can “check in” with their location, current job and the path they took to get there, accessible to all members of the Williams community, including students.

Equally important is fostering the face-to-face connections and mentoring relationships that already benefit so many Ephs. Planning is under way for annual networking events in a handful of major cities. Coakley is also beginning to work with alumni to create career affinity groups based on the Ephs in Entertainment model. The groups would offer professional advancement for alumni and serve “as an on-ramp for students who want to go into a certain industry,” she says.

The alumni career network “can teach new skills, it can provide referrals, and, in a perfect world, it can provide job offers, too,” Coakley adds. “Whatever the outcome, it can demonstrate to students and underscore to alumni that their Williams experience will remain meaningful long after they leave campus.”

That was the case for A.J. Jenkins, for whom the alumni network is a second, enormous family that only gets better with age. It’s only natural, he says, to want to help.

And it’s only natural, hearing as a student about the power of the Williams alumni network, to seek help, too. A survey of the Class of 2014 showed that 70 percent of seniors talked to at least one alumnus as they made plans for after graduation. Of that group, 96 percent said they found alumni advice and assistance helpful.

“A fish doesn’t know it’s in water,” Jenkins says. “So offering assistance to a Williams person isn’t even something I actually think about. It’s, ‘Oh, someone from Williams is calling. How can I be helpful?’

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