Giovanni Ninivaggi

I decided to go to college knowing I would have to take out loans to fund my education. Expecting tens of thousands to repay afterwards, in addition to providing financial support for my family of six siblings, deciding to study accounting was a lucrative and secure choice. However, I quickly realized that business was not for me. Searching for a suitable profession, I came across the McNair Fellows program: a two-week introduction to research experience and preparation for graduate school for low income, first generation college students or groups underrepresented in Ph.D. programs. Even though I had just switched my major to math and physics, I was confident that I was finally on the right track.

I wouldn’t be here without the McNair program. I knew nothing going in, yet in no time was sure that I wanted to go to graduate school for physics and had access to all of the tools and information I could need to get there. Following up with the McNair Scholars program, a full 9-week research-intensive summer, only increased my motivation. In addition to this, the program gave me the time and chance to experience multiple research areas and hone in on the one that fits best. This is absolutely critical, as class work is vastly different than research and the only way to know you’ll enjoy it, is to do it. Beginning with experimentally creating nanomaterials, I transitioned into theoretical work in quantum optics; I am almost in disbelief that I was recently accepted into the Institute of Optics at the University of Rochester, ranked 10th in the nation in atomic and molecular optics (AMO) physics, for a Ph.D. program this upcoming fall. Where I go will ultimately depend on campus visits, but now I can rest assured I will be pursuing a higher degree.

The McNair program creates a community of motivated individuals dedicated to supporting one another in our journey to pursue research. I am blessed to have had that opportunity. I was considering cutting my losses and dropping out to work in the restaurant business with my family if things didn’t align. For this reason, I love sharing my experiences with younger students so they can figure out what their path is, not simply earlier than I did, but before it is too late, and with the Appropriations Committee to underscore the value of funds for these programs at UConn. It is vital to keep these programs going not only because it will help those of us that have had the experience, but also because we will venture out and impact many others who began in the same situation. It is critical that the State of Connecticut continues to support programs such as McNair so researchers like me can succeed.