In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we instituted a series of changes that attempted to maintain as much of the program while keeping our participants and our keynote speakers safe. We decided to run PLUSS on Zoom, with just us and our accepted students. We chose to cancel the keynotes; this was when the pandemic’s social effects were not fully known.

In addition to logistical changes, we made programmatic changes as well. First, we prioritized the Ph.D. workshop in order to better serve our attendees, who were advanced undergraduates with declared interest in graduate school. Insofar as we predicted that graduate programs would likely undergo serious budget cuts over the next year or so, we sought to ensure that our participants submitted graduate applications which were as strong as possible. Each participant received detailed feedback from their assigned peer reviewer (another participant) as well as detailed feedback from one of the two organizers. They also had the opportunity to workshop their writing samples with the group, thereby promoting collaboration among participants and building a network of support.

Given the unique circumstances of our virtual summer school, we significantly reduced the number of articles read. We wanted to maintain PLUSS’s mission of foregrounding discussions of legal injustice as it pertains to race, disabilities, non-citizenship, and other vulnerable identities. The emotional toll of such conversations was a cost that we took seriously, so we accommodated this impact by reducing the workload and increasing the number of personal conversations and social events. The success of such community-building endeavors is evinced by a summer long reading group, Zoom work sessions, and a number of other continued e-events.

Our original evaluation plan considered the following: demographic information, application success of our participants, surveys providing insight into the summer school, the yield rate, and the institutional support garnered from the relevant universities and/or departmental programs.

Demographic Information: ⅔ of the participants identified as women or a gender minority and ⅔ of the participants identified as members of the LGBTQ2SIA+ community. With only a handful of white students, most of the participants identified as people of color (with a third of participants identifying as Black/African American). Disabilities were also represented in the participant population, as were non-native English speakers. Finally, over half of the participants identified as first generation college students. Finally, only one participant held a bachelor of arts degree from a financially privileged university, with two participants enrolled in a private liberal arts college. The overwhelming majority of our participants hailed from public and state institutions, including one HBCU..
Application Success: While our participants who intend to apply to graduate studies in philosophy have yet to apply for the Fall 2020-2021 cycle, global circumstances have led some top institutions to defer applications until next year. We therefore recognize that the already difficult process of applications will be even more difficult for this year’s students. However, at least one participant has begun a Ph.D. program in Philosophy at Northwestern.

Post-PLUSS Survey: Responses to the survey were overwhelmingly positive. In asking our participants to provide evaluations, we sought to assess the efficacy of our logistical and programmatic changes. Respondents praised our ability to maintain philosophical conversations. Though respondents received our choice of topics well, they still recommended more topics, which we will consider when developing the next year’s summer school.

Yield Rate: A happy consequence of the shift to an online platform was the fact that we were able to extend admission to all of our waitlist participants, as we were no longer beholden to the costs of housing and feeding participants. We were therefore able to increase the number of students who benefited from the program. Moreover, the ability to participate online ensured that we could accommodate the work schedules and/or other commitments of our participants, which made the program even more accessible.

Institutional Support: In addition to the APA funds, we secured generous donations from the Sage School of Philosophy, Cornell’s Ethics and Public Life Program, and Cornell Law School. Yale Law School and Yale’s Philosophy department has also expressed interest in supporting future iterations of the summer school. Insofar as PLUSS 2020 was held online, the APA funds (along with all other additional funds) remain untouched and will be used for PLUSS 2021, which Cornell University has generously agreed to host once again. We have also reached out to the Marc Sanders Foundation and applied for financial support, although we have yet to receive a response.

In addition to financial support, faculty members and the administrative staff members were generous with their time and efforts in bringing this project to fruition. Cornell University’s Sage School of Philosophy was especially supportive and deserves noted thanks, including but not limited to Dorothy Vanderbilt, Pamela Hanna, Margaret Nichols, Theodore Brennan, Andrei Marmor, and Kate Manne.

All in all, the PLUSS 2020 program was an extraordinary success. We were touched by the generosity, kindness, and intentionality of each participant and the camaraderie that arose via Zoom. We look forward to next summer’s PLUSS 2021, which will hopefully be in person.

Respectfully,
Bianca Waked and Joel Sati
Philosophy of Law Undergraduate Summer School
Founders & Organizers