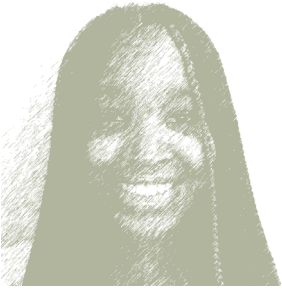


KIARA



“Don’t just pick a school because it sounds good, or your friends are going there, or someone else wants you to go there... Decide what’s important to you... like, “Am I going to be graduating with a bunch of debt, or am I going to have the resources I need there?”

—KIARA

Kiara is a Belizean American nursing student who was raised in the South Shore community. She grew up with a strong support system thanks to her relationship with her mom and siblings. Kiara graduated from a Chicago Public Schools (CPS) selective enrollment high school in 2016. She considers herself to be a self-starter. Kiara recently completed her general education requirements and the prerequisite courses for her nursing program of choice, which she will begin in the fall.

CHOOSING A COLLEGE DURING HIGH SCHOOL

“That [private four-year HBCU] was my dream school since fifth grade. I have two uncles and an aunt who all graduated from there. Since fifth grade, when I went out for my uncle’s graduation, I decided that I was going [there]. I knew nothing about it, had never been on a campus tour, but I just knew I wanted to go.”

Kiara’s familiarity with college started from a young age, as her family introduced her to different colleges early on. Kiara’s high school also invited admissions counselors from four-year colleges to visit and present to students. Kiara thought the absence of two-year college admissions staff made two-year colleges seem like less of an option. “I feel maybe that contributes a little bit to the stigma that there was going to a two-year college, and why I was so against it,” Kiara explained.

Her high school counselors explained how to go about the college admissions process, but Kiara remembered feeling confident about navigating the process on her own: “As far as going through the process, I did that on my own. Even when it came to applying to schools, my mom didn’t know that I had already applied to colleges. That’s how as soon as the application opened, I submitted my application.”

Later on, Kiara was accepted into her dream school — an out-of-state, private four-year HBCU — with a full ride. She could keep this full-ride scholarship throughout college as long as she maintained good academic standing. Kiara enrolled in this college immediately after high school graduation.

CHALLENGES AT HER FIRST COLLEGE

During her first year of college, Kiara struggled to adjust to the academic rigor of college. “I’ve always gotten good grades, and then I came to college and it’s like, everybody here has always gotten good grades. What more do you have? I guess I really didn’t feel prepared

for that.” She found herself struggling with not only the rigor of her courses, but also the absence of her mother’s support and daily encouragement. “I was really far from home, and this is the first time I had ever been that far for so long... I couldn’t just go home and see my mom, and my mom just couldn’t pop up.”

In addition, Kiara found it difficult to develop a relationship with support staff like academic advisors at her college. “All throughout junior high and high school, I had [accommodations for my disability] and had a relationship with my counselors that I feel helped me throughout school. Then when I got to college, I didn’t really have that,” explained Kiara.

“I did reach out to that [counselor at college about setting up accommodations for my disability], and I never did get a response back.” Ultimately, Kiara did not feel supported by her counselor at college, and she did not connect with other on-campus resources.

Kiara also struggled to find an academic support network through her peers. “A lot of my friends would not go to class,” she explained. “I was never really a partier, but I had a lot of trouble waking up for class.” By the end of her first year of college, Kiara lost her full-ride scholarship because she did not maintain the GPA that she needed to keep it.

TRANSFERRING TO A TWO-YEAR COLLEGE

That summer, Kiara began taking classes at a two-year college back in her hometown of Chicago while she waited for her college to respond to her request to reinstate her scholarship.

Kiara had been undecided about what she was interested in studying during her first year of college, but that summer, she began considering nursing. “I reached out to an academic advisor at [my four-year college] just to figure out what classes I should take over the summer to prepare to come back because, at that point, I was still counting on my appeal being approved and being able to come back.” However, the college denied her request to reinstate her scholarship, and she decided to officially transfer to her local two-year college where she was taking classes.

Transferring to her two-year college felt like a smooth process for Kiara because she received support from transfer counselors there as well as her mom. Kiara noted that her mom, who was a staff member at the two-year college to which Kiara transferred, helped her understand how to receive a full-ride scholarship from the college.

Kiara also felt like it was easier to thrive academically when living at home. “I feel like I really found myself when I came back home,” she said. “My grades improved. I was able to focus on school a little bit more.”

After transferring to this two-year college, Kiara felt like it was easier to learn about and access resources, such as the on-campus wellness center. Kiara found that when her college frequently promoted the resources available to students, she felt more empowered to use them. “There were people who would come around to the classrooms, the teachers would

advertise it. Everybody was in the know so that they could pass that information along. I just felt like there was better communication there amongst everybody.”

Kiara also noted that these resources even went beyond academic and professional support: “Little stuff that doesn’t have to do with school, but just makes it a little bit easier for you to focus on school because you don’t have to worry about this stuff that they have.” These resources included hygiene kits, weekly food pantries, and grants to help students financially during the pandemic.

Kiara also received support from a program that partners with two-year colleges to provide students with academic counseling, professional mentorship, and financial resources. She met with a program coordinator or professional coach once a month to update them on how she was doing and learn a new professional skill, like refining her resume. “Having someone look over my resume ... and look over my cover letter and give me pointers, that was helpful,” noted Kiara.

She explained how the professional coach she got through this program helped her secure an internship that she had applied to twice before without ever receiving an interview. “Actually, the job that I have now, I was able to get in part by [the program] because my coach actually knew someone who worked at [a local medical center], and I was able to have a mock interview with her.” Kiara explained that this practice interview and the connection she made through it led to her receiving a job offer from the medical center.

CONTINUING HER EDUCATION

This fall, Kiara will continue working at this hospital and begin a program in nursing. Because the program is at the same college she has been attending, she will continue to receive financial, professional, and academic support.

WHAT WORKED FOR KIARA

1. *Reliable and informative communication between students and staff.* Kiara felt that at first, she was not aware of student groups she could join, she could not get into contact with the staff member responsible for helping her get accommodations for her disability, and she did not often hear about how to access resources like the wellness center on campus. However, once she transferred colleges, she felt like she had an easier time learning about the supports available to her, noting that even her professors were informed about the resources students could take advantage of.

Kiara did not think that her original college lacked resources; rather, she felt like there was more of an expectation for her to independently seek them out. Kiara acknowledged that if she had done more research into the resources and opportunities available on campus, she would have found them.

2. *Receiving consistent mentorship.* Kiara’s support program provided her with an academic counselor and a professional coach, and she met with program staff monthly. She found her academic counselor’s support to be empowering and comforting, and she attributed



her professional coach's support and network to her success in securing a position she had been interested in for over a year.

Many colleges have career advancement offices where you can find similar supports to what Kiara had through this program. While programs are helpful because they create an expectation for you to meet with an academic counselor or professional coach on a regular basis, you can receive the same supports by creating and maintaining goals for yourself to consistently meet with these types of student support staff at your college.