

Yessica: My name is Yessica, I go to the University of Chicago. I'm a third year. I grew up in South Side, I went to high school there, loved it. Here at the University of Chicago, I'm about a 20-minute drive from home.

Yahri: My name is Yahriel, but you can call me Yahri. I'm from the South Side, but I went to high school on the Westside. I graduated from Legal Prep. Now I'm a financial economics major at Fisk University.

Dom: I'm curious about how people are doing. How are you feeling this week? What's top of mind for you?

Yessica: I'm trying to figure out how I need to change or how I need to adapt, but I think what's been really challenging is that I just have not been in the mental state to have the energy to adapt.

Big group discussions are very intimidating, especially online when you know that your face is going to be the main thing on people's screens when you participate. It makes it really hard to try to compete with other students who feel more comfortable with big discussions or have better WiFi connections, that I don't like, when they're trying to participate.

I'm just starting, so it's trying to figure out what to do with what I wish I could just take a break versus meeting the demands of my professors. What the institution wants me to do is to keep going.

I've also been very on top of trying to make sure I reach out to my therapist as much as I can but I'm very grateful that the university insurance still covers because that's one thing, one thing that has been a struggle is trying to explain this to my parents, it's a little bit difficult because culture is already strange-- They don't know how it works or anything because it's just not something in their expertise.

It's having to me having to explain to them like, "Hey, I'm still in school, just online," and they're like, "What's the problem?" and I'm like, "There's a lot of problems." I still haven't been able to figure out how to cross those barriers and meet them where they're at and ask them to meet me where I'm at. That has been very difficult because I know they want to be supportive, but sometimes it's hard to explain to them how they can be supportive, especially when I don't know what support looks like for me right now.

Dom: I appreciate that, just a lot's been happening in this past couple of weeks, things have been changing pretty rapidly.

I'm just curious if you could just share a little bit about, where were you when you found out that campus would be closing? What were some of those initial thoughts that were going through your head?

Yahri: For me, about four weeks ago, I was in my dorm, they sent out an email that said we have a week to get off-campus. I had made some really strong connections and build some relationships around there I was, "No biggy, I can stay down here, I have some places to go." The next day, they sent out an email saying, "You don't have to be gone by the end of the week, you have to be gone by tomorrow."

It was really rushed, but I tried not to panic at all, I did it, I was just like, "All right, let's see what I can do." I called my family like, "Hey, this is what's going on, what shall I do. I really want to stay down here," but I just ended up coming back, and that was that.

Dom: What was going through your decision-making process of where you ended up going and as you were thinking through trying to stay down at Fisk and come back?

Yahri: My biggest decision-maker, the biggest factor in it was my business. I have a fashion line, Mobeni Fashion, that's the name.

I had brought on board five of my friends, they were all working for me, and we were really getting established, making connections, and we had some really, really, nice things planned to do in the city.

After speaking with them, because I was very strong on staying in the city to work because we had made plans, we got things going, some of them were in situations where their parents wouldn't let them stay, that wasn't an option for them. After everyone dispersed, I just came back home also, and that was really that.

Dom: To press on that, Yahri, what was the process that you went through to figure out, where is your stuff right now?

Yahri: Most of my belongings are in Nashville in a storage unit, but it wasn't hard to pack or rush or anything because we had a tornado warning. I packed the essentials bag so all my books, computer and everything valuable to me that could basically replace the things that I already have was in a big bag and I'm like, "I'm good."

Dom: Yessica, I know transition was pretty difficult for you as well. Can you tell us a little bit about what was going through your head? Where were you at when you found out that these changes were coming?

Yessica: Yes. I was abroad, I had a study abroad in Morocco and it was my first time ever going abroad, so I was really excited. It was a big deal for me and the family, my cousin had something, I'm probably the first one to ever go out of the States other than Mexico. I was in Portugal when I got the email, and I was highly considering taking a leave of absence when I first got it because I knew transition back to the States was going to be hard for just being abroad for the first time, and I really missed my family a lot when I was abroad, and I knew I wanted to be with them.

When I got the email, they're like, "There are going to be online classes." The first thing I thought was, okay, how do I take a break this quarter to help ease my transition back from studying abroad into help, just be there for the family? I didn't end up taking it because I honestly, a lot of it had to do because of the financial aid. Both my parents have compromised immune systems and so with me traveling a lot to Portugal and then with the border shut down, I had to go to the UK and then from there, I went to find a cheap flight, which I was only able to do because I had help from a friend, I flew to Canada. I was in so many airports, and I was getting sick with some symptoms, so I couldn't go home.

Really, one of the main reasons why I'm in school and I'm trying to keep my focus, both my parents are still working, they're considered essential workers. It's been hard times to make sure I focus on schoolwork versus I know that they're out there going out every day, putting themselves at risk. Definitely was one of the hardest transitions maybe I've had.

Dom: Lots of balance, particularly as you're thinking about the demands of the school, how are you feeling supported by your institution right now?

Yahri: I feel like there could be a lot more support, but there's definitely support there. Our school has been doing as much as they can to let us know what's going on. Yesterday, they did have a dorm meeting to inform us we can still register with the school. We had talks about refund checks and things of that nature. We're staying in contact. I just believe the contact could be a lot more stronger.

Yessica: I'm along the same lines in terms of I am very appreciative for the support the university has given, but I'm also very critical in the way that I know that it can support us better. The mass emails have been the main form of communication, which is great. I would just also wish that the emails would be in different languages because I can't show this to my parents, they won't understand it.

Also, if they can communicate in a way that was more acceptable, not just the formal the wording that they use in these fancy emails, I feel like that would definitely has takes a load off of me to try to explain everything that's going on to my parents

because I'm the translator, the interpreter, the in-between, if they could try to ease that communication.

What I've been really appreciative though is the student supporting other students. At UChicago we have UChicago Mutual Aid. It's more students supporting one another. I was abroad when all this was happening, but students were trying to make sure they were trying to do food drives, if they needed a place to stay, communicating help and resources. Just the way that students mobilized ourselves to help other students was beautiful.

In terms of now that I'm in classes, do I feel as supported? I as a first-gen, low-income kid, not necessarily. I feel that if the university really cared, they would have offered more pass or fail options, not just for one class but for if I wanted to take pass or fail for all my classes because I know if I was back home, there's no way I would've been able to do well.

Even in my apartment, I'm struggling, and that's good I have a space, but when I'm home, I need to support my family before I can start supporting myself, and that's just how it is in my family in terms of helping my parents and helping my brothers. That's my stance on that.

Dom: Have you been hearing from any organizations, from educators, anybody from the school yet?

Yessica: Educators, whether now or in the past, have been very open into "If you need to talk, I'm here." I've been very grateful for that. I have reconnected with some of my old teachers. I actually reconnected with an old teacher from middle school who I just reached out to. I think, for me, I've also empathized a lot with the teachers. All of a sudden, they're expected to teach online, and as a person who wants to be a teacher, that terrifies me a lot.

Dom: Both of you have talked a little bit about work and I'm just curious about how this disruption has impacted your work, your streams of income right now.

Yahri: For me, I own my own business, so it's kind of weird. I have employees and everything. It really has a strong impact on my marketing because we did a lot of face-to-face, grassroots promotion, and now it's like we have to figure out another way through using social platforms or how to reach out to customers. That's really that. Gratefully, I've been able to do some pretty successful product placement work that's keeping it rolling in, not as strong as it was, but it's enough and that's really all that matters.

At a time like this, I'm just really trying to figure out how I can really have my team involved and how I can make sure they're still well-compensated because like myself, many of them don't have too much financial support and stuff like that. We have to figure it out together. If I can help them, I know they're more than likely to just reach back, help me in whatever way they can.

Yessica: Have you had to budget or make cuts or things like that in your business and everything?

Yahri: I have had to budget, but I did not cut anyone or lay anyone off, just because for some of us when we were down at school, that was our only means of income. Really just getting out, selling a shirt of whatever to make enough money to grab us some fries for the day or whatever, so I didn't lay anyone off. Our plan is to just figure out how we're going to adapt, and we're really just viewing it as though the phoenix always rises from the ash.

Dom: I think one thing that's really sticking out to me is just how much students are supporting other students. I know that's not something that's new, but can you talk a little bit just about how other ways that you all see just rallying around each other?
Yessica: I know for some of the student-run cafes when campuses are closing they started giving away food until they were like, "Hey," posting on the UChicago Mutual aid like, "Hey, there's milk. There's this many gallons of milk, this many gallons of food or juice or tea, whatever."

Yahri: A lot of ways students are supporting each other is really social media. There are group chats. Laughing, laugh to make it feel better. That's really it. I know, the parents are also involved like, "Hey, if you need anything call me or reach out to my phone. Reach out to my daughter and we'll help in whatever way that we can," and that's really that.

Dom: Any questions that you guys want to ask each other or anything that's been coming up for you?

Yahri: Really this what's on your plate? Do you feel like you're in a good spot mentally? That's really it.

Yessica: I feel like if I can answer that honestly, no. I think right now, I'm just not in the headspace of school. If it wasn't through my head, I wouldn't be in school right now. I would take a break. If it wasn't just because of the money, if I was able to explain this to my parents better, I would have taken a break before this quarter even started, but I also want to learn more about-- Yahri, how are you handling everything? You've had a move and transition back in your business, how are you making sure that you're still

taking care of yourself and also taking care of your other friends who are also part of your business?

Yahri: I try to just stay as informed as possible, but not panic at all.

Yessica: How do you not panic? What's your secret?

Yahri: I don't know. [laughs] Like I said, I just keep my head down and work, that's really it. The only real impact this has was bringing me to the reality of how much control of our lives we're not in. [laughs] Honestly, and just figuring out how I can get that control and how I can ensure those around me still have that freedom that they once had that they love so much and make sure that they keep it. That's really it. Yes, that's really it. Just coming to notice that I'm not completely in control of my situation and figuring out how to prevent this from happening again. That's really it.

Dom: In these last four weeks, what's something that you've experienced that's just made you feel powerful?

Yahri: Something that made me feel better? Let me say my content calendar. Really, there's things for my business that give me hope that are like, "It's going to be all right," and that's really it. That's the only thing.

Yessica: I think, for me, it's taking more ownership for my self-care and prioritizing what I need to take care of myself first because I think, one thing, I had always put myself into my work and I was like, "This is how I'll make myself feel better, just throwing myself into my readings, my writings."

I think now I've taken more breaks. I've taken check. I do self-check ins, I've figured out exercise is really important to me. I think just getting back into what makes me me, and what makes me healthy, what makes me feel stable has really given me a chance to like, "Okay, we're going to be okay," not just in school, but through everything.

Also, talking to my teachers. I didn't realize how much reconnecting with my middle school teacher was going to make me feel better, but it really did. I wish I could explain it more in-depth, but I think reconnecting with someone who believes in me and my capabilities has really made me think of like, "Wow, I should believe in my capabilities."

Dom: That's abundantly clear. I appreciate that. We've got a couple of minutes left. I wanted to just close with just a couple of reflections. I'd be curious to hear from you all what you think is the most important thing that your colleges need to know about your experience right now.

Yahri: I think colleges should adapt and I think the students should have that understanding that you're the stakeholder in the college, you're the reason the college is here, so really understand that your voice matters especially to them because they wouldn't be able to be here without you. That's really it.

Yessica: Just to build on top of that, I really wish. I feel like the main phrase that came into my mind when you asked that question, Dom, was, meet me where I'm at. I wish they would understand that I don't have the privilege to put my academics first. My first thing that I have right now is my family and their health, and my health too. That would be the main thing.

I would also emphasize the point of I wish they would also recognize the power students have in helping other students, and supporting, and doing less of what can UChicago do to help you, but how can UChicago help students help other students and how they can prioritize, ask what we need, and so help us organize our help, create the help that we need for each other because, to be honest, as much as the university administration wants to be involved, they're not here every day, they're not the people we interact with on a daily basis, they're not people who know our names.

Dom: I appreciate that. If you think about all the other organizations, people that are working right now, to figure out they've worked outside of institutions directly but are still very much interested in thinking through how to support first year students of color in persisting through college, what are some of the things that you're hoping they know about your experience, or what are some of the ways that you think they could help?

Yahri: For one, I think just reach out, check on them. Just make sure all right or not. Just make sure you can support them and that doesn't mean financially. That means emotionally. Yes, just make sure you can reach out. Keep those tabs and just that affirmation and reassurance that we're in this together and that's really it. That's really it. Just making sure you know we're in this together.

Dom: Any last questions that you all have? Or any other thoughts that you've been thinking about as we've been having this conversation?

Yessica: Me and my roommates have been struggling with this trying to figure out work because a lot of us did work and go to school at the same time. I think that has been a question up in the air in terms of-- I used to work at my high school through admissions and I would go to my high school regularly, but now I can't. I've had to look into getting another job because the way I support-- I appreciate the refund check and everything that it does for my rent, but I also need to help my parents back home and so, I still have to worry about making sure that I'm not just doing my online classes, but I also can find another job, but I can continue to help them. I think

in that regard work- I don't know. The idea of work is-- it's just got harder to balance that. I think one thing I've thought about in terms of how can universities offer opportunities to make sure students who lost their jobs because I've-- my best friend that I was talking about earlier who worked in waitressing and now she can't. The University needs to-- they have a lot to do in terms of supporting kids. I wonder if there was something which they can hire or help support students financially and offer them jobs. One thing I have to--for admissions that I do is that I call incoming students and I'm like, "Hey." Just have a talk with them. I wonder if the university maybe can offer a job in which they hire students to check in on other students and pay for them for their time.

Dom: I think it's all great ideas, all great ideas. Also, it's one thing I'd be curious if we could just get your thoughts on is-- as we rethink, hopefully all of this passes, we're able to go back to campus, but that's going to be different. What are some of the ways or what are some of the changes that you would like to see when you return to campus that may be able to better support you on your college journey?

Yahri: My biggest one is just really figuring out how I can be an off-campus student but be present on campus because it really impacted me in one way or another when it came to my business, when it came to my friends, my friends and employees and that's really it. Just making sure I can prevent this from happening again.

Dom: If something like this happens in the future, to the best of our ability how can we minimize that feeling for all of us but also recognizing like you said everybody's situation is different. How can we be prepared for helping people navigate those differences in their own situations?

Yessica: In fact, if there's an emergency especially with the university, I'm so sorry, Yahri, that happened to you, that's so rough and I can't even imagine the situation you were in. As they have emergency situations, they should have emergency resources. As soon as--they should have told you like, "Hey you have to leave by tomorrow." They can be like, "Hey, you have to leave by tomorrow, here are some buses we already booked for ya'll, that y'all can take to the airport, here's some emergency money if you need it or a loan. Or like, "hey we can help with flights that we can connect students with."

If they're going to drop news like that, they should offer resources like that to support in the plan. That way you don't have to figure out your whole storage unit and figure out what to do in less than 24 hours on your own while you're still trying to finish up saying goodbye to your friends and super emotional stuff like that.

Yahri: It wasn't emotional for me, for my friends it was. Their household situations are

a lot of different than mine. It was extremely emotional for them, like I have one friend who cried all day and didn't want to go home so that's rough.

Dom: I appreciate it all, I know we're running up against time. Last, I wanted to give you the opportunity, any shout outs you want to make? Any businesses, anything that you've got going on, anything that you know is going on in the communities that you want to highlight?

Yahri: All right, well then Mobeni Fashion is a great one to support, we updated the brand, we look a lot cleaner, you can find us at mobenifashion.com. We have some of everything. We're working on our summer collection right now. If you can follow us on Instagram @MobeniFashion, Twitter @MobeniFashion. You're more than welcome to engage with the brand and we look forward to seeing guys, seeing how we can help you guys and seeing how you guys can help us. That's really that. Thank you to all of the social workers, hospital workers, everyone that's risking their lives in times like this. That's really all I have to say.

Dom: Appreciate it.

Yessica: Couple of shoutouts, one to the UChicago Mutual Aid Group, who have really been key supporters in supporting students to support other students get through this quarter anywhere before it and not just for like academic or business but also for safety, for health.

Dom: How do students find that?

Yessica: It's on Facebook. It's a Facebook Group called UChicago Mutual Aid, and so that's the main source of information and like we post information to support, it's not an organization or anything, it's just students supporting students as they can. Collaborating on things on that. That's one. I want to give a shoutout to my middle school teacher that I reconnected with Ms. Ornellis, I really appreciate our conversation that I had with her and it really-- I've been struggling a bit and thinking back to that conversation with those briefs really meant a lot to me.

I want to give a shout out to all the rest of my teachers back in George Washington High School for their strength and their passion. I have so much admiration and respect for them, for what they do for their students and not just for me but also for my little brother. He's just turned nine years old and he showed me the video that teachers made for him, shout out to them.

Dom: I appreciate that. I can't tell you enough how much I appreciate just your honesty and your willingness to share.