

Dom: My name is Dominique McKoy with the University of Chicago's To&Through Project, an initiative focused on providing data and dialogue on what matters most for educational attainment in our public school systems.

Before we get into today's episode I wanted to share an exciting update for the project. Part of the goal of this project is to highlight ways that student voice and involvement can better guide our work as educator and college success practitioners. And it became glaringly obvious that in order to truly accomplish that goal we ourselves were missing some perspectives. Which is why I am excited to introduce a new co-host and co-producer that you will be hearing from in our episodes moving forward. I'll let her take it from here:

Jess: My name is Yessica Guadalupe Vargas, proud alumni of my neighborhood Washington High School in Chicago's south side. I am a low income, first generation college student studying sociology and critical race and ethnic studies at the University of Chicago.

And you are listening to Experts by Experience, a series of discussions with college students from Chicago that aims to shed light on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on CPS alumni, many who are the first in families pursuing a college degree.

Dom: These discussions provide opportunities for students to directly share their insights on how educators, policymakers, and institutions can best support the college persistence of CPS graduates in this moment of disruption.

Jess: Above all, we aim to center the experiences of first-generation college students of color, in the current opportunity to reimagine systems that can better support our college persistence and so that we can one day earn our degrees.

For this week's conversation, we are joined by two amazing women of color who are enrolled at City Colleges of Chicago and we really appreciated them sharing their experience about what this transition has looked like from their perspective.

Kiara: My name is Kiara. I currently attend City Colleges of Chicago at Malcolm X college campus and I'm majoring in nursing. I just completed my first semester in my program. I have three more semesters and then I'll be done at Malcolm X and hoping to transfer to UIC.

Yoselin: I am Yoselin and I just finished my sophomore year of college which is my second year. I ended up in Daley because here at Washington doesn't really have any engineering courses. I ended up in a lot of campuses but I mostly go to Daley now. I'm majoring in mechanical engineering. I'm hoping to graduate already, this

following fall semester is my last semester in CCC and I'm hoping to transfer to IIC. I don't know if that's exactly where but that's my top choice.

Kiara: Well, good luck, seriously.

Yoselin: Thank you.

Jessica: Beforehand, we got questions from high schoolers, seniors very curious about college choice and college. What actually it looks like? What it is? How do you choose it?

Kiara: Just to rewind back a little bit prior to my college choice, I actually went to two different high schools. I went to Whitney Young, which is a mix of all races. You've got black people, you've got white people, you've got Hispanic people, you've got Asian people. It's like a big melting pot, kind of. Then I transferred to a high school that was predominantly black. I went to King College Prep on the south side. It was like switching worlds almost. It was a very different experience and I decided after I transferred to that predominantly black high school that I wanted to go to a predominantly black college.

My uncles and an aunt of mine graduated from Howard University so I fell in love with Howard. That was part of the decision. I actually never toured the school. I went there for a year and then I ended up losing my scholarship because I didn't maintain the GPA requirement. Then I came back home to Chicago. My mom actually works for City Colleges so I enrolled at City Colleges just as a stepping stone to get back to another four-year.

At that point, I had been far from home for a year so I decided that I wanted to stay close to home this time if I did go back to a four-year. I had a work-study job when I started at CCC working in the health sciences and careers department. My supervisor was like, "In addition to the job-related tasks that we're going to have for you, another task that I have for you is I want you to talk to all of these program directors and see what program that you can see yourself being interested in." I talked to respiratory therapy, I talked to pharmacy tech, I talked to the director who was in charge of the PCT program. I didn't talk to the nursing program staff but in the end, that's what I decided on. I don't know.

I just had a love for nursing since I was younger. I'm actually a Type I diabetic and I won't get into the whole story about finding that out but that's what sparked my interest in healthcare. It was a nurse who caught my diagnosis so I've had this love for nursing ever since then. I decided to take that path.

Yoselin: That was an amazing story. Well, what can I say about me? Well, I went to high school right here in Southside Little Village neighborhood. I was planning to go to Northeastern and do teaching, but then I was like, oh no. I don't think that's going to be it. Then also like Kiara was saying that I didn't want to feel that financial burdening me. Then I learned about the Star scholarship from CCC. They cover literally everything, from your books and then your financial aid, everything that gets paid for. I was like, oh, you know what, let me just go there. I had no idea what I was doing or what I was getting myself into.

Then I saw there's this program in my high school that was called BAM. It was like, they encouraged a lot of young kids but it was only guys that they encouraged. It wasn't open for girls or anything in the program. Then I saw that they were going on tours to this shop. It was like, some shop in 63 and by midway and stuff and I was like, oh, I always had an interest in cars because my dad's a mechanic. I grew up in that environment all the time.

I was like, okay, well, let me just say, I want to learn how to change the tire this summer, at least that. I was like, I messaged the guy and I was like, "Hey, I'm interested in going and learning something and can I go?" Then they were like, "Oh yeah, just come and stuff. Come check out the cars, see if you like them." I was like, "Okay, okay, cool."

Then I ended up going there for all the summer. It was a little funny though because I never really saw girls there. I remember they took us on a field trip to, I think it was the Ferrari dealership, which was really dope, but I was the only girl and it was so funny because I was wearing the jersey and stuff and then they were like, "Wow, who's that?"

I went to go do that in the fall. I was still taking my English classes and math classes, but I was doing my whole certification while doing that. I feel that's where I really found myself in my classes. I studied the class certification program and stuff and we started really doing hands-on work in the cars and I fell in love. How I decided mechanical engineering was going to be my place was that my professor from autobody, he told me that this is the way you design a motor, a car like a mini car. Then I'm like, "Oh wait. Who's the people that designed them like?" Then he's like, "Oh, well, they're mechanical engineers." I'm like, "Wait, what is that?" I don't really know what was that.

I looked into it, and I was like, "Oh, damn, these people are doctors for cars." I like that. They just build things out of nowhere. I don't know. I just fell in love with that. Then I ended up taking calculus in the summer and I was like, "Yes, I'm staying here." That was it. I still work in cars by the way.

Dom: I just want to pause there for a moment and talk a little bit about both their pathways to City Colleges. One thing that stood out to me is that these are two young women with incredibly different postsecondary journeys, but both found a home at City Colleges, and I think that really speaks to the diversity of the study body that City Colleges is serving. Our team is doing some research right now around what happens to students on their postsecondary pathways after they graduate from high school, and one of the biggest takeaways is that it's incredibly complex. Experiences like Kiara's aren't as abnormal as we think. A lot of students transition between different institutions, and it's really cool to hear how they both found a home at City Colleges.

Jess: For me, I was thinking how important it was for them to receive encouragement and support for them to explore their options. Both Kiara and Yoselin: Kiara got support from her supervisor to look into specific programs that she would be interested in, and Yoselin, hers came a bit more accidentally, in terms of how BAM -- Becoming A Man -- is a very specific program for young men. She tags along and asks, "Can I go?" There's an important advocacy piece on her end, in terms of her feeling comfortable enough to ask if she can come along, and also her feeling comfortable in spaces in which she is the only woman. For me, that just shows how comfortable she is with her passions and exploring the depths of what she's interested in. It makes me think of how we can create more opportunities so that young people can explore what their passions are, and where they lie.

Dom: Yeah, I think it just really speaks to the power of providing students with options. Yoselin being able to find this passion for autobody work through the Becoming A Man program that wasn't technically set up for her, right, but them being open to bringing her along was really exciting to hear and I think it speaks to a lot of the really great work that's happening around this city. Different organizations are working to help students to understand what their options really are. I know Youth Guidance, the organization that runs BAM, also has a sister program called WOW -- Working On Womanhood -- and I know they have been expanding throughout the city as well. Shout out to that BAM counselor though. Making sure that there's that flexibility that any student can find their passion. All right, let's jump back in.

Kiara: I remember the first time that I even heard about COVID-19, we were in class and we were learning actually about infectious diseases and the proper PPE that you wear for different types of diseases like airborne versus droplet versus contact diseases. One of my classmates asked about COVID and I'm like, "Oh." She called it corona and I had no idea what it was. I had never heard of it. Apparently, it was on the news. I was just so out of tune with what was going on in the world at the time.

Maybe I'm not exactly sure when that was, but then a few weeks later, everything on the news was COVID. Everything on social media was COVID. It was very overwhelming

Shortly after that, we got an email from the school saying that we were going to be closing the campus, we were going to extend spring break for two weeks and then we'd be coming back to campus after the two weeks and we never came back. I feel like personally, I've had a different experience with COVID than everyone else. I feel like it came at a time when I was feeling very overwhelmed. I felt like I was drowning in school work. I felt like I was just drowning in general life, work, school and I feel like it gave me a much-needed break.

I was happy when I got that email, like, "Oh, two weeks off, I'm going to be able to catch up on all the school work, I'm going to be able to do this, I'm going to be able to do that." Not that any of this stuff actually happened but that was the thought process at the time. Then it just ended up being something completely different, I don't think anybody thought that it would get to this point.

Yoselin: I think at first I guess we all took it as a joke in a way, not a joke but just something like, oh, is this going to pass?

Kiara: Not as serious.

Yoselin: Yes, not as serious and I remember I was touching my friend, I was like, "Oh, yes, you know," we were just playing around with it but then I guess in some moment, in something it just felt all crazy and now we were asking, "Is this lockdown real, are we going to keep on doing this?" She's like, "I don't know anything about this, whatever it goes, it goes."

Dom: Just in general, what is the transition to any online classes been for you all?

Kiara: Well, for me, I'm only taking one class or I was only taking one class when this all started. I was taking Nursing 101 Fundamentals. It's three classes in one. It's a lecture, a lab where you practice skills, and then a clinical where you're onsite at a hospital. You are putting those skills that you learned in the lab to the test, I guess you could say.

For the lecture, it hasn't been that big of a transition because in the lecture, literally, she would just pull up the PowerPoint and we would go through the PowerPoint. Now on Zoom is the same thing except you're at home, as opposed to in the classroom, she shares her screen. We're still able to ask whatever questions, and still able to communicate with each other.

Lab, on the other hand, is then very different because so how lab would go is we have these skills that we would do each week. You take a pre-test, you would watch the videos, go through the lesson, and then take a post-test. Then we would come into

the classroom and actually do those skills that we watched on the video. Now, with there being no in-person classes, we obviously don't have the materials to do those skills training at home, and we can't meet somewhere and do those skills training together somewhere else. It's like you lose the whole hands-on portion of the skills. It's just the video, which to an extent is helpful, but for people who learn by doing, it's not very helpful because all you have is the videos. You don't get to practice them.

That's been the one downfall to all of this online, but with everything, I feel there's pros and cons. I'm very thankful that I'm not having to wake up at four o'clock in the morning to get to clinicals anymore because our clinical started at 6:30 in the morning and you had to be there on the floor at 6:30. I'm very thankful that I can wake up 20 minutes before, brush my teeth, throw on some clothes and get on Zoom but as I said, we did lose a lot of learning opportunities in having to do online classes now.

Yoselin: I think for me it was also a little bit the same. I was taking like my full-time classes. I was taking four. I was taking up programming, which was, we were programming in C++, and I was taking statics, Calc three, and mechanics and materials. Well, it ended up being really chaotic because I have one day I have three classes. I literally had to be on my computer from 11:00 to 4:35 in the afternoon. I was isolated. I was like, "Oh my God." I just had a little break, do something like wash dishes or something and then have to go back to my laptop all day and then do my homework in the night. My mom, she was just asking me, she's like, "Oh, how come you don't do your homework in the morning?" I'm like, "I have class."

Kiara: I think a lot of people think that since COVID shut down the physical schools that everything is over. I'm still working because I work in healthcare. I work as a CNA at a hospital in Humboldt Park. When I'm giving my boss my schedule and I'm telling her there are certain days of the week that I still can't work because I still am in class. She's like, "Oh, well, I thought that classes were over." It's like no, we just because you're not doing physically doesn't mean that the classes are just done and we don't still have a whole three months of the semester left to go.

Yoselin: Pretty much. It was just like torture. I mean, honestly, I would just go outside sometimes on the porch because I was feeling really drained just being in my house all hours. I was like, "Oh my God," but I'm glad it's over now but it was a really difficult time to just transition online.

Kiara: Just something that just popped up in my head going back to the whole seniors who are looking into schools now or even students at two years who are now looking into four-year colleges to attend. I feel like another part of the decision-making process should be looking at how different schools responded to COVID.

CCC I feel responded very well. We were informed. We were given a lot of resources, we were given the opportunity to rent laptops. We received a lot of opportunities for supplemental grants to help with COVID related expenses. If you don't have internet and things like that.

I feel a lot of students at other schools may not have had those same opportunities like just looking on social media and seeing people talking about their experiences, how international students were being told, "Oh, you have to be out of the dorms this week." Then flights being canceled and airports being shut down. What were these students supposed to do? I think that that should definitely be something that informs the decision-making process. How the school that you're thinking about going to responded to COVID? What resources they were offering for their students? Because the reality of it is we don't know when this is really going to be over. We don't know if something like this is going to happen again. That's definitely something that I'm keeping in mind when I start the process of looking for a four year to transfer to.

Dom: Absolutely.

Yoselin: I think CCC has a lot that is not valued like the quality of professors it has. I feel every professor that I had really cares about you. They show it in their own way obviously. Every professor does but they're really lenient with things especially right now that happened just like everything that was going down. They were lenient with the work. I had to do a game code for-- I had to do a game for my programming class and then I couldn't finish in one day because I had to go to work. Then my teacher was going "You know what? It's fine to just send in the weekend," and I was like, "Oh, thank you." [crosstalk]

Jessica: [crosstalk] the teachers. I want to ask a question who would you consider? From the City Colleges or from your teachers, what was the most I guess helpful help or actually the most-- What was the greatest support that you got when things started to go down?

Yoselin: I think as I said right now, I think it was the teachers too. I feel they really put a lot of effort into it.

Dom: Kiara, what have you been finding most helpful?

Kiara: I think my teachers were really helpful as well. I never felt I was going through this by myself or my teachers didn't understand what I was going through. Then also the help that CCC gave, the monetary help that they gave. I was fortunate enough that I didn't have to get laid off or furloughed, I'm still working full-time, but I have a lot of classmates who weren't as fortunate as I was. Even with me still working, that

that money was a big help.

Yoselin: Also, talking about the money support, I feel like sometimes they forget of undocumented students. I feel like they should really open that for all of them, all of the people, because there's a lot of undocumented people working right now as essential workers, and they're not getting any money. They need to have money too. They're the ones running america right now.

Kiara: I got this email from CCC about all these funds that they got, all this extra money that came in, and then in the same email, they're talking about the people who are going to be excluded from getting that money and undocumented students, students who have balances. I agree. I think it's unfair.

Yoselin: Yes, I know. I feel like they should have really opened it to everybody. It's federal help and I get that. Especially like they should see who is the one that is actually out there right now.

Kiara: Especially considering the fact that undocumented students don't qualify for the stimulus that other students may have qualified for and other resources, that you have to be a US citizen to partake in. I definitely feel like at least for the students that are undocumented and attending CCC, that there should have been more help for them.

Dom: That's true.

Kiara: Yes. It's unfortunate.

Kiara: Right and they are students regardless of their citizenship. I feel like you guys didn't dictate whether or not they were qualified when you were asking them to pay the tuition so [chuckles]...

Yoselin: That is so true [laughs].

Kiara: [crosstalk] It's a double standard, "You're enough of a citizen or enough of a student for us to take your money, but then when it comes time for us to offer financial support to you--"

Yoselin: To giving you money, yes.

Kiara: It's not there.

Yoselin: It's not there.

Dom: Some truth being spoken, appreciate it. You all are amazing.

Jessica: What is the most important thing your college should know about your transition right now? And I know you both have started talking about in terms of like, “To make sure that this is the support that they’re offering is offered to everyone.”

Yoselin: I think some are also, like some transfer guides or something. Sometimes, I notice they’re not open to undocumented students. You’re only supposed to actually be a citizen to actually get that transfer plan to the university. I feel like that shouldn’t be an option because obviously, in the university, they don’t ask you if you’re undocumented or not.

I think that’s one thing that gets me really bummed out. Like right now, something called the RISE Act came up too. I encourage, if any undocumented students are hearing this podcast, that to actually apply for it. There is a help, that is Illinois State help, and it does help you a lot.

Dom: What was that called again?

Yoselin: The Illinois RISE Act. I think the website is through ISAC, it’s not through financial aid like FAFSA, but it’s through ISAC, I think.

Kiara: Like I said before, I feel like CCC has done a good job. I feel like there’s always room for improvement, even if you’re doing a good job, having those conversations like, “What can we do to be doing a great job, a superb job, an exceptional job?”

Jessica: So, I’m glad that both Kiara and Yoselin brought up the point of undocumented folks, partly because specifically talking about undocumented folks recognizes the power of acknowledging a group of people that has been actively ignored, unseen, not recognized, and suppressed in terms of not being included in this country’s opportunity and access. This invites a bigger conversation about continuing the conversation about undocumented folks but also being intentional about including them in designing opportunities directly for them.

Dom: Absolutely. I really appreciated both of them highlighting that they have been pleased with support that they have been receiving from City Colleges, but also that there is very clear tension around who is eligible for this money and not. I think it’s also important to note that the federal government, the US Department of Education, a few weeks ago issued some follow-up instructions around the money that was allocated for higher ed institutions to support students, specifically noting that undocumented students were not eligible to receive these funds. It really highlights

the importance of local governments, institutions, and organizations to start getting really creative about how we can support some of these students so that they can remain enrolled. We can't just assume that they'll be wrapped up into some of these larger relief efforts.

Dom: What do you feel are some of the greatest needs or what do you think would be some of the best ways that the school could support or other institutions could support students in your experience right now?

Yoselin: People are not good mentally right now [chuckles] in a way. That isolation really does affect people. I feel like once we get back in campus, they should make it mandatory to talk to every student about what happened and stuff and like help them.

Kiara: They do have a wellness center where they have free counseling and free resources. I was listening in on my mom because she works for CCC like I said before. I was listening in on a conference call that she was having with all of the staff from CCC and the president and all that great stuff. They were saying that they are still offering walk-in appointments or whatever through the wellness center. I just wish that they had done better with advertising. That those resources were still available to students.

I've been getting a lot of emails from CCC, and it's gotten to the point where I don't even open up the email and read it. I just mark everything as read. Yes, I feel like maybe they might have said something about that, maybe they didn't. But if they didn't, I feel like that would have been helpful and maybe title the subject something that would have caught our attention so that people would have opened those emails as opposed to just marking as read like I did.

Yoselin: At least they can try a better way of saying that. I know they have my number for sure [chuckles]. They call us and stuff. I think giving us just the heads-up that that's there, just with a call, I think it would have changed it more, everything, than just an email [crosstalk]

Dom: It's not too late. Maybe classes aren't in session right now, but we had to go back to something in the fall, and students are still going to need support in this semester.

Kiara: For me being robbed of those clinical experiences and being robbed of that in-person lab time with my professors. That's scary now like not being able to be in the person lab time with my professors. That's scary now like not being able to be in the skills lab and practice hands-on. Then it's like eventually, you're going to have to

do this stuff and it's not going to be a simulation. It's going to be someone's family member and you didn't get to practice in the skills lab before you came out here and started experimenting on people. I don't know. I'm kind of nervous now.

Jessica: I just have one question for that, because we mentioned earlier about how this is-- It's a stressful time, there's a lot of anxieties, especially thinking about transitioning back into the classroom and thinking how this is going to impact like once you graduate in the real world, how are you managing that mental health support?

Yoselin: I think for me, I got really close to my engineering friends. We really FaceTime. We use Snapchat a lot. We just FaceTime and stuff. We're always saying like, "But after this, we're doing something. We have to do something."

Kiara: For me, I haven't really been FaceTiming or anything with friends. We do have group chats, and we talk in the group chats often. I try to do my best to check in with whoever as often as I can. I feel like we're all, just kind of do the best that we can with what we've been given and make lemonade out of our lemons. I have a best friend who we don't talk that often and I know that she's busy and I'm busy and I try to just be understanding that not everybody has been as fortunate as I have during this time.

I'm just trying to find ways to better cope with things with myself instead of just bottling everything up and then waiting for the bomb to explode. Actually, I just bought a yoga mat, and I'm planning on just doing some yoga, an hour in the morning and then an hour before bed just to relax and calm myself out. I bought some jump ropes, kind of take it back to the inner kid.

Dom: Yes. Take it back. I like that. We could easily talk to you literally all day because this has been awesome. I also want to ask one last question, though. Last episode and something we want to really keep going is we want to give you the opportunity to send out some shout-outs.

Kiara: Shout-out to the people who are actually abiding by the social distancing and coming outside with their masks on and staying at home when they don't need to come out, I truly appreciate you. There was a point at the beginning of this when I came into work and literally my entire floor was COVID patients. That is a very scary experience, especially for me, because like I said, I'm a diabetic. I was listening to my co-workers who are nurses talk about, "The majority of the people who are dying from this are actually diabetics, not even people with respiratory issues." Just shout-out to everybody who's abiding by the rules and adapting to this new normal.

Yoselin: That's great. Well, for me, I want to first shout-out for, as I said before, undocumented people, community that are essential workers. Even though they're just pushing through and stuff, I feel like a shout-out to get them recognized. They need support too and stuff.

Also, people that are donating masks. I know right here in the neighborhood in Little Village, I just saw a video, I think an owner was also donating masks. They were actually making the masks because they do dresses, like quinceañera dresses. I don't know if you guys know that. They were making masks out of the clothes and stuff. That's beautiful. Shout-out to those people.

Dom: I thank you all seriously so much, I can't tell you enough how much we appreciate you just taking the time.

Jess: Thank you for listening to Experts by Experience! We believe that student voices are powerful and we are honored to provide a platform to share their stories. These stories however aren't meant to represent what all CPS graduates in college are experiencing. The college experiences of CPS graduates are incredibly varied, and we hope to gather many different perspectives as our series progresses. We are committed to attempt to make this platform from, by, and for students and would love to invite any CPS alumni who are currently enrolled in college to join the conversation/podcast. If you or anyone you know is be interested, fill out our participant survey at <https://bit.ly/ebepod20>. Excited to talk to y'all soon!

Dom: To stay update on future episodes, make sure to follow us on Twitter and Instagram at @UChiToThrough.

To be clear, while we are elevating the voices of currently enrolled students through these discussions, these are not the only young people in need of support right now. If one of the questions you have after listening to this conversation is "What can I do?", we suggest you start by reach out to the students in your life - those who are enrolled and not - and to ask them what they need, how you can be of help, or even just to simply check in. Thank you for listening.