

Voice Memo #1, Elijah: My name is Elijah, I attend Illinois State University. I am a junior going into my second semester. I never felt like I was excluded, but ... I don't feel included, not because I'm black, but because of school spirit. I just think that overall, there is nothing that stands out that tells someone "You're a red bird." I never really felt like I was a part of anything. I've joined RSOs, and I've tried to go around and talk to different people about things going on, but just as a general sense, I never feel like everyone is fully thought of or included, and I don't feel like this is out of malice, I just feel like the general population of that goes to the school has kind of been like what the school cultivates its culture around, and I don't feel like that includes everybody.

Voice Memo #2, Miciah: Hello, my name is Miciah Wilkerson, I'm a rising fifth-year student at UIUC, and I would like to address my institution about my experiences with COVID-19, and the social injustices in America. As a person with a compromised immune system, it's been really hard for me. During this time, I'm studying for the MCAT while taking summer classes. Ideally, during the school year, I would study with friends and a group of people, but since I have a compromised immune system I've been practicing a lot of social distancing, and it's just been difficult to study. I'm doing more self-studying which I'm very new to, and sometimes, it's kind of hard for me to concentrate. Additionally, there's a lot of social injustice going on in America. I'm not new to this, but this time it's unique because there's a pandemic going on. Every time I leave the house, either I'm afraid of catching COVID-19 or being a victim of police brutality.

Jess: Welcome back to Experts by Experience. This is Jess, I'm a Chicago Public Schools alum and a current senior at the University of Chicago studying sociology and critical race and ethnic studies.

Dom: Hey, this is Dom from the To&Through Project.

Jess: And we're your hosts. You just heard from Elijah from Illinois State, and Miciah from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This podcast is focused on gathering many different perspectives from Chicago Public Schools graduates who are navigating college in the midst of this pandemic. Earlier this month, we reached out asking for other current college students to respond to the question, "What's one thing you want your institution to know about your experience right now?" Big shout out to Miciah and Elijah for sharing your voice, we appreciate hearing from you and felt that you all really set the tone for today's conversation. In today's episode, we got the chance to hear from two amazing students, Jameelah and Guillermo, two CPS alumni who just got the college degrees! We're so excited to share this conversation, and actually, the conversation was so powerful that we decided to split it into two episodes. Today we're going to focus on their experiences as first-generation students of color at predominantly white institutions (PWIs).

Jameelah: My name is Jameelah. I just recently graduated from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with a bachelor's degree in urban studies and planning. I was born and raised in West Englewood Chicago.

Guillermo: My name is Guillermo. I'm a recent graduate from Stanford University and I was born and raised in Little Village.

Dom: Just to start things off, we would just like to take a moment to say, congratulations you all. I just want put the snaps up, put the snaps up, just for you two, and thank you joining us to talk. How does it feel to be done right now with your college careers?

Jameelah: It's honestly very surreal because, I'm a first generation college student. For me, the goal was just like, "Get to college. August 2016, move to Champaign Illinois." That's the only thing that was on my mind. Honestly, something my grandmother always says is like, "Just taking it one day at a time." That was really what I did for four years. [laughs] It's just like, "Oh, I actually have to start looking for a job. I have to move back home and eventually I'm going to move out of my mom's housing."

Guillermo: Yes. Similar to Jameelah, very much similar emotions in terms of now being a first gen college student and just getting through college, it's something so big and I'm still processing it.

Stanford has given me a lot but it also has taken away a lot. Some of the hardest, hardest times that I've essentially lived in my life were at Stanford. I don't think I can contextualize how a place could be so good yet so horrible at the same time. Also just what it means to have gone to a university like that and come back home.

I think like how I engage with my community, how I check my privilege and I think I'm just constantly reflecting on that and also just reflecting in terms of what I could do with this degree. I think for Stanford, their ideal success is, go and work at Goldman Sachs. Go work at Morgan Stanley or Google. That's not the case for me. I'm trying to just figure out a way which I can remain true to myself and my community without falling in that ideal success like that Stanford has set for us.

Dom: Jameelah, I'm seeing some head nods.

Jameelah: Yes. I 100% agree. On one hand, I'm very proud to have graduated from the University of Illinois, to be part of that alum-family. At the same time, I think about the fact that black students only make up 5% of the population at Illinois and we have since like 1968. [00:06:00] I think about the fact that in the midst of everything, our university decided to announce our new police chief of our university police.

Just those very complicated relationships that black students have had on that campus, while also being like, “But I am proud of my university as far as what it has given me the opportunity to do and what I can hopefully bring back to my community.” But like Guillermo said, checking my privilege, that’s a really big thing of like not wanting to come home and seem like I’m better than anybody. I’m smarter than anybody like, “I don’t want to live in Englewood anymore.”

Dom: Jameelah, you hit it on the head getting into college and going to college is a huge accomplishment in its own right. What both of you just accomplished is something totally different, finishing college. I think you both recognize that there has been challenges in that process that I think exists for a lot of students coming from the City of Chicago. When you think back on finishing, what are some of the things you feel like got you through?

Jameelah: One of the things that definitely got me through my four years at U of I was my support system, particularly with my friends. I made it a mission to seek out black students at U of I. Our connect, Miss Delaney, she had four of her students that were students at U of I. She connected me with them and I was just like, “Where do black students stay? What organizations do they join?” All of those things and I immediately met a group of black sophomores in my freshman year and I honestly followed in their footsteps.

They were like, “So many of our people from freshman year aren’t here anymore. They left school or they had to leave because of financial aid.” I was just like, “Whatever you all are doing to stay here, I’m going to do that.” My friends were peer mentors in one of the residence halls, then I was a peer mentor. They were RAs in the residence halls, then I became an RA.

Honestly, without them, I don’t think I would have gone through it because, not only were they friends that I could lean on for emotional support but some of the things that I was experiencing because they were a year older than me, they had already experienced it. They were able to really just guide me and give me a lot of advice.

Guillermo: Some of the things that made me get through college were similar to Jameelah, support systems, friends and mentors. I think at Stanford, one of the things that I’ve enjoyed was being part of community centers. The importance of community centers in both spaces for underrepresented students. Quite frankly, I think that’s only one-- when I was looking for colleges, that was not something that I very much looked into particularly, I was more so focused on, “Does the university have good programs. Do they have good financial aid?” But now reflecting on that in retrospect, community centers were so crucial to my success at Stanford.

Those community centers were just central Chicano, Latino, the first-gen and the low-income office at Stanford. We also had ethnic theme housing. I was able to live in Fujima, which is the black and African American house and then I was also able to live in Casa Zapata, which is a Chicano Latino house. Just being part of those communities and immersing myself in and meeting people from different backgrounds and yet, we know we shared a lot of identities like being first-gen, being low-income. All those people were very much part of my success. I’m very appreciative of those communities and those people.

Jess: What tips would you give for high schoolers to start to add, just start to look for those spaces, to start to look for those people to connect? Because I remember my freshman year, like the universities probably do not have cultural centers.

I was like, I don't know where to look for Latinx people. Do I ask around? Do just like, "Hey, are you a first-gen Latin X student? Cool." They more so just came very accidentally in terms of like, I remember I was speaking Spanish or someone asked me to teach them over in Spanish. Then another person from across this table was like, "You speak Spanish?" I was like, "I do." There was just immediate like, "Oh my goodness. Yes, solidarity," or even just hearing professors read out names for attendance. My ears were looking out for-- that's how I met my best friend. I heard she was reading the names on the roster, right. I'd come from a predominantly Latinx school.

I was like jarred with the names that he was reading out. I was like, "Where are the Rodriguez's, where are the Corias? Where are the Gomez?" I hear Jocelyn or Jocelyn Perez and I look across the room like, "Who is it?" That's how I met my best friend in college. I'm just curious like, what tips and tricks would you give for the incoming freshman class, especially since for some institutions, it looks like they're going to be online.

Jameelah: Well, for me, I'm very fortunate that U of I has a really great web page where you can pretty much search anything about the university. One of the first things I did was research the registered student organizations on campus. Luckily for us, the search, you could specify it by identity-based organizations on campus. I think that might be similar to what Guillermo was talking about at Stanford. We have like what we call the black house. It was like a black student cultural house, those sorts of things.

If you have any type of connections, I would say step out of your comfort zone. I did not know any of these students that I was reaching out to at U of I personally. They had a teacher that I knew. She gave me their email. I was like, "Hi, I'm about to be at U of I in August, I have these questions," and they were very helpful.

Guillermo: One of the things that I did was do a summer bridge program at Stanford or it was predominantly first-gen low-income students. I went to Stanford a month prior to my freshman year and pretty much just spent a month there. I met 50 new people because there were 50 students in the program. I also got to learn of different resources offered at Stanford. In addition to reaching out to alumni, going on the web pages, I would very much also look for a summer bridge program.

Dom: There's also such a rich history of organizing for Black and Brown students, particularly at a school like U of I. I've had the opportunity to meet some of the folks that were doing some of that organizing in the '70s and '80s. I think it's just so cool to hear both of you talk about how much of a difference centers like this, which were actual demands that came out of this organizing how you all have been able to take advantage of that and how it's been so critical for your ability to get through.

Jameelah: It's definitely not lost on me that the opportunities I have to go to U of I and the resources that I have, it's because of student organizing and activism. That's one thing I feel like black students and Latinx students that go to U of I should learn about right away. There was a project, project 500, which was a demand to the university to admit 500 black students. That's when we started getting our 5% of black students in 1968 because that was a demand and the university implemented it in 1968. Right now in legacy of that, black students right now at the U of I campus, we created project 1,000.

You need to start admitting 1,000 black students in every freshman class. It's definitely not lost on me. I think in a weird like unfortunate but fortunate way, there was a lot of madness happening when I was in college in 2016. That was shortly after Mike Brown, I believe. There was a white student union, like a white lives matter page from my school that popped up on Facebook. Coming into U of I immediately in August, students were organizing protests and sit-ins and all of these things.

Jess: I just got to remind you like, you all started college 2016, the year Trump got elected, like 2016 was such like there was so much activism, there was so much like social justice movements going on in that year. Now that you ended your college career in 2020 in more intense social justice movement, [00:20:00] like Black Lives Matter movement, how are you both processing it? How do you think that impacted your college journey?

Jameelah: When I first got to U of I, I immediately jumped into activist spaces on campus because of everything that was going on. I was like, "Oh, there's a lot to be done on this campus." It's pretty and pristine and you come for a visit, you come for a tour and you think it's something that is not, but there are a lot of things that are happening behind the scenes that you don't really know about until you're really in the mix.

I think that really, starting out, it actually motivated me. I came into college very scared to be honest. I don't know what it's going to be like being at a PWI in the midst of everything that's happening politically in this country. I honestly was terrified, but I turned that fear into motivation such as be involved and get involved in these spaces.

I would just go to lectures. We had a professor from Yale come and talk to us about W. B. Du Bois and I was just like, "I want to go to these guest lectures, just learn as much as I can." I think that really pushed me into the role of becoming a Resident Advisor and a multicultural advocate, which were the jobs I had my junior and senior year at U of I. It's what pushed me into urban planning. Originally, I really didn't know anything about planning. This is really how I got into planning. Chicago was closing schools. Both of my schools are closed, my elementary school and my high school no longer exists.

I was very frustrated about that. Then I saw that the city was extending the red line from 95th to 130th. I thought, "You're closing schools and you're extending a train? It doesn't make sense to me." I actually met a student in one of my Anthro classes who was working on that project as an intern. He said, "Well, at 130th, you have out Altgeld Gardens, which is a predominantly black working class housing projects and this is a food desert, a transportation desert, a pharmacy desert. These people do not have access to the same resources simply because the resources are not in their community and they do not have access to transportation.

So, you can use transportation as a means to connect people to resources if you cannot get those resources in the community. When I learned that, honestly, I was so mind blown. I immediately registered for Urban Planning 101. [laughs] My professor was a black man, my very first professor of urban planning, which is great because there's only four black professors in our department. I immediately just fell in love with planning, learning about the history of redlining. It felt very personal for me in a way that made it feel very natural to talk about racial segregation in a city where, literally, every student I went to school with was black, those connections really resonated with me, and that pushed me into urban planning.

I think it really has to do with the fact like bringing it back to come into school in 2016. Just immediately, being hyper aware of my social identities in a way that I had never been before then. Then 2020, it's like, "Okay, the struggle continues. Let's go. Now, it's time for me to find community organizations at home."

Guillermo: Similar to Jameelah, I started getting involved with movements on campus. I also wanted to do something that summer that involved what was happening in the country. I applied for this public service fellowship and I got it and I worked at the ACLU of Illinois, and I did some work with DACA students. At that time, Trump had announced that he was rescinding DACA. It was a very interesting time.

I don't know, I liked the ACLU because they just kept suing Trump, It also made me realize that I don't-- because I thought I wanted to go into the legal field because of what happened, it made me realize that I didn't.

I wish I had changed my major. Jameelah, shout out to you for doing that and realizing that that was your passion. I unfortunately majored in something that I did not connect with as well. We could have a whole other conversation about that but I'm still trying to find a way in which I could find a role to give back and to get more involved. I did take a few classes like Chicano Latino Studies and I did take Urban Studies class. I have to say, those were probably two of my favorite classes of undergrad out of all the engineering classes I took. [chuckles] None of the engineering classes I took were as useful.

Dom: That's real. Guillermo, I'm curious, Jameelah was talking about the opportunity to have educators of color in college and what that meant to her. I'm wondering if you've had the opportunity to experience classes with educators of color as well?

Guillermo: I did. I experienced a few classes with educators of color. One of my first classes that I took at Stanford was with a black woman. She was amazing, absolutely amazing and just very much changed the way that I saw the world and pushed me to think of the world in a much nuanced and complex way.

Unfortunately, that's not the case for a lot of the STEM classes I took. If anything, I don't think I had a professor of color for STEM. Quite frankly, those were probably the harder classes where I would have liked for professor of color too. I think they would have been more empathetic with their students. Whereas, some of the professors I had were very strict and were not as flexible. Unfortunately, I think the ironic thing about that is that that's how First-Gen Low Income, Black Indigenous students of color are weeded out of those majors.

I think, if we had more diversity in those fields then we would be able to help with the retention of those students. Ultimately, I didn't have enough professors of color and I wish I had.

Dom: Thanks for sharing that you all.

Dom: One thing that really resonated with me is Jameelah just talking about how important it was for students who came before her to help her get through. The progress of classes that came before her, both immediately and decades before her, are still having an impact on her persistence journey.

Jess: I think what Jameelah's point like really emphasized is that not just there is a fight to learn how to navigate spaces, develop up the skills, to get those scholarships, and make it to universities. There is a continual fight for the resources, sort of carving

out of your own space even once you are on campus. So, I really thought her point was beautiful her point in which she recognizes sort of those shoulders she stands on and the shoulders I like stand even on campus of like past activists and organizers who really had the right to challenge their institutions to not just admit them and not just put them in front for diversity pictures but to actually invest in them.

Dom: I think there are forms of protesting in just getting your degree for some of these institutions that just fundamentally, just were not set up, historically for students of color, right?

Jess: Yes, because it goes to show what the degree means when every building, library, and book that is on campus was not intentionally for them.

I am going to be honest. It is really hard for me to conceptualize graduating. I guess it goes to show how I am still processing the fact that I am still in college, to begin with, especially at a place like Chicago. My mom and dad still do not really know like my University. When they are asked about college, they are like, “Yes, my daughter is in college” but they do not necessarily have that much exposure to college to be able to say like, “Ah yes, University of Chicago.” Like they still do not understand it.

Dom: It is a journey for any student particularly when you are occupying space that does not feel like your own, I think it is natural to have that fear that Jameelah described. I felt that fear. I think one of my biggest regrets about college is I operated from a standpoint of fear, right? The classes I took wholly came down to, “Am I going to be good enough to be able to do this?” partly because my scholarship money was tied to my GPA and I was terrified about getting an F in the class and losing that opportunity to even go to college. But at the same time, I felt like I left something on the table. There were classes that I was too scared to take because I did not feel like I was willing to be out on that island. I was not willing to take that risk because it was the difference that could be between me being able to be at this institution or not.

Jess: Exactly. How much of those risks like that you were not able to take because we literally cannot afford the cost? Like this is our one shot and we are trying to do our best not to lose it.

Dom: And I wonder, “Are we creating conditions where students who come from different backgrounds are able to take advantage of everything that these world-class institutions have to offer?” I think the answer is no, right now, right? There is this larger moment that we have to wrestle with, which is a conversation that has passed just diversity, right? It does get into these real issues of equity, inclusion, and recognizing that equity means policies that are race-conscious and that are not race-neutral. That means there may be specific supports that exist for maybe low-

income first-generation students of color that do not exist for all students but with intentionality to make sure that students have the opportunity to access all that these institutions have to offer.

If we are honest, these institutions, they want to do well. People are trying to learn. I know there are people on campus that care deeply about the experience of first-generation college students.

Part of the point of this podcast is that we as a system that is tasked with supporting students and having the opportunity to talk with students directly, and for students themselves can collectively come together to figure out how can we make sure that there is an opportunity to provide this specific supports that are needed to make sure that students like you, [inaudible] and Jameelah are able to continue their educations.

Jess: I agree. And that we cannot go back to normal. That we need to do better and think critically on how to support the students who need the most on campus.

I think going back to Guillermo's point in just talking about how he would not have made it. He would not have graduated if it was not for his cultural center. Similar to Jameelah, she said that if it was not for her friends, she would not have graduated. That is the importance and what it meant to have a community. For a cultural center, it is supposed to be a space that negates all those insecurities, and all those fears.

Dom: And I think, from what Guillermo and Jameelah was sharing like, it is also space where you can build those bonds and say, "Hey, we are going to get through it together."

Jess: Exactly.

Jess: At the end of each episode because we appreciate you all sharing your stories with us, we also want to share the platform with you all and give you all the space to give any shoutouts.

Jameelah: Well, first and foremost, shoutout to Ms. Delaney because that is how I got connected to Dom and this podcast.

Dom: Snaps to that.

Jameelah: Yes. That's really dope. Shoutout to myself because I reached out to her about a job. Trying to make these connections, work these connections.

Dom: Use that network.

Jameelah: Shoutout to all my Chicago public school students in the struggle, especially those of us that don't go to the fancy high schools that get all the fun thing and that sort of thing. You are just as worthy of a great education than any other school in Chicago, and as one of my high school history teachers told me is small things to a giant. Everything that we're going through right now, it's ultimately going to make us better. Whether you decide to go to trade school, community college, four-year HBCU, PWI, whatever, I'm so very proud of you. Whether you decide to just go right into working. I'm so proud of all of you because I definitely feel like those of us, especially schools in Inglewood and North Lawndale and those sort of things, we were very much written off, very much so and here we are.

Guillermo: I guess I would like to give a shoutout to anyone who's hearing this that has supported me along the way and very much have given me support.

Also, just a shoutout to all the students, specifically students of color that are going through a rough time right now with the pandemic, a lot of police brutality, anti-blackness that's happening in the world,

Quite frankly, if I was a high school senior or a high school student during these times and I was applying to college, I honestly would not know how I would do it. The fact that these students are still very much chasing their dreams, whether it's college, trade school, or whatever they're chasing during these times is just so admirable and brave. I just wish them all the best of luck and very much hope that they continue to chase those dreams and don't let others tell them what they can or can't be because they very much are worthy of anything that they want, whether that's college or anything.

Dom: It's been real. That's so real. That's so real. One thing, I think I'd feel we left something on the table, Guillermo, I would love for you to just share--You're being humble, but we'd love for you to just share a little bit about your organization that you've started in your college career and what the state of that is.

Guillermo: Chicago Latinx Scholars is essentially a group of people, we're all volunteers and very much in different stages of our career. Some people are seasoned professionals whereas others are early on in their careers. Some are college students, some are high school students. We essentially try to work together to try to bring resources to Latinx communities. I started this in my freshman year of college. In the past, we've had probably close to a dozen or more events across the city ranging from scholarship workshops to networking events. We recently had a workshop on student loans to help students with student loans during the pandemic where we work with

the Chicago Free Legal Aid Clinic. Last summer we had our biggest programming event where we were able to get essentially companies to donate money to bring high schoolers from all across the city to work on a design challenge where they talked about their neighborhoods and essentially just proposed solutions to issues that their neighborhoods were facing.

Our emphasis is on Latinx communities because people that are leading this are Latinx, but we very much recognize the importance of making this accessible. We try to have programming across the city in different neighborhoods.

Dom: If there's any high school students or current college students that are listening or practitioners that want to share more information about getting people involved with your community, what's the best way for them to find out or connected?

Guillermo: They could just reach out to me directly. I could connect them or they could look up Chicago Latinx Scholars. We have a web page and we also have a Facebook page. If anyone's interested in getting involved-- I think for us, if you just want to spread knowledge, if you're good in financial literacy, you want to hold a workshop, we'll help you hold that workshop and we'll reach out to our network to get you the space or get you the resources to hold that.

Dom: Thanks, bro. Fantastic. This has been a gift to be able to talk with y'all for real.

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.