

**Voice Memo #1, Elliot:** Hello, my name is Elliot Pamon, I'm currently a rising junior at Purdue University. Right now, I'm currently studying computer science. I have two minors. My two minors are sports management, and I study statistics also, as my second minor. One thing I want my school to know that I'm really starting to appreciate is how they're interacting with and handling the whole scenario with everything going on in the world. Like as far as COVID, they've been doing a very good job at keeping everyone clean and safe and stuff like that.

As far as the injustices going on in the world, I would say they're really also doing a good job about that. They sent out a message saying that they don't really agree with everything going on, and how they really care about all students individually, no matter what race, so I think that is a good message to know, of course, all you should know Purdue is in the middle of Indiana, and Indiana is a known tough state to be in, being a black person, yeah... So I'd definitely say that they've done a good job about both scenarios so far as the virus and the injustice going on. So yeah, thank you, appreciate your time.

**Voice Memo #2, Quintin:** My name is Quintin, I'm a junior at Eastern Illinois University, majoring in sports management with a minor in business administration. During the pandemic, what's been challenging but maybe easy for others, it's difficult to stop doing something you love to do, like my hobbies: playing basketball, getting into the weight room, socializing with family and friends. I had to find new things to do and be distanced with my family, you know, I have my own apartment. And I know it's going to be temporary, but you know, gotta do what you gotta do...

George Floyd, it's messed up, but I feel like protesting and having a voice would definitely get people involved, and I really think people should continue doing that. If you don't say anything, things won't change.

**Dom:** Welcome back to Experts by Experience, a podcast focused on gathering the many different perspectives of Chicago Public Schools graduates who are navigating college in the midst of this pandemic. We are your hosts, Dominique McKoy with the University of Chicago's To&Through Project;

**Jess:** And this is Yessica Guadelupe Vargas, a CPS alumni and current senior at the University of Chicago studying Sociology and Critical Race and Ethnic Studies.

You just heard Elliot from Purdue and Quintin from Eastern Illinois, sharing their responses to the question: "What's one thing you need your college to know about your experience right now?" Huge shout out to Elliot and Quintin for sharing your voice and helping us set the tone for this episode's conversation.

This is Part 2 of our conversation with Class of 2020 graduates Jameelah and Guillermo. Jameelah just finished at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Guillermo just finished up at Stanford. If you want to learn more about their college experience and their pushes for how these PWIs can create a stronger college experience for future first-generation, low-income students of color, please listen to Episode 3.

**Dom:** Before we get into today's conversation, we want to acknowledge that this episode is a bit different.

**Jess:** While this podcast is primarily focused on how CPS alumni in college are navigating the COVID 19 pandemic, in order to truly recognize their experience, we have to also recognize how the pandemic has exacerbated existing racist structures, inequalities, and injustices that affect students' day to day experiences.

**Dom:** To share a bit of context, we recorded our conversation on Juneteeth, a holiday that recognizes the end of slavery in the United States America. While Juneteenth holiday that has been celebrated in the black community for generations, Juneteenth 2020 felt different.

This was less than a month removed from the murder of George Floyd. It was less than three weeks removed from the mass demonstrations and civil unrest that were sparked by that murder. And through it all, our two guests were at home finishing their college degrees.

**Jess:** So we wanted to dedicate this episode to understanding how this moment affected them as recent college graduates and what suggestions they have for institutions working to address racial inequity on their campus.

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**Dom:** You all just made it through your college careers and we're in a moment right now that has never existed in some ways. I think our country is continuing to wrestle with the murder of George Floyd, continuing to interrogate systems of racism that have existed in our country, in our society for forever, in ways that I think hasn't happened before. I'm curious to just hear from you all, how you're making sense of this moment right now in your perspective as a recent college graduate?

**Guillermo:** I think the past few weeks have been, for me at least, it's been a moment of learning, a lot of learning and trying to find ways in which I can be a better ally to the Black community and my Black friends. A lot of it has been educating my own community, the non-Black Latinx community, very much pointing out racist remarks

and having conversations with people that are around the difficult conversations but very much needed conversations because I feel that it's not the responsibility of Black people to educate non-Black Latinx folk.

It's our own responsibility to educate ourselves. For me, that's been the case and also just trying to find a way in which I could get involved and not center myself but push the efforts that Black folk, especially Black women and Black Trans folk have been pushing for a long time. I don't like to center myself with what's happening but very much just take a step back and help others and support others and just learn.

I was very hurt, the fact that we just didn't learn about this and just continued to learn. For me, that's been really, really important and just trying to find ways to support the Black community and elevate them, because I think in elevating the Black community, we elevate everyone else. We lift everyone else up. I think a lot of non-Black Latinx folk do not understand that. It's quite frankly infuriating. That's what I've been trying to do these past few weeks.

**Jameelah:** For me, during these last few weeks, it's really been a wakeup call for me in a lot of ways, that there is still a lot of work to be done and that I need to be a part of that work. Even though I was involved in things in undergrad, it's just like weird, guilty feeling of like, "Am I really doing enough?" Really challenging myself to step up and find what works for me. So, reading a lot of things about, "Okay, what's your role? Are you an ally, an advocate, an activist, an educator? What role do you play in the social movements and, how can you give? What can you do?"

I started a book club with my friends. Right now we're reading, I believe it's called *Who Do You Serve, Who Do you protect?* Really, that's just about the history of racist policing. I definitely think I really take up the role of an educator. So, sharing resources with people, sharing information with people when and where I can, and also just trying not to feel guilty.

I saw someone say, Black people experiencing joy during this time, that's sometimes enough activism because when we live in a world that literally tried to commit genocide, and that does not want us to live, let alone live happy lives, sometimes just experiencing joy is enough for the day. I think that's what really what Juneteenth is about. Just have a moment to reflect and relax and that's it. "It's 2020. The veil is finally being lifted and now we are truly seeing the world for what it is. Hopefully, the latter part of this decade, we see the fruits of our labor but, I won't hold my breath waiting for it."

**Jess:** How has you both being back home, during when the George Floyd protest started How have you two been processing what's been going on?

**Guillermo:** At least from what I know, there was a lot of issues with anti-Blackness and Black people coming into our neighborhood and unfortunately, being attacked. I think in that sense, I was very frustrated and very hurt that that was happening, especially at a time like this, but it also was a wakeup call for the Latinx but non-Black [00:38:00] Latinx community to address a lot of these issues and very much face them head-on.

**Jameelah:** For me, well, for four years, I've been saying I live a totally different life in Champaign than I do in Chicago. It is a very heavily policed PWI. A lot of resources, I could easily walk to the library or to a restaurant or to Walgreens or something like that.

Whereas back home, living in a neighborhood where we are dealing with a lot of violence and how that impacts just perceptions of safety and realities of safety. That's been very different. Particularly in this time of civil unrest, there's pretty much no stores open in my neighborhood right now. We were already dealing with a lot of business flight, CVS closed way before all of this stuff happened. I think Save A Lot closed, now we have all of our grocery stores and convenience stores closed. I think the only thing that's open are fast food restaurants right now.

That just made me realize like, I was really living a very privileged life at U of I. Now, I'm back to my real reality which is like, I don't have a car either, now I have to get on CTA in the middle of COVID just to go very far to go to target or something like that. Just really looking at my community right now in this time to say, there's a lot of disinvestment right now happening. Again, I'm really just trying to find motivation in all of this instead of being sad about it, I'm like, "All right, I need to get involved with my neighborhood's development corporation because we have one, I need to reach out to our alderman because I live in a tax increment financing district." All of the taxes that are accumulating, what are you spending it on? Because I just see blight all around me. Just really being like, "Okay, this neighborhood, it needs to get better and I can be a part of holding the people with the power, the money accountable."

**Jess:** it just goes to show that for a lot of First-Gen Low Income kids like, it's not just the degree that you work really hard to get, it's also just the exposure, the exposure of like, "Wait, people live near grocery stores and libraries and have good access to transportation?" It's possible, and once you see it and once you experience it, you're like, "No, I'm bringing this back." Thank you for also sharing that.

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**Jess:** To provide a little context for our non-Chicago listeners. Our two guests grew up in two different neighborhoods in Chicago: Jameelah is from West Englewood which is predominantly Black, and Guillermo is from Little Village which is predominantly Mexican. For the last few decades, these communities have been organizing against some of the patterns of divestment, school closures, segregation, pollution and many more inequitable policies and practices that we, unfortunately, see affecting low-income communities of color in Chicago.

**Dom:** So obviously in this episode, we aren't exactly talking about COVID but that

dissonance of being home vs. being on campus that Jameelah just described is so important for anyone supporting college students to understand.

**Jess:** Guillermo's and Jameelah's experience is not new and actually has been recognized through research done by Melissa Osborne, who received her PhD from the University of Chicago is now a professor at Western Washington University. Her dissertation titled "How First-Generation College Students Navigate Social Mobility." She talks about the tensions of the double-bind between students of color and low-income students' experiences at these elite institutions gaining access, gaining exposure, to like these privileged spaces and then going back to their more under-served communities.

**Dom:** And how does that research resonate with you, just in your experience?

**Jess:** For me personally, it validates a lot of experiences that students of color, first-generation students have been experiencing on campus way before me, and that is part of the problem. There is not enough research on our experiences on campus, which is so unfortunate because we often tend to be the student group that has like the lower graduation rates compared to white privileged students in these spaces. I mean, often excuses that they have are that they do not know the struggles of first-generation, low-income kids on campus. And so having this research is a form of meeting them where they are at. Research universities love research papers. So there is research on how their students are struggling on campus. Will you pay attention now?

**Dom:** Absolutely. And in thinking about returning to school this fall, whatever that looks like in the context of COVID and the evolving movement against systemic racism, that "double-bind" Dr. Osborne's research describes is going to be exacerbated. This is a summer like no other, and while we are all experience this moment, we need to be conscious of the fact that not all students are experiencing it in the same way.

And that as we are welcoming students back to campus or support students return to classes online we need to make sure that there are ample opportunities to understand exactly what our students experienced this summer and remain creative in the ways that we are creating space to build community, process together and continue efforts to identify supports students may need to successfully return to college.

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**Jess:** Do you have two have any questions for each other?

**Jameelah:** I'm just wondering Guillermo, has Stanford released any statements of support or anything like that given everything that's happening right now?

**Guillermo:** Yes, they have and I guess I'm not really probably the best person to talk about this but, from my perspective, they have released a statement but I don't think it's enough quite frankly. I know when what happened with George Floyd happened, that was actually finals week and a lot of professors were not accommodating students during that time. I reached out to a few of my professors and I was like, "Hey, look, I know there's black students in your class and you should reach out to them and check in on them and also accommodate them," because I was just appalled.

Stanford likes to seem like we support Black Lives Matter, but it's like, what have you done institutionally to support black students?

I felt that very much the administration could have done a better job, and also held professors accountable in accommodating students. They released a statement, at least in my department that they were like, "We encourage professors to accommodate," but it's like, "No, you should require professors to accommodate and you should hold them accountable to that." In that sense, I think they could have done more and they very much could still do more.

There's also a conversation about better funding for community centers, especially the black student community center and resources that students need, and I don't think Stanford has done that yet.

**Jameelah:** Yes, I can relate to that. Our school is tweeting their support and we're like, "Oh," the same university, when a student put a noose in the elevator in August, that university is putting out a statement and all that student got was community service and he paid a fine and that's it. Like, "Oh, that university?" [chuckles]

Definitely, we've really been clapping back at statements because, we've learned as we have a black chancellor, that black faces in high places don't really mean very much. [claps] [laughs] We're like, "What are y'all going to do because these statements aren't enough."

I was like, "All right, that's cute, but I will be sending the email, so we can actually get some action steps because, it's not enough to just talk about it, you got to be about it."

**Guillermo:** Yes. Quite frankly, a lot of what the response of the administration has been because of students of many of the movements which have been led by black students. I don't think that they did it out of the goodwill of their heart, I think they did it because students were like, "Yo, you're not saying anything and we're black students and we're here in your institution and we need your help."

**Dom:** Absolutely. On that note, when you are in leadership positions, what are some of the decisions that you feel or areas of focus that you feel like need to happen particularly for an institution that's focusing on racial justice right now?

**Jameelah:** I was just going to say, it's not enough to just say, "Okay, let's hire some people of color in these positions. Let's enroll this number or this percentage of students of color," but how do we put a process in place where your hiring practices, your admission practices are anti-discrimination? What's the root of the problem? Why is it that we only have 5% black students at this university? Is it financial aid? Is it outreach when you send admissions counselors to go recruit and stuff or recruiters to go talk to students and things like that? Are you sending enough in black communities and those sorts of things?

**Dom:** It's probably all of those things. We need to address them all at the same time and it's hard, but that's true.

**Dom:** I'm going to pivot a little bit since we're talking about work, actually. One, just to name it, the class of 2020 is facing one of the toughest job markets I think we've seen in a long time arguably in history. I'm interested just to hear what are you hearing from your peers and what are you experiencing yourselves about trying to find a job right now?

**Guillermo:** I do have something lined up for the fall. I'll be in the corporate world, which I don't know, we'll see how that goes. I think I'm still trying to figure out essentially what I'm doing with my life. I'm very fortunate to still have a job. I'll be starting in a few weeks, but I have a lot of friends who have, unfortunately, lost their jobs or unfortunately, were not able to get jobs because a lot of companies froze their hiring. I am especially thinking about black, Indigenous, students of color that are first gen and low income who need to start making money to help themselves and provide for their families too because their families have been counting on them. It's so hard. I think we should, especially now if we have an opportunity, we should share with others and we should very much pull people into our networks and tap into our networks to be able to connect people with opportunities. Because I feel that now more than ever there are a lot of barriers to getting those.

**Jameelah:** For me, fortunately, I do have a job for the fall which will go into next year. Unfortunately, some of my friends, things that they're interested in doing, the times are just not allowing it.

For example, one of my friends, the type of work she would go into would probably be working with park districts and forest reserves and things like that. Those are all closed right now. Her internship got canceled because of COVID because the park

district was officially closed, that sort of thing. [01:02:00] People are really saying, “Okay, I guess we should go back to school and get more degrees.”

**Jess:** What should your schools know about your experience right now?

**Jameelah:** We recently celebrated our 150 years of being a university. They have the real opportunity to make the next 150 years a lot better than the last. That’s going to start with no more beating around the bush and trying to appease donors. They need to make real decisions like our racist mascot that needs to really go because they just put it on the back burner, but people still love their chief, that sort of thing. People are frustrated and it’s going to show on campus.

**Guillermo:** Similar to Jameelah, Stanford needs to get it together. They see themselves as a leader in research, a leader in different fields, but quite frankly, in terms of equity and serving its students, they’re definitely not a leader. I think that, yes, you could look at the rankings, you could look at all that but if you don’t have an institution that serves all of its students, it’s not a good institution. I think they need to very much recognize that and put their money where their mouth is because they have the money. They have the money to expand the African and African-American Studies Department and other ethnic studies departments across campus, but they don’t. they don’t hire more faculty of color.

We have the King Institute on campus which pretty much has a lot of the archives of Dr. King. It’s literally housed in this small, it kind of looks like a trailer, and it’s ridiculous. That very much exemplifies how committed you are to this [01:06:00] work and how important this work is to you. Whereas our engineering quad each building is worth \$100 million. That’s just absolutely ridiculous. I think that, that is where we could do a better job. Expanding resources for students, funding our community centers more. I think, for me at least, I like to think of it like if you focus on those students that are most disadvantaged, that face the most discrimination and do not have the most opportunities and you focus on those students and help uplift those, you will essentially uplift everyone else.

**Jameelah:** Yes, these institutions need to hire people of color beyond just being in diversity, equity, and inclusion spaces. Okay, that’s cool that you have a diversity officer, but where are the black professors in engineering?

**Guillermo:** Also, compensate those people. Because if you’re hiring black professors, those black professors will not only be doing their job of teaching, but they’ll also serve as mentors, as counselors for black students on campus.

They’re fulfilling all these roles across campus and they’re getting paid less than

these other white professors that are not doing half as much. Let's call it off for what it is and compensate these folks and pay them for their merit because they very much bring a lot of important things to campus.

**Dom:** Here in Chicago, we have a really vast network of nonprofits, school counselors, organizations that focus directly on supporting low-income students of color getting to and through college. Is there anything from that perspective too, that you feel like those people need to know about college students' experiences right now in particular?

**Jameelah:** I think it's very important to keep in mind that college is not just the academics. It's an entire socio-cultural experience as well as academics. Think about, how are you preparing people to stay in college when they're dealing with the fact that statistics show that one in four women will experience an attempted or completed sexual assault in their undergraduate career?

Those things really impact retention I believe. There are tutors on campuses. There are office hours with professors, but I think there's a lot of other things that intersect with the academics that can push people out of school. When you're preparing students in the work that you're doing to get them to college, it's not just about financial aid and grades. You need to think about the whole person and really have that whole person first mentality.

**Guillermo:** How do we support students in college? What is making students drop out of college? I think that's one of the things that I think about, but also recognizing college is not for everyone. I'm the first one in my family to go to college. My younger brother is going to trade school.

I think we should normalize this idea that people could go to trade school. People could just work normal jobs and still be successful because at least, the way I see this, those people are successful. To summarize it, I will very much focus on the retention of students that do go to college, but also provide alternatives to students that don't want to go to college or can't go to college.

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**Jess:** If you're interested in learning more about community organizing in Chicago or places to donate, I'd recommend to check out I Grow Chicago, grassroots-based peace house that does work in West Englewood; LVEJO, a Little Village environmental justice organization, or My Block My Hood My City, that does work across Chicago. Links can be found on the episode page!