

Jess: Welcome back to Experts by Experience, A podcast focused on gathering the many different perspectives of Chicago Public school graduates who are navigating college in the midst of this pandemic. We are your hosts: this is Yessica Guadalupe Vargas, a CPS alumni and current senior at the University of Chicago studying Sociology and Critical Race and Ethnic studies.

Dom: And this is Dominique McKoy with the University of Chicago's To&Through Project. On June 18th, 2020, our country received the news that the US Supreme court had ruled against the current administration's effort to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program or DACA. While the news was initially met with celebration, it quickly became clear that this ruling left many questions for current DACA recipients and for those who were hoping to access the protections of the program.

Jess: So we wanted to talk to students that are most affected by this case and uplift their voices and stories. In this episode we are excited to be joined by Sherelin and Yessenia, two rising college seniors who are also DACA recipients. We cannot emphasize enough how much we appreciate them for taking the time to talk about their experience navigating college and how their institutions can be better allies for DACA students. I'll let them take it away...

Yessenia: I am Yessenia. I am a senior at Dominican University. I'm currently majoring in sociology, criminology, and social work. I grew up in the US. I grew up in specifically Chicago, all over the Southside of Chicago.

Sherelin: Same here. My name is Sherelin. I'm also a senior. I currently attend Roosevelt University. I am a middle school math major. I grew up on the north side of Chicago, Logan Square area all my life since I can remember too, so I am a Chicagoan.

Jess: We have gotten a lot of questions from High schoolers this summer about the application process so can you share a bit about how you both navigated getting to college as Dreamers?

Yessenia: I applied to I think, close to 25 different schools, and I was accepted to all 25 of those schools. However, getting back those letters of telling me, there's no financial aid that we can give you or you're considered an international student, just because we took our chances with-- I knew that I could be considered as an international student for some of these colleges, but I also heard that they gave really good programs for Dreamers.

Sherelin: Yes, for sure. There's a lot of great scholarships out there that you can apply,

but something that I always tell other Dreamers is that don't be scared to apply to private schools. Public schools don't offer scholarships or at least many scholarships to Dreamers or undocumented students. What I found is that even though they have a higher price tag, they do have private funding. Sometimes private schools are the way to go if you're a Dreamer.

Yessenia: Definitely, I agree.

Dom: How many scholarships do you think you applied to?

Yessenia: Close to a hundred.

Sherelin: For sure, I felt that. [laughs]

Sherelin: I think another thing is it really depends on your financial status, where you're at, but don't ever feel bad about going to community college, going to city colleges. The Chicago Star Scholarship saved my butt, not having to pay for those classes.

Dom: That's awesome. I'm also just curious about as you were positioned as Dreamers, what your experiences have been on each of your campuses. I was wondering, Yessenia, could you describe a moment where you felt really supported by your school as a Dreamer?

Yessenia: I think the moment that I felt most supported by my university, or by my school, actually, has been when we had a Dream US meeting. We know that there's more students like us on campus and we actually have a club called the Undocumented Immigrant Alliance on campus.

We all went around a table like "What are your dreams? What are your aspirations? What are your goals?" We had this round conversation because we were all in the same house.

Seeing all the support that we wanted to give to one another and then seeing it play out through the year when we would find each other through the halls and be like, "Hey, how are you doing?" That familiar face made you feel less stressed.

Knowing that you weren't alone on that campus because there were more students like you, that definitely did make me feel warm and welcome. I think with that, definitely, all of our educators and everyone at all of our offices, like the Student Success and Engagement Office, has really pushed forward to support us, especially with the event they provide, not only around the Dream US students but around the whole undocumented community on campus.

Sherelin: For me, I think I felt more supported by the teachers and the staff at my school, the time that they took to really talk through my options with me.

Dom: You've had professors that have helped you navigate this process as well?

Sherelin: Yes. They have always offered to write me a rec letter or, "Hey, I know this friend who owns this non-profit. Go talk to her."

Dom: With these professors, did you share with them that you're a DACA recipient or is this something that just came up organically?

Sherelin: Yes, I did tell them. Especially to the professors that I'm closer with, I told them, "Hey, I'm a Dreamer. I'm studying this. This is what I want to do." They've always been very supportive.

Dom: I'm also curious to hear the flip side of that question. Have there been any times where you felt like you haven't been supported by your institution or there were times when you wish you would've had maybe a little more support?

Sherelin: I think for Roosevelt, I wish we had more of a club or group for Dreamers. It's not like Dominican. We don't really have something that's close-knit, or we don't have events like that.

Yessenia: I think although a lot of professors and a lot of staff and everyone has been very supportive of our club and our community on campus, I do think that there needs to be more training for a lot of our staff, a lot of our professors because I feel like sometimes not everyone is well-educated on the matter, and that's something we've been pushing for, not only for our staff but for our students as well.

Sometimes, there's some departments where there's not people that look like us. Whether that be professors of color or some offices don't have any like Hispanic, Latino, or person of color in those offices. I'm not saying that they don't understand. A lot of my best professors are very cultural competent and they don't identify as a person of color.

However, I do feel like sometimes we don't see that on our campus and Dominican has been great with their support, but I do know that in the last year we did lose a lot of our people of color. I wouldn't say there's not enough, but I feel like there could be more people of color at Dominican.

Sherelin: Actually, now that you bring it up, I do agree with you. I feel like a lot of people even right now don't really know about DACA.

Dom: I agree. There's a ton of misconceptions about DACA. From your perspectives, what are some of those common misconceptions that you feel like you come across, and what's the truth behind them?

Sherelin: When you're a Dreamer, you don't have a temporary green card. We can't travel, we can't apply to FAFSA, we can't apply to a lot of programs, we can't vote, we can't register to vote, we can't do a lot of stuff. If we do something wrong, if we get arrested for anything, that can give them the option to deport us.

Not that long ago, I heard a comment. He was saying like, "Why are you guys emphasizing the scholarships that are out there for undocumented students? Why not emphasize all of the scholarships?" That was something that I was just like, "Well, it's because those are a little bit harder to find than a regular scholarship." The scholarship application, in general, is hard, but it's two times harder for an undocumented student.

Sherelin: Undocumented students don't have access to student loans. We can't apply for student loans, so we can't have that option to fund our education that way right now and then pay it later. We have to pay out of pocket at the end of the day.

Jess: Wait, I'm curious in terms of how are you all navigating the college process on your own like trying to figure out in terms of extra obstacles that you all had to go through because of DACA? How are your parents involved with that process?

Yessenia: I'm really thankful for my parents because my parents knew that it wasn't going to be easy for me to go to college. When it came time for my college process, my parents were on top of it as much as I was on it.

My father was the one who was driving me everywhere for college interviews. The only thing he would tell me he's like, "If it's within the state, I'll drive you, if it's out of the state," he's like, "We will find someone to drive us there," because it was during the time that Trump was being elected. I remember that my father was a bit scared. If it was out of state, I remember he will ask one of his friends like, "Hey, can you drive us?" Or we would take the train. He found ways to ensure that he was included.

Sherelin: Yes, same here. My parents are extremely supportive. My dad took me to my Golden Apple interview, everything.

Jess: This summer there has been a ton of important news surrounding DACA which has also been mixed in with the coverage of the pandemic, racial injustice and the

upcoming election.

Dom: An important clarification on the June Supreme Court ruling we mentioned earlier, is that it did not address the actual legality of the program or make any final decision on if our country will or will not continue to offer DACA protections for undocumented young people.

It only ruled that the way in which the current administration went about trying to end the program in 2017 was unlawful and the ruling left a lot of questions around how the program should operate moving forward.

In Mid-July a federal court in Maryland issued a ruling to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services -- the agency charged with processing DACA applications -- that the office needed to reopen the application process for new DACA recipients.

However, later that month July 27th -- and actually the day before we recorded this conversation with our guests -- the department of homeland security issued a memo indicating that they would be rejecting any new DACA applications and announced a change the renewal process for current DACA recipients reducing their work authorization from 2 years to 1 year.

Jess: So clearly this fight isn't over. And for the thousand of DACA recipients in college right now there's still remains a significant need for financial and legal support to be able to continue their studies.

Although undocumented students are blocked from any federal money for college, some states have opened up State funds for undocumented students. A couple of those states are New York, California, Washington, DC and here at home in Illinois.

In 2019, the Illinois state legislature passed the Retention of Illinois Students & Equity or RISE Act.

Starting in January of 2020, the RISE Act allows undocumented students and transgender students who aren't eligible to fill out fasfa to apply for all forms of state financial aid through a separate state application called the Alternative Application for Illinois Financial Aid.

These state policies are crucial in helping undocumented students get better access to higher education. States wide policies however aren't the only form of support undocumented students need. As we are about to hear, university/colleges initiatives and resources play a vital role in helping undocumented students navigate campus.

Jess: We're curious to hear, where were you when you found out about the Supreme Court's decision? What impact do you think it will have on your last year of college?

Yessenia: I learned about that and I'm like, "Oh, my God." I remember my best friend was also here at my house because her wifi wasn't working. I go to her and I'm like, "I need for you to confirm that what I just read is actually happening." She goes ahead and she reads it, and she's like, "Yes, it's real." I'm like, "Are you sure? This isn't just a me and you dream, this is a real thing?" She's like, "No, it's real."

It would felt like a lot of weight had been lifted off my shoulders because, for the past two years, it was all in the shadows like, "What's going to happen? What's not going to happen?" I'm really hopeful and I have that energy I needed to push through these next two years that I have left for everything that I've planned for my bachelor's and my master's, and just finally finishing everything.

Sherelin: Yes, I'm exactly on the same boat. I was really hopeful because, for a long time, I was like, "I have to worry about finishing school. Can I even teach after I finish? What's the whole point?" I think this is a relief, but obviously, we're back at like, "Where are we at?" I'm still very hopeful about what's going to happen.

Dom: I think one thing that's coming up for me is that both of you all, the careers that you are on a trajectory to go towards are solely, pretty much focused on serving other people in a way, and trying to help other people.

Sherelin: I was originally going to go into engineering and I was talking to my favorite high school teacher. Shout out Mr. Clark, I love you. I was talking to him about school and engineering and he was like, "Wait, you're not going to be a teacher?" I was like, "Well, I didn't really thought about it until now." I think after that, I was really seriously thinking like, "Okay, I would love to be a teacher. I would love to come back to my community. I love education, and you saved my butt. Probably right now, it'd be crying somewhere over engineering school." [laughs]

Yessenia: I have a very similar story. I was originally going to be a math major with a concentration in statistics, especially social statistics. I was going to be a statistician. [chuckles] I'm sitting in my Introduction to Sociology class for my gen ed class. I was sitting with this professor and she starts talking about what you can do with sociology and stuff.

One time we were having a conversation and I needed-- She knew about my status because, in one of my papers, I wrote about it because of what was going on. She tells me, she's like, "There's this scholarship out there." She's like, "I think you'd be a great candidate, why don't you apply for it? I'll write your rec-letter." I want to say she fixed my life. I don't want to say she fixed my life but she put all my ideas that I was thinking of.

Jess: Speaking from our majors and our careers, we're almost there. We only have one more year left before and so we got to get through this year, right? How are you feeling with your college plans for reopening?

Yessenia: I know I should be happy that they're looking out for our well being. We're starting off hybrid and then after Thanksgiving because people are going to go home for Thanksgiving, we're going fully online, but I'm also very upset. I was supposed to do an internship this summer. I don't want to say it's fully canceled, but it's postponed. Then I have another internship lined up for my year. I don't know how that's going to work out.

I'm questioning how it's going to be finishing up all of my courses knowing that I'm a visual and auditory learner and so it's like I have to see what you're talking about. With PowerPoint, with Zoom not always being the best platform and internet and stuff, and it's like, I don't only want to do readings and I'm fearing the readings and the hundreds of pages of readings that are going to be coming my way.

Sherelin: The only thing I'm really worried about is I was supposed to do clinicals last semester, but I couldn't get into the classroom before we went into quarantine. Now, I don't know how I'm supposed to complete 150 plus hours of clinicals and then my student teaching. I've been thinking and questioning but I'm going to finish it if anything. I would do anything to finish.

Dom: I know there's not anything anybody can do, but it's just a lot of people are feeling that maybe not exactly feeling the pain, but are definitely trying to empathize because it's such a tough situation. I agree. You go and finish. You all made it this far. [chuckles] You made it this far. What do you think is the most important thing your school needs to know about your experience right now?

Yessenia: I think there are multiple. One of them is having more dialogue with students in general because I know decision-making isn't easy and with everything going on some decisions have to be harder, but I do think I know they're having a lot of input and a lot of service out there and having that dialogue is important.

I do think in regards to being an undocumented student, I feel like my university has done a good job of being supportive and stuff, but I do feel like, in general, Dominican has enrolled a lot of undocumented students and they have been very supportive and we call it our home but I do feel like sometimes every now and then, there's that question or there's that skepticism or questioning or validation. It's not the stranger syndrome, the one that you don't belong.

Dom: Imposter syndrome.

Sherelin: Imposter syndrome.

Yessenia: Right, the imposter syndrome. I feel like a lot of us as undocumented students,

we often have that embedded into us that because of so many bad experiences that we had out there. Because I have had so many students who, unfortunately, they feel like they're not having enough support, even though it's there, but because they're either afraid to ask questions or they just feel like they don't belong and they decided to not continue. Definitely, reassuring your students that you'll be okay and you can go push forward to it, and keep finding those resources to help your students as best as you can.

Dom: Absolutely. Back to that first question, what's the most important thing your school should know about your experience right now?

Sherelin: I know they support undocumented students and in a financial way, you give scholarships and stuff, but I would also like to see more of an active activism behind it, being more vocal, being there, educating your own students and staff on DACA or undocumented people in general. I think that would be a great thing to work on because like we talked about earlier, I feel like there's still a lot of missing information out there about who Dreamers are and what DACA really is, and I feel like it's important to know.

Dom: I agree, even when I was just doing a little bit of research about both of your schools and just like what they've put out publicly about DACA, and there's a difference between your two institutions, from an outside eye. I was able to find that for Dominican and just wasn't as much for Roosevelt. I think that's also something from an outside perspective, but this is apparent and I think it's just like, what better time than now to be vocal about it?

Yessenia: I think it's also because there's been a lot of student push. We've been pushing for the creation of a multicultural center.

Biggest shout out to Carlos Benitez, who is a fellow student, a psychology major. He's been working to be not necessarily the liaison for undocumented students, but he has been pushing for anything that he sees that isn't okay. He'll take a stand for it. Definitely, I think seeing his bravery made a lot of us, made me, especially, be a part of it. It's a lot of student impact for us to create a lot of the things that are going on.

Jess: Like you said, Yessenia, a lot of the things, they're not just given to you nicely. A lot of it is it is because they don't know what to offer with resources that students directly need out and so a lot of it goes on the shoulders of the students that have to act.

Yessenia: I think Dominican has a really big history of student movements and that's what has allowed for this to continue. Not long ago, an alumni came in and spoke

about her being a part of the very first marches back when the Black Lives Matter movement started eight years ago and hearing her stories was very empowering because we're like, "This has been a history in the making for a really long time of students pushing for what they needed at Dominican." Even now, fast forward eight years now, it's still student-led. Dominican has allowed for a lot of us to do a lot of student-led activism and student-led work.

Sherelin: I didn't like the activism. Activism in my school hasn't been as active as Dominican. I feel like for me, the activism has been taking more part of outside of school, like for BLM, anti-ice protests that I see student bodies participating, but not directly into this institution. I think it's something that I can definitely push towards, aiming more into that institution and not only the system overall outside.

Jess: We mentioned before, we love to give space for students to give shout outs.

Yessenia: My specific shout out goes to UIA, my group. They are the ones who made me feel welcome since day one before it was any of us seniors. A big shout out to anyone that has ever given to our emergency fund.

We do have a fundraiser so anybody that has ever donated to our fundraiser. Even now, if anyone wants to also give out to our fundraiser, we do have an emergency grant that we fundraise for at Dominican. Definitely, if you want to help any Dominican student, we will accept all your donations and we'd gladly thank you for them. [laughs]

Dom: We'll include a to link to the donation page on our show notes.

Sherelin: I just want to say shout out to my family. Shout out to Mr. Clark, and all my teachers at Juarez. Also, shout out to the Golden Apple. If anyone is interested in becoming an educator, we need more teachers of color. We need more black men in schools, that would be amazing. Please reach out. I will talk to you about everything you may want to learn about becoming an educator.

Yessenia: Yes, definitely. The other one, shout to Dream US. If anybody also wants to learn about the Dream US, also reach out.

Sherelin: I know, times are hard right now. If anyone needs help renewing for DACA, shout out to The Resurrection Project in Pilsen. They do help you with renewing and I know they offer scholarships too.