

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 Guadalupe Vargas, a CPS alumni and current senior at the University of Chicago.

Dom: With the summer officially over, thousands of young people across the country have kicked off their college careers under uncertain conditions to say the least.

Jess: For many students from the city of Chicago, this transition comes with learning to navigate college under a set of rules to limit the spread of COVID-19 on campus. And the task of navigating (often for the first time) new cultures, communities, and experiences that are particularly taxing for first-gen, low-income, students of color.

Dom: The first year of college plays a critical role in a student's ability to establish community, create academic routines, and develop a sense of belonging on campus that can carry them through their college journey, but in the face of this unprecedented start to the school year we wanted to seek out the perspectives of students navigating this transition firsthand to better understand what these first few weeks of college looked like in 2020.

Jess: Today we have the opportunity to speak with Carmen and LaShawndra, two women who recently graduated together from Johnson College Prep in Englewood, a high school a part of the Noble Charter Network in Chicago. Both left Chicago in August to embark on their own college journeys, Carmen at University of Illinois, a large state institution, and LaShawndra at Albion, a small liberal arts college in rural Michigan.

In today's episode they offer insight into what their unique college lives in 2020 look like for them as first-year students, a couple weeks into the start of their college career.

LaShawndra: My name is Lashawndra. I'm also known as Dalala. I go to Albion College, I'm a first year. I went to Johnson College Prep, which is in Englewood, so I had to wake up early and travel 30 minutes just to get to school, which is cool because it was a nice ride to go back and sleep in.

Carmen: Hi, my name is Carmen. I'm a freshman and I currently attend the University

of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. I grew up in quite a few neighborhoods. The first one would be the West Pullman neighborhood. The second would be the Auburn Gresham neighborhood. Then finally we're now in Chatham.

I originally was going to Air Force Academy in my freshman year of high school, but I then transferred my sophomore year to Johnson College Prep, where I graduated from.

Dom: You all will go down in history as one of the strangest ends of high school and beginnings to college. I'm curious to hear about what it was like to finish your high school career behind a computer screen. What were some of the changes that you all had to make to finish up?

Carmen: I stopped going to school because I actually was ill. I had strep and I didn't want to--COVID was just fresh and I didn't know if I had COVID or not, so I had to make sure I didn't have COVID, and I had strep.

I didn't know that my last day of school, which was March 9th, was going to be my last day of high school. I kind of was a little bit depressed about that, but once I heard that we were going to do a drive-thru graduation I was like, "Okay, that's cool."

It still felt like we were getting a ceremony to me because all the teachers, all the staff came out around the building and that kind of made me feel good. Not even kind of, it made me good to see that all my teachers and the staff that pushed me through high school, even when it got hard they were still there cheering us on, during this pandemic. Getting our diploma handed to us via sunroof, that's something, that's a flex for me.

Dom: Lashawndra, what about you? How was the transition to remote learning in finishing up high school?

LaShawndra: When I first went online, I wasn't feeling it at all. I didn't do my work, if I'm going to be honest. Then my advisor, Mrs. Latoki, she talked to me. She put some words of encouragement and everything. It got me back on track, like my grades went up and everything.

I graduated with a 3.8. I was proud about that. Like Carmen said, that parade was really nice. [laughs]

Dom: What do you think made it so positive?

LaShawndra: Everybody that really supports me was there. They was there to congratulate me. When I handed my diploma, my momma took a picture and put it

on Facebook, she wrote this big old paragraph saying how proud she is. It just made me cry. I was just overjoyed.

Jess: On the same topic of culture and the support that you all got in high school, how were they supporting you all choosing your school? May 1st was online, when you all had to do decision day?

Carmen: For me, at the beginning of senior year I had a vision that I was going to go attend the University of Michigan. My college counselor, shout out to Mr. Downey. He was really on. He was like, "Mission Michigan." Then once I got my denial letter from Michigan, I cried and he was like, "Okay, so what you going to do next?" Then my English teacher, Mr. Ward, he always-- He kept pushing, "You should go to University of Illinois, that's a good school. It's a good school." He was like, "You really ain't going to probably have to pay that out of pocket."

When I was saying Michigan they were like, "Okay, we're going to support Michigan. We're also going to support University of Illinois because that's the school for you." I just forgot about Michigan and I just started focusing on University of Illinois. Then when I'm committed, all my teachers were proud of me and I'm like, "Dang." I'm like, "This is a nice school and all," but they were like, "We're so proud of you you chose this school."

LaShawndra: I had a similar experience. At the end of my junior year, I was selected, well nominated, to participate in the scholarship called Posse. I made it to only phase two, I didn't make it to phase three. I was real discouraged about that. Just like Carmen, they was only like, "What you crying for? Chill out. You have other schools. You have other opportunities." That's why I did this with Mr. Downey because he was my college counselor too.

Carmen: Mr Downey, he would check in with us periodically, our caseload, his caseload. He would just go by the class period caseload so that he would check in with us via Zoom or email. As far as my advisor, once the school gave them the okay so they can email and text us--my advisor, she would go in and she was like, "Hey you all. I need you all to really get on your game. I need you all to do this and that. Carmen you're not doing the work, do the work."

They would motivate us like that and once we officially graduated, I added my teachers on all social media accounts and we would keep up on a professional level. We would just keep up, "How're you doing in college? How's your first week of college going?" I would share my accomplishments and stuff like that with my social media accounts and they would see that that's how we all were-- They would share positive messages to me and that's how we all keep up on my end.

LaShawndra: Like they would reach out to us more than we reached out to them. For Mr. Downey, he always watched my grades. He would always come to me if I have a C, even a high C, a C+. He's like, "Why you got this C? What happened." Plus Miss Latoki, our advisor she would do the same thing. Even after we graduate, we have alumni counselling that follows us six years after we graduate.

Dom: Part of what makes this year so unique is that you all are starting college in the midst of this pandemic. You all are both going to very different schools as well. Albion, small school, more rural in Michigan. I think it's less than 2000 students versus U of I, a large school, a more urban setting, thousands of students.

It also seems like the impact of the pandemic it's hitting your schools very differently. I'm curious to hear about one, just what does the pandemic look like on campus right now? And just how that's affected your transition.

LaShawndra: On campus, basically Albion is very strict. When we first got here, we had to stay in our rooms for three days. The only way we could come out is if we go to Baldwin, that's our eating hall, to get some food and all that but that's the only way we could leave our room. We have to quarantine for three days and then after everybody came we had to test every seven days. After that, we found that we are the lowest rate for COVID testing positive in Michigan. Period. So they lifted some rules. Now we can have visitors, but we got to sign this request form and we can have visitors, we can leave campus only on weekend is about it.

Before, when I first got here they was really strict and it really-- I don't know. It confused me a little bit because I wasn't used to it and I'm like, "What? I got to stay in my room for what?" I was ready to get out, meet some new friends. They were like, "You've got to stay in your own for three days." I'm like, "Okay," but I adapt to it, I'm pretty good at adapting to new environments.

Carmen: As you all know, my school is on the news. Almost like a month before we even got here, they told us, "Right at the door before you can even get your room key, you have to test." First thing we did, we had to do a COVID test.

They gave us a PPE kit, so we all got our different Illinois masks and stuff like that, wipes and hand sanitizer and a thermometer. Checked in my room, it was cool, I had to wipe everything down, everything was all right. First, we did have appointment slots but it's a big school. You can't tell everybody they got to check in one at a time, so when I was moving in, it was quite a few people moving in but it was helpers, they were trying to encourage social distancing and one family per elevator. Understood that it's a big school, it's really hard for you to try to do all of that.

They said no partying, no hanging now, they said that of course. At the time they were giving us scheduled days to test, we had to have a scheduled date to test. They relaxed on that and they said, "Well, we're not going to tell you when a tests is, apparently these are inconvenient times for you all, so you all have make sure you all have to test within a time frame." I was keeping mine Monday and Thursday to test and the test came back within 24 hours. It was really convenient.

Everything was going cool until last week our school basically issued out a quarantine order, basically pretended no visitors, really you have to stay in your room only to come out-- The quarantine stuff and I'm like, "This is a big school, it was already boring when I got here--" I'm like, "Okay, I understand." U of I, I would say they are trying their best.

But as far as my college experience, I definitely feel it's different because I won't get the full first year experience because one, all my classes were online. I knew my classes were going to be online a month before I got here. I really was given an option, "Stay at home or you come to college?" I'm like, "Might as well," especially when I got up my award letter and it was when I got my notification and my balance. They was like, "You're going to school for free this time because of COVID, no out of pocket costs." I'm like, "I'm definitely going to school if I'm going to school for free."

COVID ruins everything, it ruined everything because U of I is such a fun campus and you all know it's known for its parties and its culture and literally outside, it looks terrible, it looks dry, it's just so dry out there. I've never seen it like that.

Dom: If you look out your window right now, what do you see?

Carmen: Okay. Looking out my window right now guys, I see nothing. Across the way is the other residence halls and there's nothing-- Nobody out here. There's no signs of life, let's just say that, not really. It's really dry, all the bikes are parked. Then when I got here, a lot of people didn't actually move in. Nobody, a lot of people moved. Me and my roommate moved in but the girl next to us, her roommate didn't show up.

I'm not sure if you've all been in this campus pre-COVID but this school is huge. When I came to visit last May, it was cluttered, it was just people everywhere. It made me anxious, but now I'm here. I'm like, "Okay, I can get on the bus and I could be the only person on the bus." At a point I'm like, "Oh this is nice."

LaShawndra: I can't relate because I just went to a party three days ago. [laughs] Before we walked in the door, we have this app called Aurora and it shows our

test results. We had to show the person, like the security guard saying that we test negative to get into the party.

Dom: So this is not under wraps, you all ain't sneaking, this is like a sanctioned party, like social stuff.

LaShawndra: They played it out like a party. I still felt like I was at a party but you could tell that they were really cautious about it. I still had fun.

Jess: What's you all's routine now or do you all have a routine yet?

LaShawndra: Yes. I start classes at nine o'clock. I get up, shower, put my clothes on and I walk to class. It's not a long walk because it's a small Campus. I have two classes with one professor. My first class it's a seminar, it's called to sleep or not to sleep, it's a class about sleeping. [laughs] Every week I have to write two-page papers about sleeping which is cool. My second class is called Psychology 101. I have a competitor attitude, so I'm like, "Okay, I'm going to be the top of the class, you're not going to beat me." [laughs]

Dom: You're going to class in person?

LaShawndra: Yes, and then I have two online classes.

Carmen: Well, I'm a little different. This is my classroom here, there's no library. This is it. Well, my dorm is my classroom. At 9:00 AM I have to be up to do my Zoom call for my chemistry lab. I don't know what's in the water here but chem here at University of Illinois is something. It is something. I took honors Chem in Sophomore year. When I say everybody is going through it with this chemistry stuff, everybody's going through it.

My Mondays are really Zoom call days. I'm not going to lie, I have missed three Zoom meetings since the beginning of the semester. Mainly being because U of I puts the time in military time, so I get 1500 and 1400 very confused. I will log in literally an hour late to my Zoom call, but I would definitely get on top of that and email my professor's like, "Hey, this happened or I had a conflict."

Basically, you have to have discipline to be online, be remote, and that's something I'm learning because like I said, I didn't really do what I was supposed to do when we were remote in high school.

Now I'm definitely having to play catch-up and I'm a fast learner and I can adapt easily, it's just I just wish that I just took that first remote opportunity serious so I wouldn't be having the issues that I'm having now but I'm going to persevere and get

through it though, so.

Dom: I appreciate that. From your perspective, how have you been settling in as somebody who looks different from the majority of students that are on campus, and do you feel like COVID has gotten in the way at all from you building those connections at school?

Carmen: Well, before I got down here, we did a who's who at UIUC thing on twitter, and I posted mine of course. Then it was all we used the hashtag UIUC24 and that's how we found each other. Then it was a UIUC24 group chat made. My class has about 15 group chats because I was in three at first, and then I dropped out of two, and then I'm in one right now.

We found each other, and then the thing about it is though through the twitter one, it was predominantly people of color in that one, so that's the one I'm still in. As far as the finding people that look like me, I came down here with three of my advisory sisters and then a couple of--well, quite a few of the guys I went to high school with. We weren't as close that we are now because we're close now because we hang out more now, in high school, we are all coming together, I'm like, "Okay, we're getting to know each other," but I've talked to two girls that ironically are on the same floor as me and they're of color, they're of a Latina descent. I've been talking to them and

I got to know them by sending basically a message to the floor group chat saying, "Who wants to go get Insomnia cookies?" Me and my roommate and those who were our roommates, we all went to get Insomnia cookies and I got to know them more. I've been saying hello to people, I'm just being nice and in the morning, I'll be like, "Good morning." Or I'll be, "Hey, how are you doing?" We can't really smile at somebody with the mask on but I'm like, "Hey, how are you doing?" or, "Thank you," when I get on and off the elevator. That little social interaction there with people that look like me it's made it better being at a PWI.

Dom: It just makes me think too with everything that happened this summer around the killing of George Floyd, the social unrest that we saw, the fight for racial justice that we're still continuing right now, all of that happened after you all made your decisions about what school you were going to attend in the fall. Did everything that happened this summer, did it influence your choice or make you think twice about your decision at all or make you think about your decision differently?

LaShawndra: It made me think twice about going to Albion because Albion is in Michigan, and Michigan is one of the biggest racist states. I was a little weary about that, but then I got to campus and people on campus are actually friendly. Maybe I'm in the good part of Michigan so I'm not nervous anymore. This school is

white so I'm like, "Okay," and then George Floyd happened and then I'm in Michigan but when I actually got to campus, like I said, I didn't have no worries anymore because people around here is really friendly.

LaShawndra: My mom, she was a little nervous. I have a black roommate, and when I told her that-- They told us our roommate a week before we moved in and when I told her that my roommate is from Chicago. She was like, "Okay, cool. You can go." It's been fine and also, the office of minority student affairs, they've been hitting us up a lot lately with information and helplines and tiplines, stuff like that. Actually my new RA is a person of color now, so to my new dorms. That should be fine. We all should be able to connect that way. For U of I to be a PWI, I'm pretty comfortable here.

Carmen: But telling us to be in quarantine, we can't really socialize in a time of our lives where socializing is literally how people get through college. Being social and coming together as a team to help everybody get to their common goal of passing their semesters and passing their finals and getting to their degree, it's really hard. That's one thing I struggle with. You have to basically sneak to talk to people or you have to like do things. I initially felt like I had to break the rules just trying to make sure I can get understanding on a chemistry problem and that I won't be homesick. When I first got here, I did have an anxiety attack and my sister, thank God, she was coming the next day-- or coming that day to take us to the grocery store because I was like, "No, being here is like really-- No," I couldn't do it. I felt confined and after we progressed, I'm like, "Okay, this is not that bad."

Dom: We've been asking in every episode, and want to ask both of you, what do you think is the most important thing that your institution needs to know about your experience right now?

LaShawndra: Well, for me, I think that Albion needs to know that I'm trying. Me knowing myself, I know that I'm going to have days where I'm just not feeling it and I don't want to do anything like go to class, interact with my friends. I want everybody just to know that I'm trying. Because I was diagnosed with depression and sometimes I have episodes. When I have my episodes, I don't want to interact with nobody.

I just want to be to myself, I don't want to go to class. The thing is I want them to know that I'm trying because I don't have my mom with me. Every time I have my episode, she pushed me like, "Come on baby, you got this." Now I'm legit on my own. I just want them to know that I'm trying, bear with me.

Carmen: What I want the University of Illinois to know is that coming from a African American family, I grew up below the middle class. My family was below poverty. I'm

very grateful for the generous financial aid package that I did get to come here, but also, I have to succeed here. This is my only option. This is my only option, so I want them to also know that I'm very dedicated to being here at this institution and that I'm going to do everything that I can. Literally everything that I can to make sure that I succeed to become that OBGYN that I want to be. There's so many resources here and I want them to know it's greatly appreciated and that as a minority student, I do see that.

Jess: Yes, you all are giving me flashbacks to when I was first starting college. Just the same feelings of you really try your best and you know you're going to give it your shot but also the stakes that this is not-- There is no second chance, there is no backup life like in a video game in which you have multiple lives. This is it. The way I explained to people is people tell me like, "What job do you want?" I'm like, "I don't know, but I'm my parents' retirement fund so whatever works there works there, but I don't know."

Jess: Who's that person or organization that you want to shout out?

LaShawndra: First I want to shout out Carmen for actually pushing through her being a new girl at Johnson sophomore year. She's spreading her wings and I'm so proud of her. [chuckles] Then I want to shout out my mom because when I say she's my number one supporter, she is legit my number one supporter. If I don't have nobody else, I know that I have her, and I love her so much.

Carmen: First, I want to definitely shout out my high school and also the whole noble network charter. I want to shout them out because literally without me transferring into the Noble network, I honestly do believe that I will not be sitting in a college dorm room right now because of the education that I was receiving prior to that.

Also want to shout out my previous employer Hyde Park Animal Hospital because literally although I was a high school student and I was trying to work to make sure I could support my family, Hyde Park Animal Hospital they still pushed me. They made sure I knew that school came first. When I needed little minor scholarships or words of encouragement, they were able to do so.

Literally all the vets that work there either graduated from University of Illinois for undergrad. Shout out to Kat. Or they graduated from the vet school, so shout out to Dr. Williams, Dr. Chatterjee. Shout out to those people right there because literally they pushed me through. Also, I want to shout out my advisor Miss Fitoki because that's my advisor. Also, I want to shout out also my family.

Carmen: I just said I can't wait to get those credentials behind my name because I

promise you I'm going to be something else.

LaShawndra: Speak it into existence.

Dom: I love it.

LaShawndra: Preach.

Jess: We want to take a step back to listen again to their powerful response to “what does your university need to know about your experience.” Unlike all of our other previous experts on the show, Lashawndra and Carmen weren’t asking their colleges for anything. They didn’t ask for more resources or responses in policy. Instead they both said they’re “trying their best” because, “I have to succeed here. This is my only option.” They just asked for understanding.

Let’s put this into context. We have to understand the immense pressure low-income, first-generation students of color have when going to college. The stakes are incredibly high, especially when, for a lot of us, we along with our teachers/counselors/parents/friends had to work so hard just for us to get a chance to get a degree.

And I say a “chance” intentionally as our acceptance letters do not guarantee the degree. The reality is it’s just not enough to get students like Lashawndra and Carmen to be on campus. The data show that less than half of the CPS graduates who enroll in college, are receiving the adequate supports they need to finish with a degree

And that’s not by accident as colleges continue to ignore and not invest in creating the proper spaces and resources for their most marginalized students.

Year by year colleges boast about how they are increasing diversity by admitting more first generation/low-income/students of color. Once these students are on campus however, many of us struggle to find a supportive network, find the adequate resources, or even a sense of belonging on campus.

For some, I included, we wrestle with feelings of imposter syndrome. Where I doubt whether I am deserving/smart enough to be on campus. These insecurities kept me from asking questions, sharing my thoughts, or even just being myself. I would lie to people at my high school about how great school was going because I didn’t know why I was struggling so much when I did everything high school and admissions wanted me to do. “Am I the problem? Is it just because I’m not enough, or cut out for this?” These are questions I kept asking myself.

That's not to say Lashawndra and Carmen are destined to go through this, but the reality is that they are vulnerable to it happening, especially this year with COVID and racial civil unrest. So this begs to question, how can we continue to support our students like Lashawndra and Carmen at their college campuses? So that their happiness and comfort isn't limited to the first few weeks they're at college?

As students, we can continue to do what we have always done with student to student support. Even if it's just a quick text, check in to see how your friends/underclassmen/upperclassmen are doing. If nothing else, we have each other.

Jess: Before we end, I don't want any first-generation, low-income student of color to feel like they are lucky to be at their institution. That manifests a power dynamic where you have first first-generation, low-income students of color placing a sense of validation at the hands of these PWI and also downplays the immense amount of obstacles these students have had to overcome to be at their schools.

If you are a first-generation, low-income student of color you need to know your college or university is lucky to have you. You were swimming against the odds of a college process that was not welcoming to students like you, so be proud of yourself and know you are worth more and deserve more than what any of these institutions currently have to offer you. And that you have every right to challenge and demand your universities to serve you better.

Jess: Thank you to Lashawndra and Carmen for this amazing last episode. Yes folks, you heard correctly, this is our last episode of this series! We want to recognize that there is way more to these stories than what we were able to capture, but that we hope these episodes allow you to get better insight and inspiration from CPS youth in college right now.

Dom: To my colleagues listening who are working to support the college success of CPS graduates, keep doing what you and please make sure to be checking in on all your students right now. Not just on grades or financial aid, but on college life in 2020. It is something different. So please keep checking in how we can continue to help them take those small steps everyday toward graduation. As the students on this podcast demonstrated, even those quick messages of encouragement can make a big difference.

And for those of us who are in positions to affect policy and leverage resources in support of FGLI, we hope you can consider ways you can take action on some of the tangible requests that the students in podcast series have shared. Or reach out directly to the students you serve to better understand how you can work to meet their needs and develop that sense of belonging on their college campus that we

have discussed in this project.

Jess: We wanna say another thank you to our listeners and a big thank you to all our students for sharing their stories: Yahriel , Kiara, Yoselin, Michiah, Elijah, Guillermo, Jameelah, Yessenia, Sherelin, Carmen, and Lashawndra.

Dom: Experts by Experience is produced by 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. To stay updated on our work, make sure to follow us on Twitter and Instagram at @UChiToThrough.

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