

Eloy: Hi. I'm Eloy Ortiz Oakley and you're listening to another episode of the "California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Podcast." Welcome, everybody. Today I have the great pleasure of welcoming a Santa Monica College student, Josh Elizondo. He is currently a student at Santa Monica College and is a leading member of the student design team that is playing a critical role in the AB705 institutional transformation work that's happening on campus. He currently serves as the Guided Pathways Advisory Committee member. He's originally from the motor city, Detroit, Michigan, and as I said, he's a full-time student at Santa Monica College and is a music artist and an established actor. So first of all, Josh, welcome to the show. It's great to have you.

Josh: Yes, thank you for having me.

Eloy: So, Josh, it's really great when we can have students on the show because what we talk a lot about higher education or the economy on this show, it's always wonderful to hear the perspective of students who are actually living the experience of a college student and that one of our finest community colleges down there at Santa Monica College, it's great to have you on the show. So let's talk a little bit about your experiences there at Santa Monica College. As I mentioned earlier, you're a member of the Guided Pathways Advisory Committee. Can you tell us a little bit about that experience serving on the committee, how that feels as a student to have your voice and your perspective listened to as the college thinks about how it's going to develop its own plans?

Josh: Yes. So I got involved with the advisory committee through Santa Monica College, actually. They have a student squad here that helps implement Guided Pathways and we saw the application come out for members of the committee and then we submitted myself and I was also nominated by some of the people here on campus and I ended up getting involved through that way. And my first meeting was here at the Long Beach chancellor's office and I've just been involved ever since. And that was about a year and a half ago. And I really think it's important that students are involved because those are the ones that the changes are being made for. And so, having that voice is super crucial and being able to direct and steer what changes are being made and make sure that they're having the student perspective and being influenced by the student perspective. I think that that's why I've been involved and that's why I've been involved at Santa Monica College as well.

Eloy: Well, that's great. So as you think about the changes that are being discussed, you know, certainly, you're involved in those discussions about how to implement this Guided Pathways framework. You're also been involved in discussions around the implementation of AB705 and for our listeners, that's a

recent law that really changes the approach of how we deal with remediation, how we deal with placing students in the courses. As you see those changes being discussed, what do you think those changes mean to you and your fellow students? Do you see them as positive changes or what's the reaction so far from your colleagues?

Josh: Well, personally with the changes that have been happening, I do see them as positive. Myself, I had been attempting several different math classes and was not able to really pass them with the grades that were required. And so, when the law took effect, I was able to get placed into a more college-level math and I actually just successfully completed it recently. So it was... The law actually personally had an effect on me, and then I know around for other students there has been a mixed response, but a lot of students have felt that they've been excited that they don't have to take a lot of the courses that they had to because they didn't test into college-level classes. However, they also have had a little bit of anxiety or fear based on the fact like are they ready for those courses? But I think overall the response has been pretty good. It's still on his new stages and as far as Guided Pathways, a lot of students have really been excited to see that there's additional guidance happening for them and being able to figure out where they want to go in their specific educational pathway. And I think that overall, specifically, how Santa Monica College has implemented Guided Pathways has been done very succinctly and great with the students at the table.

Eloy: So in your experience moving into college-level math, English courses, do you feel that you're treated any different just because you were able to bypass some of those remedial classes before you got to the college-level class? You know, there's a lot of people debating whether or not we're just giving students a pass, giving them the opportunity to take these courses. But do you feel that you were treated any different in that class and since you've taken that class, are you succeeding just as well as you did in that class?

Josh: Yes. I think that...I didn't feel when I was taking the class that I was treated really any differently. The only thing that really was different from the peers taking the regular statistics 54 was that because I had placed in a lower section still through an assessment, they gave us an additional one-unit class that was for extra help and time with the teacher so the class was a little longer to be able to provide additional educational supplementation for the students who may have had more difficulty with the topic rather than just being placed into a higher math.

Eloy: Right. Well, it sounds like that's a good way of treating someone different, you know, offering more support, more help, ensuring that you're

continuing to make forward progress. And so, that's good to hear. Now, in looking at your bio, you are someone who is very familiar with foster youth and the challenges that our foster youth face. You founded a nonprofit organization a couple of years back called The Foster Bunch and currently serve as the executive director. So let me ask you how you feel the experience of foster youth are changing, if anything, in the community colleges and what do you think our listeners need to know about the experience that foster youth have at our colleges?

Josh: Yes. So I think that overall, a lot of the changes that are happening are going to greatly improve the college experience for foster youth. I myself, as someone who grew up in the foster care system and works heavily with foster youth, I benefit from the programs on campus such as Guardian Scholars. And for Guided Pathways in particular and AB705 as well, but mostly Guided Pathways, it's about really leveling the playing field. And I think that while the conversation has mostly been around people of minorities and of color, there are other avenues and populations that also will benefit from the changes happening. A lot of foster youth are of minority and they also come from backgrounds that are poor economic communities and low-income backgrounds. And so, myself, I didn't have a parent or someone to navigate me through the college experience such as some of my peers may have had. And with the additional framework, I think that it's really going to help foster youth as well because they will have that guidance through an educational journey that they otherwise would not have any guidance from unless they sought out counseling because they don't have their own parental figures.

Eloy: Right. So this whole conversation about Guided Pathways, from your perspective, you feel that it is at least opening the door to discussing how different students' experiences are dealt with in our colleges and how we, as you put it, level the playing field. And so, you see that beginning to happen at Santa Monica College?

Josh: Yes. For sure. I think Santa Monica College has done an amazing job at really implementing Guided Pathways but also making it an importance to have students at the table. So at the beginning when the bill first passed and where they were tasked with creating a lot of the winter retreats and getting the initial framework started, they made it a point to have students at every single meeting and then since then we've...when they created a student squad, they were intentional at targeting the populations in which they knew needed help with this legislation. So there were people from Atalante, which is the Latin X club program on campus. There was people from Black Collegians, Guardian Scholars, the veterans' program, people on academic probation, young, old. They made sure that the student squad was very represented. And so, with

having the students at the table and being able to really have students guiding the conversation, I think that that was key to the success here at Santa Monica College.

Now we're moving into the last phase of really implementation. We've finished a lot of the going through courses and articulations and making sure that different programs were being able to. We're just left with the final mapping days of most of the general education. This past semester we rolled out the new areas of interest, is what our school's calling it, instead of meta majors. And it's really been helpful to have students figure out what areas or what fields or where to go to. There's additional counseling, additional resources, and I think everything has just become a smoother process.

Eloy: That sounds great. So you mentioned something in your previous comments around the economic challenges that students face, particularly low-income students who are coming from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. I would imagine you see a lot of challenges on campus with housing and food insecurity. Can you talk a little bit about either your personal experience with food and housing insecurity and how it affected your college experience or tell us a little bit about what you're seeing from your fellow students?

Josh: Yeah. So I actually had my own experience with housing and food insecurity last year. I was living in Santa Monica and there was some issues I had with a place I was staying, and I ended up staying outside of the home in my car for a couple months. And I was struggling, I'm not going to lie, but I also was able to find safe places to sleep overnight, and the school was very helpful and being able to get me resources. I contacted my programs on campus, they have food and clothing closets here and I always felt like I had a place that could support me even though I was struggling and that my education didn't have to take a backseat for the time being. And the school even was able to help me with a little...they have like a scholarship or discretionary fund for a one-time help for students. And so, I was able to get that as well.

And so, I think that personally as someone who's attending college, it's difficult to balance. Coming back to school, I had taken a few years off and then coming back, I then had a real-life to pay for. And so, wanting to be full-time at school but also working full time, it's sometimes challenging to balance, especially if there are any hiccups in the road, which that's what led to my housing and food insecurity and me being homeless. But I think really with the support of Santa Monica College, I was able to get my feet off the ground again and I now have a place to live. I'm still working towards my educational goals and I think a lot of other students face the same thing and it's a conversation to be had about like

really with those students about how the education system can help them through the challenges as well, not just that it has to take a leave of absence.

Eloy: Right. Well, I really appreciate you sharing your story. So many people, our listeners included, think about their own experience in college, which may have been 15, 20, 30, 40 years ago. And in some ways, unfortunate that it's very different today, and your story isn't unique anymore and that's something that we really need to focus on. So I really appreciate you telling us that story now. Go ahead.

Josh: I would say one other thing too, something else that the college was very helpful with was, especially with DOPs and Guardian Scholars program here on campus, they have a company they partner with each week that donates fully cooked meals multiple times a week. So I was able to at least have one solid meal from the college, usually two or three times a week and be able to at least count on that as a source of nutrition and food as well.

Eloy: Right. Well, that's great to hear. And a big thank you to the folks at Santa Monica College for what they're doing to help students like you. Now, you came out here from Detroit, Michigan?

Josh: Yeah.

Eloy: What brought you to California and do you see California as your future?

Josh: Yes. Yes. I came out from Detroit, Michigan. I left right after graduation and emancipating from foster care. I came out here because I wanted to get into the entertainment industry and I also wanted to study marine biology, and I figured I could do both things here in the city. I did attend another community college here in the Los Angeles area, but that's when I proceeded to drop out because I didn't feel that I was studying what I wanted to and also I was having challenges with the curriculum. And so, I think that also and a comment on Guided Pathways and really being able to find what it is that I wanna study, I think coming back to school right as Guided Pathways was getting its start, I was really able to find my way through the system and really redefine what it was I wanted to study. And part of it was I was studying business management and marine biology, but I don't like math and I'm not good at it. And I didn't really have the guidance to tell me like, "Hey, well, maybe we should look over here. Like you really are doing all these things in your personal life." And so, after last couple of years, I've been in the entertainment industry, I've been acting, I've been doing that whole world. I've been doing the nonprofit work with foster youth and then I've just came back to school. Yeah.



Eloy: Wow. So as we begin to wrap up, I wanna turn it over to you since you have the opportunity to reach many people on this podcast who think a lot about higher education and think a lot about the student experience in the community colleges. What are one or two things that you want them to hear about your experience and things that we could do to make your experience better in the California community colleges?

Josh: Yes. I think the biggest thing that I would like to see implemented throughout the California community college system would be making sure there is a point for students at the table. I know there has been a great push for it recently and there's been some great strides in that. And then I do know that Santa Monica College has been very vocal in being able to make that happen here at the campus and my work with the Guided Pathways Advisory Committee, I also know that some other schools are not as progressive in being able to allow students at the table or have them or even know what this structure looks like. So my involvement with the G-Path, we were also...Santa Monica College is gonna be hosting the next meeting here in February. I'm gonna be actually one of the student leaders leading the meeting and we're gonna be talking about student advocacy and the importance of having students at the table.

And I think that moving forward with implementing Guided Pathways, it would be great to see some sort of portion of the money for Guided Pathways allocated to having students at the table, similar to Santa Monica has been able to provide through a separate grant. So one of the things with Santa Monica College is that for the students' squad and the student leaders here on campus are all paid for our time and compensated, and that's through a separate fiscal sponsorship outside of Guided Pathways. But if there was a way that we could create some sort of funding or commitment through the next renewal process. That would be, I think, ideal because we're trying to make a change for the system and in my eyes, I really think it's important if any change across the table, if you wanna make for a community or population to include their voice, include them at the table just as you're including me in this conversation today. And I think it would be really great to see that moving forward.

Eloy: Well, I think that's great advice and a great challenge to us and the California Community Colleges to create more seats at the table for all of our students. So, Josh, thanks so much for taking the time to be on the show. Thanks for telling us about your personal experience and thanks for being such an outstanding student leader. Thanks for joining us today.

Josh: Yeah. Thank you for having me.

Eloy: Well, you've been listening to another episode of the "California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Podcast," and you and I have had the pleasure of listening to one of our outstanding students at Santa Monica College, Josh Elizondo. Thank you for listening in. Thank you to our listeners, and we'll come back at you again soon. Thanks for listening.

Announcer: Be sure to join us for the next "California Community Colleges Podcast." This has been a California Community Colleges Presentation.