

Eloy: Hi there. This is Eloy Oakley, chancellor of the California Community Colleges. And you're listening to another episode of the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Podcast. Today I have the pleasure of being joined by two outstanding student leaders. They are leaders of the Student Senate for the California Community Colleges. And I have with me the president of the Student Senate, Danny Thirakul and vice president of communications, Ya'Mese Alijè Johnson. It's a pleasure to have you both on our show today.

Danny: Thank you so much. We appreciate being here.

Ya'Mese: Thank you. Yup.

Eloy: Absolutely. So, as you can probably tell by their titles, our two student leaders represent the largest segment of higher education in the country in terms of students. Over 2.1 million students in the California Community Colleges. So they have a very amazing job. They represent nearly one out of every four community college students in the nation, nearly 10% of all the undergraduates in the nation. So that's quite a job.

So the Student Senate represents student issues across our system. They represent our students in the state legislature and they do an amazing job of talking about the challenges our students face in the California Community Colleges, which is what we're gonna talk about today.

So, let me start off with Danny. Danny, tell us a little bit about the Student Senate for the California Community Colleges and tell us about your upcoming march on March 19th that you will be leading onto the California State Building.

Danny: Okay, thank you. The Student Senate for California Community College, you know, we're a statewide organization meant to help booster local student senates, make sure that they have a voice at the state level. And that's what we're about. We're about empowering the local students, the local voice, and making sure that those needs are brought up to light.

Eloy: Tell us about how many students senate are in the California Community Colleges and how the Student Senate works.

Danny: They're supposed to be 115 student senates, but some colleges have kind of left that student population behind. So we don't have entirely 115, but you know, there's a lot.

Eloy: There is a lot. Tell us about you, Danny. Where did you go to the community colleges and what are you doing right now?

Danny: So I go to Sacramento City College. I started actually a semester late. I got out of high school and thought I wanna work a full-time job. And it was in telemarketing. And I knew that that's not what I wanted to do. So I followed kind of the pathway that most first-generation American students do. And that was, you know, get your higher education done and you know, pursue what your passions are, pursue your interests.

And so I got into college a semester late, but I knew that I wanted to do something more with my life. I wanted to work and give back to my community. And so I actually started off as a political science major, and then I switched to business administration, and then I switched to interdisciplinary studies for social sciences because I wanted to do community and regional development, and then I finally found my place into my economics degree that I'm currently pursuing right now.

Eloy: That's great. That's wonderful. And when you're done with Sac City, where are you going?

Danny: I actually go there now. So I both enrolled at Sacramento city college but I go to the California State University of Sacramento as well.

Eloy: That's great. Before we get into some of the other questions, Ya'Mese, why don't you tell us a little bit about you and your story? Where do you go to school, what's your major, and where do you see yourself going from here?

Ya'Mese: I don't answer this question often, but I first started going to school in fall of 2016, and I've always had a very big passion for animals and I still do. So when I first enrolled I was at health sciences majors for the first two years of community college, taking a lot of chemistry classes, a lot of biology, anatomy and all that, you know, learning all that great things that nurses learn that I don't understand how they did it because that's a lot. And then finally switched over to triple majoring in communications, liberal arts, with an emphasis of cross-cultural studies and humanities.

And I'm using that to pursue more into the politics field because I've realized that I kind of, I like politics a little bit more than I do animals and also kind of politics isn't a game that you wanna get in late. So I told myself I need to do this as early as I possibly can. And then when I'm done and I'm tired of doing politics and things like that, I'm just gonna fall back and be a vet tech.

Eloy: All right. Well, that's great. So, I'm sorry, where are you gonna school right now?

Ya'Mese: Oh, I go to school at Merritt College in Oakland, California.

Eloy: All right. That's great. So, Danny, there's a march coming up that you all are organizing. Tell us about that march and what do you wanna accomplish?

Danny: Yeah, so this is the first march in a long time that the SSCCC has done. It's been a couple of years...

Ya'Mese: Since 2011.

Danny: Since 2011. Yeah, that's been a long time.

Eloy: That's a long time.

Danny: You know, our delegates, our constituents at a local level, they said that they wanted to bring it back. And considering the climate that we're in, in trying to push for a financial aid reform, this was the perfect time to bring it back. So we're excited March 19th, we're gonna be marching down the Capitol to advocate and convey to the legislature the importance of funding the total cost of college.

Eloy: And why do you think it's important for the legislature to hear that message? Why is the total cost of college important to students like you?

Danny: Right. I always say that you know, college is affordable, but going to college is not affordable. Right? You know.

Eloy: So the cost of tuition is affordable, but the actual cost of going to college is expensive.

Danny: Exactly. Right. People are transitioning from this sheltered state of a high school student and being supported by their families to now transitioning to try to be this young adult and independent. But it does not work out that way. So, for myself, I still live at home. I'm 22, I still live at home with my parents. Would I like to be out on my own? I would absolutely love to be out on my own, but current circumstances won't allow me. Even if I worked part-time, full time, I wouldn't be able to survive out there on my own without the support of my families.

And what is happening out there is that our current system, our financial aid system, our institutions don't have the resources in order to help foster that individual development and growth to be that young independent person out there getting your education done and getting into the workforce and pursuing your careers.

Eloy: How about you, Ya'Mese? Why would funding the total cost of education be important to your experience in the students that you know and interact with at Merritt College?

Ya'Mese: So, from my personal experience, because I am a black woman, so I'm a woman of color, I come from a community where it is very hard to even try to go to school considering like some of the circumstances that I have to come from and areas that I have to travel from out of to get to school to get my education and trying to go to school without working was not an option. It's still kind of isn't an option because I can't afford to live at my parents' but still be able to like travel and do things like SSCCC that has benefited my life a lot without working. I have to work at least two jobs, and if I need extra money then I would do like small odd jobs just so I can survive while still going to school.

And I think that's very important to realize that a lot of people who are of color, they can't get there without having some type of assistance and like a lot of assistance because it's hard for us to try and travel to get there, but then it's also hard to try and pay for, like, school. It's also turning hard to pay for living and especially the area that I come from. I live in Oakland, where like getting a one-bedroom apartment still costs \$2,500, and that's way out of my price range.

Eloy: Right. So you mentioned the community of Oakland, and there's been a lot of discussion and a lot of research that suggests that a lot of community college students are facing housing insecurity, they are facing food insecurity, and this sort of gets to this issue of the total cost of attending college. What has been your experience, Ya'Mese? Do you see a lot of students struggling with food insecurity and housing insecurity?

Ya'Mese: For food insecurity, most definitely. So my ASO two years ago implemented the Alameda County food drive to come bring food to our campus every two weeks where we can give out food. And we've seen an increase ever since we've started it of 2% of just community in general, including our college that comes to get the food. And we've started to see most of them are starting to become students. And to me, that's pretty much saying that most of the students that I represent don't have the food and don't have the money or the resources to

even make sure that they're able to pay attention and actually get the knowledge that they're supposed to because they're worried about eating.

As far as housing, last year, my ASO, we had to help a woman stay afloat with her house because if she didn't stay there, she was not gonna be able to stay in school. If she didn't stay there, her kids were gonna starve. They were not gonna have like a actual place to sleep. And it still kind of affects me now because that's like a real thing. And seeing the situation that she went through made me realize that housing and food insecurity are things that are being met, but not being met as quickly as people think they are because there's still people out here like experiencing these things way quicker than any legislation could be passed.

Eloy: Right. Yeah. I can only imagine how difficult it is to not only attend college, but to be successful in college if you're worried about where you're gonna get your next meal, if you're worried about where you're gonna live. That's an amazing amount of pressure.

Danny, what are you hearing from the students that you represent around food and housing insecurity?

Danny: I mean, going along the same sentiment. I mean, people have to choose between a lot of things, right? A scantron packet currently is a couple of dollars, \$2 or \$3 for a good 10 packet of scantrons. That's a gallon of gas, you know? I mean, if you're a student and you have a car, you're gonna choose to buy that gallon of gas because that's gonna take you to class, take you home, get you to work. You know, if you have kids, that's taking them to daycare or taking them to school. You know, those are the kind of things. The smallest dollar means a lot to these students. And you know, those needs are not being met institutionally.

Eloy: Right. So, there has been discussion in the legislature about reforming the Cal Grant system and increasing the availability of aid to community college students. Is that something that the Student Senate supports and if so, do you think that this would really help improve the situation around food and housing insecurity?

Danny: I've looked at the proposal and we definitely support this new change to Cal Grant. One of the proposals is increasing the Cal Grant award to \$6,000. I mean, that's a lot. Currently, it's I believe about \$1,700, \$1,800. To \$6,000, that's gonna mean a lot for our students at a community college. Right? Especially because students receive the most debt coming from a community college, even though it's the most affordable. So that \$6,000 is gonna go a long

way and we're gonna be excited to advocate for that at march in March and in other legislative visits.

Eloy: Great. So, Ya'Mese, in addition to the food and housing insecurity, what are some of the things that you're seeing at Merritt College and you're hearing from students that you represent are things that we could do better in the community colleges or in the state to help more students of color and low-income students be successful in colleges like yours?

Ya'Mese: Yes. So, most definitely, one of the drives that my ASO has been doing this year has been asking our board of trustees for more funding to actually get a space to have a food pantry. Because unlike other colleges, we don't actually have a food pantry. So we only get fresh produce. But we've seen that most of the people that do our surveys want things that are more sustainable than fresh because they last longer, and it's, you know, if you can survive at least off of beans and rice, then that's what you got to do.

So, I think like that's something that we were looking towards like advocating for even more is just putting more funding, if we can find it, towards actually having campuses build a space or to find a space. Because right now, some colleges that I've seen have been pretty small that don't have spaces and it's either they need money to build the space or they need to give money to a different department so they can actually move somewhere to like fix up a space so they can give a space to the students for the food pantry. Although I feel like we should just be making these pantries as soon as possible to help the students, like, as much as possible. But for right now, like funding is like a big source that is hindering most people from having one.

Eloy: Right. So, Danny, tell us, if I'm a student listening in and I wanna participate in one way or another in this march, tell us when it is, what time, how can they participate?

Danny: Awesome. So we actually have a registration page on our website, www.studentsenateccc.org. It's free to register. We just wanna get a good count of exactly how many students are going. But on there is all the information. We start lining up at 9:30. We march at 10:30. Our speakers and our podium rally starts at 11:30. We're gonna be meeting near the Crocker Art Museum. A

nd that space is where we're gonna be forming up and meeting before we march. And you know, if people are interested, definitely contact us through our website, email us personally to get to know us and to figure out all the details in order to know what to do. We are providing some transportation, but it just depends exactly, you know, where the students are, of course, and where

college they go to. We have a little bit of funding to help get more students down there to the capitol.

Eloy: Wonderful. Well, I hope to see, you know, hundreds if not thousands of community college students come out. So, I'm looking forward to that event.

Let's switch topics a little bit and talk about a different population of community college students. So there has been quite a lot of work being done in the California Community Colleges to better support the educational needs of currently and formerly incarcerated individuals. Understanding that, you know, these individuals, when they come back into society, they need to get a job, they need to have access to good a quality education. We want them to participate in our communities.

So, I understand that one of the legislative priorities for the Student Senate is to increase program funding for currently and formerly incarcerated students. Danny and Ya'Mese, tell us a little bit about why that's a priority for you.

Danny: I mean, I could just start a little bit about it, but I definitely want Ya'Mese to kind of finish it off. I'll just say quickly that, you know, we just don't do enough for that student population. We absolutely don't do enough. Year after year, we fight for funding and we fight for financial aid reform and still, they're always put last. And you know, it's an equity issue. You know, we need to start focusing on who our disproportionately impacted students are. And that's people of color. And that includes our formerly and currently incarcerated students. But I'll let Ya'Mese kind of get into the details about it because I know that she has a lot to say.

Ya'Mese: Thank you, Danny. So when I seen this question, I kind of knew how to answer it, only because I've experienced, in a way, being incarcerated. But then I went downstairs at my campus and talked to some of my incarcerated constituents and they were letting me know that like, the system just needs to do better for them because there's not enough for them. Like they have to experience being dropped off in the middle of the night when they're released sometimes. And once that happens and they get to their destination where they're safe, they immediately have to do all these things of getting a job and doing this and doing that. And if they're gonna be in school, well, what classes and things are you taking? And it's a barrier that they have to go through so much before they can get to the school to even feel like they're doing something.

And one of the students in particular at my school had told me that he felt like he was a modern-age Malcolm X. That he had to force himself to read while he

was inside because there was nothing else he could do. And then when he got out, it was so much that he had to do that he felt like he didn't wanna come to school anymore. And although like community colleges, once they get through all of those barriers and they finally come here and it's affordable for them to get here, they have to face the barrier of now feeling sometimes unsafe because some people are like, "Oh my God, you've went to jail, what did you do?" And most of the time some of them are just in for things that they'd done for like petty crimes.

And so like I think us looking at if we really want them to do better and to be better, like they want themselves to be, us supporting them and saying like, okay, we're gonna help you through every step of the way instead of some of the steps. Once you get these things done is a lot easier. And giving them that support is what's gonna make them feel more motivated to get to where they want to be because I believe only about 20% of incarcerated students actually graduate community college and that's out of this 95% that was released.

And so that's not a very good proportion of incarcerated students that we want to see succeed, especially those that learned what they've done and is telling themselves and everyone else around them. Like, "I can do this, I can be something and I'm gonna be something."

Eloy: Right. Danny.

Danny: And I just wanna say that to go along with that theme really is that there's a real opportunity here that California Community Colleges, essentially, can be the solution to how we handle criminal justice reform. You know, there's a bigger picture out there and I think that needs saying and that we need to start focusing on that.

Eloy: Well, I think that's a wonderful way to put it, Danny. I mean, speaking as someone who came through the California Community Colleges and now has the pleasure of representing them, we are sometimes that best hope for people from all backgrounds regardless of where they're coming from, who really want to make a difference, who wanna contribute to their communities. And I'm proud to represent faculty and staff who really believe in this work. So, I really appreciate that this is a priority of yours is certainly something that we wanna see grow in the California Community Colleges and support for it to grow.

Unrelated topic. We're hearing that there is a greater and greater demand for mental health services because of the trauma many of our students have faced in their communities, some of them as returning veterans. Why is this also a priority for the Student Senate?

Ya'Mese: So, I believe this is a priority, and I'm pretty sure this is a priority for most of our students because of situations and things that they've experienced. And so, personally, like myself, I had to help five individuals on my first week of school get through mental health issues, get through their anxiety because they started to break down. It was so much stress. And what was the sad part about it is that our counselors did not notice it. And to me, that already rung a bell that they don't have enough training or they don't know how to handle it. So they just let them go. And you know, sometimes if you can't take care of the mental health as soon as it happens, it can lead to things that are much worse.

So I'm a big advocate when it comes to mental health because I understand I work with people who need the attention and need the help. I work with kids who are autistic and I can see in all of them and even some of the students that come to my campus that are autistic that they don't have anyone here to depend on. Like if they do, they have to like find a teacher that's willing to do it. Not like there's someone there that's gonna be with you, that's dedicated to you, that has made the time for you, that understands what you're going through so they can help you through the process. Because right now there's no one there to hold them as a helping hand, which is needed.

And you know, things like this just grows crazy. And that kind of like leads into why mixed in with that priorities, like getting our health too. Like there are campuses out here that don't even have a medical center or a health center for their students. And if you don't have that, they don't even have the basic need of being able to go somewhere that's supposed to be that place. Most of these people are like having these breakouts and things like that in bathrooms, like places that are being very unsafe, that can lead to things as dangerously as death.

And I think that's something very serious that we all have to think about because if we don't take care of this issue now, it's gonna be something that keeps popping up year after year after year until there's this big thing like "We don't have any of this." And if we don't take care of it now then there's gonna be like, "We don't have any money. We don't know what to do." And right now, it's still a big demand, but we might as well start it while the demand is somewhat small before it gets really, really huge.

Eloy: Right. Well, and I know speaking on behalf of our counselors, and faculty, and staff, they also wanna see more services, more support for mental health because many of our counselors are overwhelmed as I'm sure you've experienced. So the more help we can get for them and for our students the

better. And that's certainly something that's a priority for the chancellor's office as well. So we will keep pushing for that.

Let me touch on one more question then I wanna turn it over to you guys to talk about what you think is important for our students to know about what's going on and for our public to know what's going on with community college students. We are right in the middle of primary season as well as we are just about to begin the census. Two very important issues to today's students both in terms of not only who you vote for and who becomes president that represents you in the white house, but also how you know, you're counted in the census and the kind of resources that will follow that. So, what kind of efforts is the Student Senate engaged in to to ensure that students are out there registering to vote and that we're getting the word out about the census?

Danny: Well, we actually just received some information from the Secretary of State's office actually presentation done in order to help get us information about how we can put voting centers and polling stations at our community colleges. I believe it was actually my college, Sacramento City College that recognized or awarded, I believe, for the most creative way to try to get students to vote and be registered. So I'm happy about that. Chat up Sac City. Go Panthers.

So you know, we got that information and we're definitely rolling that out to all of our students. There are grants out there and funding opportunities for our local students' senates on how we can utilize that funds to outreach to students and then also, outreach them and get them involved on local campuses and local policies and things like that. Right? Voting is just one way to get civically engaged. There are opportunities on campus as well.

Eloy: Well, that's wonderful to hear because you know, I will give my 22nd PSA here. This election means a lot to the students of California, and so anything we can do to ensure that they get out and vote, it's gonna be very important.

Likewise the census, which we'll begin counting here shortly. It's very important that we do everything we can to get the word out, how important it is that every member of every student's family gets counted regardless of where they come from. It's important that they get counted.

Ya'Mese: And if I may add, because at my school I actually ran into a lot of people not understanding what the census was. If no one knows, the census is pretty much like Chancellor Oakley said, it's for every member of every family to be counted. It's not only just to count you and to know who's living in what

house, but it's for the government to figure out how much money to give each state and how many jobs each state needs to have in each County. I feel like all students need to know that's the reason why the census happens every 10 years because without this, and if we don't, regardless of being immigrants and things like that, we have to do this because it creates a lot more job opportunities for all of us. It's pretty much a power play for all of us to take part of this because now we know that there's going to be more jobs in our communities and things like that. So, very important to take part of the census.

Eloy: Absolutely. And I think in many cases, you know, particularly with students who are first generation or who are one of the few in their family that speak or read English, it's important that they help the families, you know, the people in their household make sure that they get counted. So, thank you for doing all that.

Now, let me turn it over to the two of you. Let's start with you, Ya'Mese. What do you think our listeners should know about today's California community college student? What should we know to ensure that all students that you represent have the greatest opportunity to not only to get into college, but to complete college?

Ya'Mese: From my perspective, the experience isn't and always what it seems. It's so ever-changing. Like when I first got here, my experience was terrible. Didn't have a really good counselor and none of that. But in the next few months, when I'd seen a counselor again, that counselor made me feel a little bit more motivated. Then I got into student government and eventually, led me to statewide student government where I pretty much flourished afterwards. And it's kind of changed around. And even in the flourishing, you know, it's been a roller coaster. It's been up and down, up and down. I think that's what people need to realize what the student experience is.

Especially as a California community college student, it's a roller coaster. It's a ride. Like, you have to be there and be ready for that ride the entire time because it's not always gonna be like, "I'm gonna come in, I'm gonna go to this class, I'm gonna get this degree and I'm getting out." Because sometimes it's, "I'm coming in, I'm going to classes, something may happen and I'm gonna stay here for like an extra year." Or it could just be how it was the first time I explained. Just understanding like it's a roller coaster but it's more good times than it is bad and when the ride's over you'll miss it a lot. Because I'm about to end my ride in the California community college system and I'm, you know, feeling a little bad. I do. It's a great experience.

Danny: Getting withdrawals already?

Eloy: Right. Well, don't feel bad. We love you in our colleges, but we also wanna see you go and do great things. Now, I imagine part of that experience that you've seen also involves students really having to do a lot, not only for themselves but for their families. How does that experience shape the challenges that you see your students facing?

Ya'Mese: I think it shapes you in a much better way than you expect. It just gives you a lot more tools on how to handle certain situations because as everyone always tells people, they tell you...

Eloy: That never happens here.

Ya'Mese: But you know, they just tell you like get through it because it's gonna happen later on and you'll know how to handle it. I think that's the same thing that community college just because it's so like intertwined with your community that if something happens but you have to leave like to go see grandma or take care of grandma real quick. It's things like that where you're just like, okay if this ever happens again, I know how to handle this when I'm at the UC or the CSU level or I know how to combat this and do this and do that. I feel like community college gives you way more tools of handling life later on, than your first job would straight out of high school. At least in my experience, it has.

Eloy: That's a great analogy. How about you, Danny? Anything that you think is important for our listeners to know about the students you represent?

Danny: I hope that a lot of high school students are actually listening too. You know, don't be discouraged to go to a community college at all. You know, I talked about it earlier, that we're transitioning from being a sheltered high school student to being a young adult and independent. And I can think, being in a community college, that that transition is going well. You know, it really helps you and it really supports you and I don't think you could really get that if you went for university. No offense to them. But you know, I think that the support that they give for personal development is extremely helpful.

And I would also say that it's competitive. It is just as competitive as going to a CSU or a UC. Your units, your credits, they transfer over, they help you complete your end goal. There is a, he used to be the vice president of student services at Sacramento City College. Michael Poindexter, amazing person. And he's the one who I first heard that from is that these classes are competitive. The undergraduate classes at CSU or UC or even Stanford, they're the same classes you're gonna be taking at community college. They're all gonna lead up to your

degree. Do not be discouraged to go to go to a community college and don't be discouraged to be a community college student.

Ya'Mese: Get an extra degree on the way?

Eloy: That's right. Well, I think that's a great way to close. And as a community college student myself, I couldn't agree with you more. So I wanna thank you both, Danny and Ya'Mese, for being here with us to talk about the California community college student, but more importantly, for being willing to be student leaders. I know how difficult it is sometimes to balance your lives, you're students first, but you're wonderful leaders as well. So thank you for joining me here today.

Danny: Thank you so much.

Ya'Mese: Thank you for having us.

Eloy: All right, you've been listening to another great edition of the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Podcast and I've had the great pleasure of talking with Danny and Ya'Mese, both great student leaders in the California Community Colleges, leading the Student Senate for the California Community Colleges.

So again, thank you all for listening and we'll be back with you soon.

Man: Be sure to join us for the next California Community Colleges podcast.

This has been a California Community Colleges presentation.