

June 15 Podcast Transcript

Eloy: Hi. This is Eloy Ortiz 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'm going to spend some time getting into the student experience during this COVID-19 crisis. I'm going to be joined by one of our outstanding students, Gurshaan Arora. Gurshaan is a biology major at Foothill College, so we'll be talking to him about his experience and what he's seen as a community college student on the ground during this really crazy time.

I also want to highlight that recently, our student senate for the California Community Colleges conducted a survey of students within the community college system. They wanted to better understand the challenges that students are facing, and better advocate for our students. And, not surprisingly, the top three responses that we see from students indicate significant levels of anxiety, stress, and depression, as well as other mental disorders. Sixty-seven percent of the students surveyed indicated that they have some form of anxiety or stress, and many of the students who reported higher levels of anxiety also reported that they've had a loss of income, they have an inability to pay their bills, their mortgages, their rents, their utilities, and many of them have had to drop one or more courses due to financial reasons.

So, I know that many of you feel the same way I do. This has been a crazy time. All of us feel anxiety, regardless of where we stand on exactly what's going on with this pandemic. We all feel concern about the uncertainty of what tomorrow brings, what the future brings, will we have our jobs back, will life be very different? That creates a lot of anxiety, and our students are at the front line, feeling that anxiety.

So, to talk more about what's happening on the ground, as I said, I'm joined by one of our outstanding students, Gurshaan Arora. He's a biology major at Foothill College, and he also is a very talented young man. Recently, Foothill College held a COVID-19 public service announcement video contest, and my guest today produced an outstanding rap video, something I certainly wouldn't be asked to do, and he won the contest. The video can be watched on YouTube, and we'll try to have a little bit of information at the end of this podcast, in case you all wanted to check that out. I hope you do. It's outstanding video. So, without further ado, Gurshaan, welcome to the podcast.

Gurshaan: Good morning, Chancellor. It's quite an honor to be here. For sure, about a month ago when I was making that song, I did not see myself in the position that I am today. It's been quite crazy, but not crazier than what's going on right now in the world, so, I'm happy to be here and help you address it.

Eloy: Well, we're happy to have you here, and yes, there is a lot going on in the world. Every time you turn on the news, you know, it is just amazing what we're watching. But, what always gives me hope is turning to the students that are a part of the California Community Colleges, and hearing their stories. Let's jump right into it. So, you're finishing up your first year of community college, there at Foothill College.

Gurshaan: Yeah.

Eloy: By the way, an outstanding college. It's been, obviously, a wild year, to say the least. So, with all the changes that you've been facing, how would you describe the differences between your first semester, when you started out, and now your second semester, where everything is sort of changing?

Gurshaan: So, over at Foothill, I think I am actually at a slight advantage, because we have a quarter system, so I've been able to go through two cycles, if you will, with the fall quarter and the winter quarter, which each time is a different refresh. Just, you step into the college experience once again, you get to start a class, finish a class, and you get the experiences of doing that, whereas if you're on a semester, of course, you don't get to do that as much throughout the period of a year.

In terms of the difference, of course, it's pretty different. I'm a STEM major. I'm hoping to transfer to a UC in 2021.

Eloy: Great.

Gurshaan: And the issue with that is of course, although we do have the TAG program, I still need to do my best to stand out over the other potential applicants. And part of that, for me, was not taking any online classes for coursework, just to try and stand out, especially because a lot of the honors options were offered on campus. So, having all of my classes moved online, especially the ones that were more hands on, so, biology, and chemistry, of course, which I'm currently completing the cycles of, was quite a change. I've always considered myself as someone that's more of a hands-on learner, and each of my science classes have a lab portion, and having to do that virtually is a complete change of format.

Eloy: Right. Yeah, and in some ways, you're fortunate to be at Foothill College...

Gurshaan: Of course.

Eloy: ...which is a college that has an outstanding reputation for having a very robust online offering. The faculty there have done outstanding work over the years to put a lot of their courses online, so they had a little bit of a head start. But, especially as a STEM major, you still face some challenges with that transition?

Gurshaan: Yeah. Of course, for classes that consist of mainly a lecture, there isn't as drastic of a change, of course, in terms of presence of your teacher. You still have that through Zoom. I think the main defining factor for me was definitely the lab portion of two out of three classes I'm taking this quarter, and at the end of last quarter, just because I think a lot of the learning we do is through lab, for STEM classes, of course. The concepts you learn in the lecture are applied directly during the lab portion, so if you're learning about a certain phenomenon, you don't really drill it into your memory until you perform an experiment that allows you to see it occur in front of you.

I do also, of course, think I am blessed in a way to be at Foothill. As you said, Foothill has a good reputation with online classes. I was aware of that before I applied to Foothill. And I think part of that, of course, is a contributing reason as to why the transition's been as smooth as it has.

Eloy: Great. Well, that's good to hear. Now, you made this video of, this public service announcement video, and it's very inspiring. It's certainly entertaining. So congratulations, by the way. But you've overcome quite a few challenges along the way. What were some of those challenges, and how do you think you got through them?

Gurshaan: So, for this question, are you referring to the challenges of the video, or...?

Eloy: Right, yeah.

Gurshaan: Like, making the video, not...

Eloy: Making the video, as well as the challenges that gave you the creativity to create this video. What were you trying to communicate along the way?

Gurshaan: Yeah. So, when the student body was introduced to the contest, there were four different topics, some of which included promoting the prevention of xenophobia. Another one was promoting the spread of factual information, because of course, right now, with the media all aflutter, it's easy for certain things to slip through that may not be factually accurate.

Eloy: Right.

Gurshaan: And of course, while those are important topics, for me, expressing my creative side has always been more of a fun activity, and I felt that translating that into the online learning category would be kind of a light-hearted, enjoyable experience. I've been making songs for school-related projects since fifth grade, and of course, the quality at the time wasn't anywhere near what it is right now. I started making non-school-related, like, more personal music around late my senior year of high school, in 2019. And throughout all of that, I've had a friend that has, like, a home studio setup where I can go to record, he's able to mix the audio, I can see the song being made in front of me, be able to voice my creative opinion as to what goes where, how certain things are gonna come out in the end, but for me, I definitely knew I wanted to make this song, however, I was a bit lost, because I don't have any technical experience when it comes to music. I don't know how to mix, master. I just know how to write my words down and have them come out of my mouth.

So that was the first challenge, of course, just considering how to be able to do this at home. Of course, I'm limited on a budget, too. I only work at Starbucks, not an internship at Google. But yeah, I was able to do some research, and found a nice entry-level microphone that I could go pick up from Target. I set it up in my closet, to make a little studio, you know, prevent any loud echoes. And that was actually something I found online too, that having, like, clothes around you is a way of soundproofing [inaudible 00:09:04]

Eloy: That's good advice. Let's start doing this podcast from my closet.

Gurshaan: Could be an option.

Eloy: Now, let me ask you this. Obviously, one, you know, this experience has allowed you to gain some new skills. But, you know, going back to the survey that the student senate took, as you think about it, as you've made this transition, as you sort of sit at home, watching what's going on, I'm sure you lost hours from your Starbucks job as a barista, because many of those locations closed, do you feel some of that anxiety that many of your fellow students are feeling, and if so, when you think about it, what are you anxious about?

Gurshaan: Well, in terms of anxiety, of course, I think that's always gonna be there, whether it's directly from school, or whether it's just being surrounded in the media environment that we are right now, with every other topic being related to the situation in the world. I think the main anxiety I faced, of course, was just ensuring that I'd still be able to grasp information from my classes in

the same way that I would on campus. Of course, to me, as I described earlier, it's a lot more engaging to be able to do things hands-on, or, even a lecture, just having someone talking in front of you, and not being distracted by all the various tabs on your computer, notifications, that's a completely different experience.

However, I think definitely a piece of advice I could give to students would be explore your resources, because I think, just, the idea that we have in our minds that we're switching to online learning instantly makes us think that, okay, this is kind of a makeshift situation, like, we're already limited, but, speaking from my experience, and with what Foothill's done, I've noticed that all the resources that we would have had on campus, whether that's tutoring for each different subject, whether it's mental health services, those have also been translated to an online format. So I think, of course, for students, just exploring their options, thinking about what they would do if they were on campus, honestly, and trying to figure out how they can still do that, just with a online format.

Eloy: Right. Now, clearly, students are feeling anxiety, but so are the faculty that are making this transition. And they've done an amazing job, but clearly there's been some challenges along the way for many of our faculty, and for our students now. In your experience, you know, you've given advice to students on how to get through this. As a student, what advice would you give your faculty, or the faculty that are suddenly becoming Zoom experts, and trying to engage with you and your fellow students? What advice would you have for them?

Gurshaan: You know, first off, I can definitely understand where they're coming from, because it's a new experience to all of us, whether you're a student or a faculty member, especially if the faculty members aren't as adept with technology as they'd like to be. I think for them also, the same advice goes, just exploring the resources, because just again, speaking from my experience at Foothill, and just from what I've seen, I think Foothill has also done a great job to allow such an infrastructure that is readily available, with technological support for teachers. So, I think definitely, you could always find a method to guide you through whatever it is, whether it's Zoom, whether it's using Canvas to get your assignments up. Of course, this is the era of information, and we have it all around us. And I think the main factor is just figuring out how to get it.

Eloy: Right. Now, as you made this transition, did you have any challenges with acquiring the technology you needed to be able to engage the way you would want to in your courses? You have any challenges with WiFi connections or the computer, or any other tech challenges along the way?

Gurshaan: In terms of actually having the technology to use, I think I was very privileged in that manner. I have my laptop, which I use for my schoolwork, so for lectures, labs, I have that. WiFi, I'm also privileged in that sense. Of course, WiFi isn't reliable, no matter how good it is. I had a chemistry exam yesterday, during which I had to stop. You know, my teacher asked if I could move downstairs closer to the router, because nothing was loading.

Eloy: I've had that experience, yes.

Gurshaan: It's regular, and it's always a pain.

Eloy: Right.

Gurshaan: But, that's just my viewpoint. I think I'm blessed to be privileged to that sense, but for me, growing up in such a diverse area, where I go to school with students that are the sons and daughters of CEOs of multimillion-dollar corporations, but also going to school with students that live in one-bedroom apartments, as I had to for a lot of high school. I think it's definitely good, and it gives me hope to see the schools, whether it was my experience in high school, or whether it's Foothill College, using the funding that they have from their trustees to understand the demographic of their student body, but also understand what they can do best to help them. One thing that's definitely carried on from my experience at high school when at Foothill is making such technology available to students, and definitely just doing things like that, to make sure that they're not depriving anyone of the learning experience that they have come to Foothill for.

Eloy: Right. Now, based on your experience, if there was one or two things that you could change about your community college experience to make it better for you and your fellow students, what would that be? Do you have any thoughts? If we gave you the magic wand, tell us how, one or two things that would improve your experience in the community colleges. What would that be?

Gurshaan: Yeah. From my experience in high school, definitely my senior year, when I was looking at my options for colleges, during my senior year, I think I decided to branch out a bit more. I really took advantage of the campus life that we have, and it made high school definitely feel like more of a community. Of course, you've been to the same people, same group of friends, same classmates for the past four years, and you've gotten to know them. But you've also gotten to incorporate with them through different campus activities. And I think one factor that's definitely considered by students when they're applying to community colleges is the lack of campus life. And that's one thing that's really

pushed by students when they're considering their options, but I don't think that needs to be an issue. I think, like, of course, community colleges still have their respective student bodies, they still have their respective clubs. I think it can still be a great communal experience for everyone.

Eloy: Right. Now, sort of closing off on the topic of your experience in community college, then I want to talk about your rap career. But before we close off on your student experience, now, you're thinking about transferring to the UC, and sounds like you're a STEM major, a biology major. As you think about transferring now, given the situation you find yourself in at the community colleges, and likely, you're gonna find yourself in some continuing physical distancing environment when you transfer to UC, don't know where you'd like to transfer to, but I'd love to hear that too, but has your thinking changed at all about what that UC experience is gonna look like, given the challenges that many of our campuses will still face in a year or two down the line?

Gurshaan: Well, to be completely honest, all I see is more challenges. And whether those are challenges that can easily be overcome, or whether they're things that I just have to deal with until the world begins solving more of this pandemic... Of course, as someone who considered the community college option to provide financial ease to my family in my situation, as opposed to going directly to a CSU and being, burst into that environment, it's been a bit hurtful to see my friends that chose to go directly to UCs still having the burden of \$60K tuition, \$70K tuition, for the same online format, and being deprived of the other things that they are paying for with that UC bill, such as on-campus housing, or meals. Of course, I'm definitely hopeful that by the time I do end up transferring, I don't have to deal with the same factors, especially considering my personal financial situation, but I am still hopeful that, considering their infrastructure, considering the help I've gotten on a community level, that the UCs will also be able to accommodate the online format in the same manner, there won't be a rough transition or a drastic comparison between taking the classes I would have taken on campus versus taking those online.

Eloy: Yeah. And I would agree with you. The faculty of the UC, like the community colleges, like Foothill College, is doing an amazing job of adapting. And yes, I believe you'll have a great UC experience. Where do you wanna transfer to? What's your one or two top picks?

Gurshaan: I'm weighing my options. Of course, I'm most likely gonna use the TAG program, the Transfer Admission Guarantee, which constitutes I believe all the UCs except for Berkeley, LA, and San Diego. But as a biology major, of course I'm considering Davis, which is one of the better options for biology.

But in terms of having better, I say, on-campus experience, and of course the area too, UC Santa Barbara.

Eloy: Well, can't beat that. Yes.

Gurshaan: Just because, as a California born and raised, that's where I definitely see myself.

Eloy: Well, don't forget about those anteaters.

Gurshaan: Of course.

Eloy: That's a great experience as well. Now, let me start to close. Obviously, you know, you won this challenge. Your talents were obviously on display. What thoughts do you have about continuing a music career in addition to your biology career? This something that you wanna keep doing?

Gurshaan: For sure, yeah. It's definitely my main form of creative release. I've never been good at drawing, never been good at playing music. I only know a few chords on my guitar. But this is something that I definitely can do. If there's one thing I've learned in the time that I've made music, it's that if I've been able to receive the amount of positive feedback that I have for the numerous amount of things I've done that are school-related, I still have stories to tell that aren't school-related that pertain to my experiences growing up in the Silicon Valley, and factors like that. And personally, I can't wait to see what reactions I get from taking my creative path in that direction.

Eloy: Right. So, if I'm a talent scout listening to this podcast right now, I would assume that I can just go over to YouTube, search for Gurshaan Arora, A-R-O-R-A, and some of your, particularly this video will pop up?

Gurshaan: Yeah. My channel name is actually just "Gursh," which is my first name minus the "aan."

Eloy: Gursh?

Gurshaan: Yeah, it's what my friends call me. Always been easier.

Eloy: Great. All right, well if anybody wants to check out Gursh, go to YouTube, plug that in, and I'm sure you'll be entertained. Well, Gursh, thank you for joining us. It's been a pleasure to hear your story. I wish you very much the best of luck as you get through this...

Gurshaan: Thank you.

Eloy: ...you know, with all of our students. We will get through this. And you will get to the other side of this, and you will be at one of our UC campuses, and I look forward to seeing you there.

Gurshaan: I look forward to it as well. Thank you so much.

Eloy: All right. Well, we've been joined by Gurshaan Arora. He's a biology major at Foothill College, listening to his story as we think about the millions of students that are pushing through this crisis at all of our community colleges, not just in California, but throughout the country. And you've been listening to another episode of the California Community College Chancellor's Office podcast. This is Eloy Ortiz Oakley. Thank you for joining us, and we'll be back to you soon.

Announcer: Be sure to join us for the next California Community Colleges podcast. This has been a California Community Colleges presentation.