

My Pre-College Journey of a Lifetime

By Imahni Cheeks, Class of '21 - Oakland Tech High and an Oakland Promise Scholar



My college journey actually began in the year of 2020. A moment in time that most believe will go down in our history books or a year that all of GenZ will be telling their grandkids about. It was a year that took us all by surprise and took a lot of our joy with it as we began quarantining because of the national pandemic. We missed out on a ton of life's most amazing moments, but all in all, it also was a year of change and strength. It helped me recognize in a lot of ways that life is unexpected, but that you have to make the most of what we have. Instead of just sitting at home, I decided to explore a new side of myself and jump into what would soon become my spectacular college journey.

My journey was not spectacular because of the college process itself, but because of the people who stood by my side to help me succeed. When I first began this journey, I was terrified and had no clue where to even start. In more ways than one I felt stuck; my parents had worked all their lives to get me to this point, but they themselves had never

been to college and no one ever asked me where I wanted to go for my higher education. For the first time in my life I was on my own. Similar to most other first generation college students, my parents took a backseat in the process as I learned how to steer a foreign wheel. This pressure was unlike no other not only because of the stress of figuring out how to even apply to college, but understanding my position as an Afro Latina within society. You see, growing up as an Afro Latina in Oakland I learned from a very young age that education meant more than just a degree. It meant guaranteed success and access to spaces and positions that were typically kept away from people like me. It also meant that I could break a repetitive oppressive cycle within my community that stripped away our right to college, given the lack of educational resources such as tutors, after school programs, mentors, leaders, and other assets. Which is why I had to reflect on what I wanted in this lifetime. Looking out my window into the open streets of my beautiful community that had been shunned away, I realized that I couldn't sit and wait for change; I had to be a part of it.

With that in mind, I set my eyes on the prize to be the role model for my siblings. I wanted to become a social justice advocate for my community and a mentor to future first generation students. As I pursued my new goal, I made sure I took every opportunity that I could, even during the pandemic. My first step was joining an internship where I learned about law and met inspiring adults who came from every walk of life and gave me wisdom on how to be strong and confident in my skills. Then, I became passionate about social justice by joining a political campaign advocating for District 7 in Oakland as well as joining the Latino Student Delegate Council where I had an amazing mentor and made many connections with not only students, but people from the Oakland community.

I got into student government at my school which helped me see how I could be a student leader. Stepping into these new positions all in one year was challenging because I had to accept not knowing in many instances, what the "heck" I was doing! On top of my confusion, it was also overwhelming being a part of so many things while handling my academic course load. Nonetheless, all the stress and confusion disappeared as time went on and I learned to adjust to my new environments as well as make connections with people who would stay by my side to help.

These experiences and my internship at the Center for Youth Development Through Law (CYDL) helped me in the college process in completing the FAFSA requirements as well as my College Scholarship Service Profile (CSS). Both of these are essential financial aid documents and are very hard to figure out without a guide or someone who has strong financial literacy.

The political campaign taught me how to try new things and work hard to create change which led me to join the Latino Student Delegate Council where Daniel Guzman of OUSD Office of Equity helped me develop my writing skills by challenging me to think critically

and analyzing my work as I wrote my college essays. Within the Latino Student Delegate Council, I was also shown how to step into the spotlight and make connections and collaborate with people.

My student government position allowed me to see all the resources my school had to offer as well as spread the word about them. For instance, the school's College and Career Center with Ms. Viv and Ms. Hunter, helped me with financial aid, scholarships, essays, and even took me to go see the schools I was deciding upon.

Finally, I want to highlight my experience with scholarships, college acceptance, and college decision time because I think they are essential for any student who might come across my piece. To start, when I was applying to colleges, I heard so many discouraging statistics about the low acceptance rates of colleges which caused me to stress about whether or not I would even get in. I was able to discover however, that really there is no need to worry because there is more than one pathway to get into college. One being the community college route which I even contemplated over as it saves money and allows time for the student to identify what they might want to study and if further college is right for them. Furthermore, 4-year colleges often have different acceptance rates when students apply for a transfer from 2-year community colleges. All in all, college journeys are not all the same and that is perfectly okay.

Secondly, scholarships are essential. College is expensive for everyone; I know that finances were a big concern for me when applying because I knew that I not only had to think about myself, but the impact on my family as well. So when I started my college process and heard that scholarships could take some of those financial pressures off, I made sure to start applying. Some tips I would share is that it is never too early to apply for scholarships and to take every rejection lightly that you might get after submitting and/or interviewing for the scholarships. I applied to more than 20 scholarships and got denied 19 times, but the one that said "yes", just happened to be the best one of them all. This scholarship under Oakland Promise has not only allowed me to go to school debt free, but also provided me with a mentor who will advise me on any questions or issues I might have while attending my university. This is amazing because as a first gen college student, having someone with the experience and knowledge of what college is like to guide you is really alleviating as I won't have to do this alone. I recommend any Oakland high school student to apply, as it is important to apply to scholarships that support your local community that wants to see you succeed as much as you do.

Then there is decision time: dum...dum...dumdum! Probably the scariest time of all because you don't know what is going to come next after you get accepted at some college and no one can make the decision but you. I flipped coins, would make the final decision in my head and stick with it for a day then change my answer, walked around my

neighborhood a million times looking for a sign. I prayed. I talked to alums. But in the end, only I could dictate where I wanted to be. So as I sat at my computer looking at my two acceptance buttons wondering what to choose I ended up still not being able to make a decision. So as my last resort I asked myself the corny questions that everyone kept recommending me to think about. Where is my community and what will be my new home? Which led me to choose University of San Francisco out of my final two choices. Now I am excited and anxious to see where my decision will lead me.

Honestly, in the end, I can't tell or share what the exact steps are to make it into college, but I advise anyone who is like me to look for those support systems whether it be at school, home, or your community to find your outlets and people who will help you when you feel like you are lost and can't find your way. Also get out of your comfort zone and explore because you will witness a world that you never knew was there. I go by a saying "*Yo No Se Manana*" which translates to "I don't know tomorrow" and I want anyone who is starting this journey to understand that although you can't predict what will happen in the future, you should take a leap of faith because we are all shining stars and no matter where you come from or who you are, your destiny is greater than what you might believe.


