

Name Key:

Kh: Khadija El-Karfi

Ki: Kiloni Quiles-Franco

DJ: Dennis Jones

RVL: Robyn Volcy-Lee

BA: Bola Adams

CB: Cheyenne Bailey

MC: Mylinn Clément

[intro plays]

[0:34] Kh: Hi everyone. My name is Khadija El-Karfi.

Ki: And my name is Kiloni Quiles-Franco.

Kh: And today we're very excited to be talking with, um, an organization named Students of Color for Public Health.

Ki: And Dennis Jones, a faculty member from the medical campus to talk about, uh, the work to live versus live to work dogma.

Kh: So I'll let you all introduce yourselves-

Ki: and welcome.

[0:59] DJ: Thank you for having me. I've been at BU now a little over two years and I'm an assistant professor in the Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine at the Medical Campus. And my research focuses on the lymphatic system and we look at lymphatic vessel development in normal physiology.

[1:17] RVL: Hi everyone. My name is Robyn Volcy-Lee and I am the treasurer for the Students of Color for Public Health.

[1:24] BA: Hi everyone. My name is Bola Adams and I serve as the President for the Students of Color for Public Health.

[1:30] CB: Hi, my name is Cheyenne Bailey and I serve as the vice-president.

[1:34] MC: Hello everyone. My name is Mylinn Clément. I am the event coordinator for the students of color for public health.

[1:40] RVL: Our organization serves as a community and a space for students of color who are at the School of Public Health at BU. Um, we serve as an opportunity for students of color to get to know one another, um, to offer each other support, um, [and] to offer each other resources as well.

[2:00] CB: Yeah, and I think we also serve to do, uh, community engagement efforts and to bridge that, uh, oftentimes that gap between institutions that exist in these spaces, um, and the people that, you know, uh, have been living here, et cetera. And so doing that work, which has been a little hard considering everything that's going on.

[2:23] Ki: Do you feel like maybe there are some restrictions towards things that you feel might be more important for students of color, but right now, the way that it's set up, maybe they preferentially prefer other types of events or organizations or things like that? Could you expand a little bit more on how it's currently affecting you?

[2:41] BA: I just feel like being an affinity group on campus, there are so many things we do. And I've said this before, and I always say this to say, we be not- We being members of the executive board, we have to serve as like [a] psychologist, counselor, social worker, admissions person. And it's a lot, it's not to say we do not enjoy doing this. We're students and we're also student leaders. So just sometimes having, having, having same- we'll have, we have more administrative support. I think that would be super helpful. And going back to finances that would help a huge deal [with] the amount of work that we do. And then going back to what Robyn said that would help us with publicity- that would help us also gain in, or like have attraction of more students to say, if they're reaching out, if you're coming to this event, we have this, we have that, we have, we have different opportunities for you to be involved that doesn't necessarily have to stress you or require so much of you because we want you in our safe space as students of color.

[3:45] Kh: Awesome. And Dennis, I don't know if you're familiar with, um, application process or the admission process, but would you say that from your experience and from the students that you've seen, and that you've worked with that, you know, the application process or that the admission is, you know, is accessible to students of color?

[4:06] DJ: I remember I applied to all- two to six, um, graduate schools for PhD programs. And I don't think, I don't remember paying a fee for any of those, um, because I, they provided diversity waivers at that time, which was really helpful for me, because I think at that time it was like a, almost a hundred dollars per application.

[4:29] Kh: Um, and I know that you just mentioned how you had like fee waivers and I think that's really great. And I think a lot of programs should implement that because I remember when I was applying to grad school with each application, it was like a hundred dollars. And at that point I was like, "Oh my God, like, I don't know how I'm going to pay for it." You know? So it was very stressful because I had to not only take my classes and apply to grad school, but also work so I could, you know, afford to send those applications. So would you say there are other things that maybe schools or programs can do in order to make the application process more accessible to students? For example, for example, for me, I had to take the GRE, which is like a

test that is expensive. Sometimes you have to take it more than once. So, you know, would you say there are things that can be done to make the, the whole process easier and more accessible to students?

[5:22] DJ: In terms of the, um, graduate school admissions committee, um, so going to the question on the holistic assessment, you know, the GRE is just one part of the application. So I don't think the GRE should have the most weight, um, in an application.

[5:47] Ki: So, I mean, in that sense, then you would basically be saying that the GRE would be a supplement to the entire application, right? It would just be another part of it. Luckily you're right. BU is gearing away towards the GRE requirements which is nice. And they also do have a diversity waiver for applications for the PhD program. I myself used it. Um, but in terms of the holistic assessments, I think what's kind of got people pulled two different ways is the fact that the standardization, or if you standardize the application process, there's a lot of space where people who don't fit into that box are kind of being excluded from being considered as a, as a meaningful applicant, right. And they're not being called in for interviews. On the other hand, you have a holistic process where it's very subjective and there have been studies and papers published that have recently shown that that in itself can be somewhat biasing because the people who are reviewing the applications would perhaps look for students who have similar characteristics or likeness to themselves in a scientific way. Um, so I mean, is there a middle ground here? Do you think it should be somewhat standardized, somewhat holistic?

[7:04] RVL: We know that the GRE is just a means of testing, not necessarily how smart you are, but how well you can take a test, unfortunately. And a lot of times people tend to pay for these opera- like pay to take courses on how to take this test and students of color may not have that opportunity. So they're luck- they're not in the same boat as maybe their white counterparts. So they may not be able to, you know, get into a program with a high GRE score because they weren't able to pay for the GRE cour- the GRE prep course. And that itself leads to different, like, disparities in like enrollment. But I do think that I- especially like BU School of Public Health, it's coming along in a lot of different universities, but BU School of Public Health noted that that was something that was limiting their student of color, like, admissions is this GRE requirement. And I think that's important is like understanding that this is a hindrance and this is going to block your ability to have a diverse population of public health professionals. So dropping it, I think [it] was the best thing that they could have done.

[8:23] CB: Yeah. I think I can really only speak for myself, but, um, in just talk- just like thinking about it and talking to people, um, it seems like our, um, like barriers to applying or like second guessing ourselves when we were applying really had to do with, like, institutions and their lack of commitment to actually doing what they say about diversity, equity, inclusion, but, you know, I don't even like "inclusion". Um, but you know, like that, um, I think it's really on institutions themselves to do that work, but personally I had to really sit down and think like, why shouldn't I be able to apply to be at School of Public Health? Like what counts as having

public health experience, right? And what stories have I garnered from these experiences that might've been, not these extensive internships at the top hospital or something like that, that other folks might've had because they had the strings or the connections and, you know, I was just starting out from literal scratch.

[9:36] I just, I like talked to my friend who was in a master's program at the time. He was like, "what do you mean you don't have any public health experience you've done this, this and that, like this counts as public health experience". Like, "why are you second guessing yourself and basing your experience off of what is socially deemed acceptable or, like, common of what experience and et cetera looks like," right? And so here I am comparing myself, somebody who has a completely different story than a lot of people that I've been in school with, um, to then be like, "wow, I'm not measuring up. So I'm just unqualified." And it's funny too, because I think BU has like, was one of the schools that don't have those, like, lengthy requirements of like, you need three to five years of experience in this, like their's was really open. Um, and every other school that I looked at and that I wanted and then gave, like, "you need to have five years of experience," like you've already blocked folks out who may be, have just gotten to it based on, um, an event in their life that happened or learning about it through college and never hearing about it from anybody else. They might've not known any doctors or had family that [had] done public health and stuff like that. And so already you've created that barrier for them. Um, so I think it's really a lot of times based just mostly on the institutions and actually, um, getting rid of the systems, um, such as work experience, um, like prior work experience and all of that [that] stop people from applying. Um, and also just like dismantling white supremacy culture from our, like, internal thoughts of, like, why am I not good enough? Or maybe I'm not capable enough. And that whole like imposter syndrome thing before we even get started.

[11:36] Kh: Something that you said really resonates with me, um, I'm an international student and I grew up, um, my whole life in Morocco and I really knew that I wanted to go to the US because it was like, um, it just seemed like the best opportunity for me. And I really wanted to go to college, but then at the same time, my parents don't speak English. My parents did not go to college in the US so I did not have all of those resources or knowledge or people around me that could just answer questions or then went through that process. However, I had like, this one mentor that used to work at this like English center, and that was, like, super helpful and super encouraging. And she believed in me and she was like, "here's what you should do. Here's what you should think about". So can you maybe like, tell us a little bit more about, did you have that one person maybe that encouraged you or someone that guided you and what kind of advice would you give to faculty members or like students that maybe are in the same kind of situation?

[12:36] DJ: Yeah, that was exactly my case where I had this one mentor. I was, you know, just following what everyone else did. And I think, um, at one point I even enlisted in the military because, um, you know, I didn't know how I would pay for college. I knew I wanted to go. Um, but you know, I had good grades and I ended up being the valedictorian of my high school. And I had this one mentor, who is actually from my church who, um, told me about, you know, um,

this, about Morehouse College and that, you know, I, I could likely get a scholarship to go to college. And so that kind of changed my whole plans. He kind of showed me what my options were and kind of gave me confidence that, you know, I could get accepted to a four-year university or four-year college or university.

[13:33] Ki: I think we can all say that we are where we are, because at least one person took an interest in us, right? We, we wouldn't have been here unless we had somebody telling us about something or pushing us in this direction. And I truly do just want to give credit where credit is due.

[13:51] MC: Talking about students of color, feeling like they have to work 10 times harder, we have to definitely of course look at the environment in which, uh, is perpetuating certain levels of discrimination or prejudice within their own institution. And so I think even before looking at enrollment, uh, and it is important to think about, especially in my case, I looked and I physically went from Maryland to Boston to, uh, survey the school. And it- like my decision to come to, um, Boston was based on my experience there before I even, um, [was] enrolled within the school. And sometimes you would get, or I would get, um, as a person of color, uh, microaggressions. And this could, uh, basically, uh, mentally I could take that information with me throughout my, uh, matriculation within the program in which I have personally done. And so I think when Boston University is looking at, um, making an inclusive environment for students who are looking at the school, it is important that they have a great time and a positive time in creating a positive environment that will help students make this decision to go to their school or to stay at their school. Because at the end of the day, if they are looking to have all these graduates, especially graduates of color, it would be important to try to, uh, have great re- uh, retention and make a great experience, a great learning experience for us.

[15:31] BA: I do agree to what, um, Mylinn, Robyn, and Cheyenne said. I think for me it stems more so, more from like a financial basis to say applying to grad school, just like you had mentioned, it's expensive! I remember for me, I had to pick up, like, extra shifts to save, like, thousands of dollars just so I could apply for grad school. And then also what Cheyenne said, while trying to apply, I'm like, "Oh my goodness. I don't think I fit the same requirements. I don't think I'm going to get in". But then I had to also do, like, additional research to see, "okay, if I want to apply to this school, how many students of color do they even have there". And it's not just about having students of color. Do I feel like I will be represented being there? Cause there's one thing to bring students of color in, to admit Black and Brown students, but then it's- do they feel safe? Do they have the environments where they feel like their opinions are respected? Their views are listened to?

[16:30] Kh: So, Dennis, I know we talked a little bit about, you know, the obstacles that some students can face, whether it's like financial obstacles or just not having the right mentors around you. Who do you think needs to be involved in those reforms that need to take place? For instance, we talked about how important and how helpful those waivers were, right?

[16:55] DJ: Yeah, that's, that's a good question. Um, I personally hadn't thought too much about it since I, you know, applied to graduate school. I don't know who made the decision to provide fee waivers, but that was an excellent decision. So I think the admissions committee, uh, needs to be involved and I think they need to hear from URMs, um, currently in the program or past- who were in the program. And I would say even people like me, if I think about, now my experience in, um, applying to graduate school, um, what are some of the challenges? Which we said is the financial challenge and also the visibility or understanding the process, um, those other challenges. So I think if, uh, if the committees have that information on, like, where to go and how to recruit, um, effective practices to recruit students, then I think that would make, uh, uh, a big difference.

[17:59] Ki: You know, those are excellent points. I really do think it needs to come from more than one person, more than one department. It's a community effort, I think, to get academia to represent the community that it's working for. Right. And so bringing it back full circle, I mean, you said, I don't even know how these people can do it. How can you work and do this and do that all the time?

[18:21] DJ: Yeah so I, I look at my sister as like, uh, I have a twin sister in Mississippi and so, um, she had a child when she was 18. And so, she went to full- she got a nursing degree, uh, while she was taking care of a kid and working a full-time job. And so I always look at her as like a superhero of someone who, who was able to do that. And so I still don't know how she did it, you know, and I always say that that was motivation for me because she could do those, um, three things at once: being a mom, uh, going to school and working. And my only job was to be a student, you know, and get good grades in college. And so, yeah, she's kind of my hero for that. I haven't told her that.

[19:13] Kh: I love that you mentioned that, Dennis, and I feel like a lot of mentors sometimes don't realize that people have different circumstances, that they have a lot of things going on at home or that they have like, you know, a family member they need to take care of. And that maybe can explain why, for example, they're always late [by] five minutes or, um, they cannot make it to one class. So having that experience with your sister, you know, and other people that, you know, maybe that have families and are doing their PhDs, what kind of, what did that teach you? Or like, what kind of advice would you give to mentors that may have students that are in the same situation?

[19:49] DJ: You know, when I was a student, I didn't think about other people's situations, but now as, I guess, as a mentor, I try not to, um, assume that people know how this linear, um, path or, you know that everything just falls into place the way I think it would as, as like a student or as a postdoc, you know? I try not to dictate people's schedules, um, because I don't know and I don't ask what obligations they have. And so I try to be more understanding. I mean, I do expect, you know, to have a work product, for them to be productive, but whatever flexibility that they need, um, I try to give them that space.

[20:37] Ki: There's more of a realistic obstacle sometimes when individuals don't have the same financial abilities as others. And some of that has to do with working while going to school. So some of the effects of that can be, uh, grades slip a little bit, right? You don't have the same amount of time to study. So it looks, on paper, like you're not as good of a student, but maybe it's just that you're doing so many things. Uh, paying for your families, sending money abroad, uh, paying for surgeries, things like this. Resources can be limited depending on the institution that you're attending, depending on the, um, opportunities that were presented to you. And then of course this dissemination of information where you can find that there are a few waivers, like who's telling you this information? So I guess going along with the theme of "work to live versus live to work", um how can we, how can we get more people of color going to graduate school, realistically? Um, I've heard a gradient of arguments saying, "start at the preschool level, go to elementary schools and tell the students about it". I've heard people say, "Oh, we need to sit in cafeterias and scout like the army does". Um, what are some ideas? What do you think? How, how, how can we improve the diversity at the graduate level?

[21:56] Kh: Yeah. So I think one thing that, I think it's interesting that you bring this up because, um, we just had a conversation about this with one of the professors. And she told me about how this one student was always late to class- five minutes or seven minutes or 10 minutes. And for the first few weeks, and the first few months, she just thought he was not as serious. You know, he was just not a serious student, always late, not on time. But then after she talked to him during office hours, she realized, like, it was always late because he had a shift and he was working and there was no way for him to not take that shift. He needed that shift because he was using that money to pay for his tuition. So I feel like as professors, as grad students, or as, you know, staff or administration, it's always important to not always assume the worst of someone. And also maybe think maybe there's another reason, you know, let me ask the student, let me see how I can best assist them. Um, and not just assume that they're lazy or they're not doing the job, you know, I think that's one thing that is really important to keep in mind.

[23:05] RVL: I definitely agree with the whole, we need to start at preschool because we need to, like, we need to start early with these students of color. We need to let them know that 1) you are worthy and you are important enough to apply to grad school. Like your career doesn't have to stop after high school. Doesn't have to stop after undergrad. Doesn't have to stop after, like, you can go into a postdoc, you can do anything that you want. And we don't tell students that! Um, that's one thing that I think needs to happen is like letting these students know that these opportunities are there for them. I can only speak for public health school because I'm in public health school, of course, but we see such radical disparities in health, like, and they're racialized as well. And the only way that we can fix these radical disparities is if we have practitioners of color and like, we're- we don't have that because they're not in these programs. And it's like, how do we get these people into programs? We have to acknowledge that there are these huge barriers that are preventing them from getting into our programs. And like, that's- a lot of them tend to be

financial. So getting rid of these financial barriers, like I said, like getting rid of, um, application fees, making tuition more affordable. I think those are things that definitely need to be done.

[24:19] CB: And I think oftentimes what people of color, like a lot of times we have those stories, right? And I feel like sometimes, like I'm just like selling myself at that point with just, like, selling the traumas and the, you know, all the, the inequities that I've experienced over my life time, like, and just being like, "this is why I should be seen as the same as a white person with experience". Um, and I hate that. Um, I hate that I have to do that. And I also think about it daily, of the fact that we'll probably have to keep doing that because a lot of these systems are not set up for people like me.

[24:58] MC: I believe that institutions should actively recruit from colleges and universities of color. Um, in my case, uh, historically black colleges and universities, which are important in, like, the foundation of black education. Uh, if a student hears about a school or is educated in their learning and actively have been participating in, however they need it for their own community and have all the necessary requirements to go to grad school, they should be able to go to grad school or professional school, no matter what. So having these partnerships would definitely knock down these barriers. And they, I believe that institutions such as BU need to take down, knock down anything that is preventing students of color to not be able to have these opportunities, um, that their peers have. It would just be, uh, just a wonderful thing to see young students encouraged to do whatever they feel like they can do and not have those barriers in front of them. Students are literally looking at a wall like a big fat gray wall, um, that is preventing them to be able to go to the other side of where their, their dreams are of their careers. Anything that they can imagine, their wildest desires, but there is no ladder at this moment for a lot of people. There's no elevator, there's no escalator. Students are literally climbing, climbing with their hands or whatever tools that they have. And they have to do it alone.

[26:38] BA: Because for me, in my head, if I see you're not putting that out there, if it's into the system to say, it's, it's intentional. You're doing that on purpose because you think people would, in quotes, "misuse this opportunity" of, like, asking for waivers. Well, like I'm poor, I'm broke! I had to work double shifts just so I could pay for grad school. Not everyone is offered that same opportunity. So if we're asking for inclusivity, whatever that means to the administration, you need to be inclusive in the way you admitted students. And in the way students that are being admitted, in the way they feel they are presented. But another thing is just, um, having that conversation to say, let's not wait until we have like a unifying event in quotes to happen. Let's not talk about how black lives matter or let's not talk about how brown lives matter- that needs to be an active discussion going on within your departments, going on within your school. It doesn't have to take for someone to get shot for you to realize, "Oh, this affects black and Brown students in my school."

[27:39] You know, it should not have to be my job to have to tell you, "Oh, I'm sorry about all of the things you had to face in school". So the school also has, they have to start actively having



these conversations and also finding ways to walk towards it, to where you're not putting all of that burden on students of color to come each time and be on your planning or recounting traumatizing events from," Oh, I don't have, I don't feel represented because I've only had one black one black professor in my entire two years". We should not have to be doing that. You know, retraumatizing and having people tell their stories all over again. Like that should be, that should be clear. We do not have to point that out to you. So like being active and being intentional in the way they want things to change. I think that needs to be a priority for BU and for other schools. I'm not sure many people are listening, but you need to go out there. You need to support your Black and Brown students and it's not until they tell you, this is an issue- you should be able to tell this is an issue, and you should also constantly use your privilege to ask those questions. Oh in my class I only see two Black and Brown students, what's going on within the admission committee. The Black student doesn't have to come to you to say, "I don't feel represented". They see it. So you should be able to see it as well. So BU let's, let's do something.

[28:55] Kh: What kind of advice would you have for the administration in the future when they're, you know, uh, connecting with student orgs, um, how can they best support you and the work that you do?

[29:07] RVL: I would say, um, I think that the administration could help in the sense of making our organization a little bit more well known to other students of color. And I think that, you know, if there were a way to create like a website for us or an, um- while I know that there are websites that describe the organization online, but it's hard to navigate and it's not always easy for students to, like, it's not always easy for students to know that there's like, there's these organizations like ours available. So just, I guess, um, making sure that we can, the administration plays a role in, I guess, making sure that we're known.

[29:53] MC: To hop on what Robyn says, I really do feel, like, that it is important to have these, again, like these partnerships with the faculty and the, um, administration. So that students feel comfortable coming to us and feel that this can be like a solid foundation of what, like, the heart of BU could look like. Um, that people of color can be at the center or can be in, like, higher positions or can be successful within the programs. I think as a person of color, it's sometimes hard to find, like, a way between, like, being able to approach the faculty about, like, new opportunities, probably choices that I can make with my career. And so I think having those conversations between people of color and the faculty, would help, um, and, and this partnership.

[30:51] Kh: Thank you so much for being here. I think this was such a great conversation and you know, I think a lot of great points were brought up and yeah, we really appreciate it.

MC: Thank you for having us.

DJ: Thank you.

[outro plays]