

Transcription for

THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 17: THE PANDEMIC'S HUMAN TOLL AT CUNY

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MICHAEL YARBROUGH

PAULA-CAMILA CACERES

PAUL FAIN

MARJORIE VALBRUN

33:15

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PAUL FAIN: Welcome to The Key with IHE. I'm Paul Fain, a news editor at Inside Higher Ed, and the host. And today I'm fortunate to be joined by my colleague Marjorie Valbrun. Hello, Marjorie.

MARJORIE VALBRUN: Thanks, Paul.

PAUL FAIN: You have written about the human toll of the pandemic on faculty members and beyond. And I know early in this you came across Professor Michael Yarbrough. Can you tell me how you first heard his story?

MARJORIE VALBRUN: You know, I was hearing stories about how CUNY was losing professors like overnight, like they were just losing them by the day. And I started looking into that. So I just started searching online and I ran across his article he wrote in Daily News in April. And the article was headlines: What CUNY teaches us about the coronavirus and vice versa. And I read it, and it was so interesting that I just got in touch with him and I just said I have to talk to this guy, and that's how I started talking with him, and he became a part of my story.

PAUL FAIN: Well, you know, I remember that piece as well. It's pretty devastating. It talks about how many students in his class have been impacted by the virus. Can you just briefly talk about what happened to him and his class in this very difficult spring?

MARJORIE VALBRUN: Well, his class is, you know, seniors and they all have to do this research project that's part of, you know, their Law and Society program. It's a bachelor's program. And so they were going to do individual projects, but as the pandemic bore down on New York, and they went to remote, he asked them would it make more sense, and if they wanted to, just do a class project together. And they loved the idea, and they decided to drop all their other projects and to do a project on the pandemic and how it was affecting students, their families, individually, and their communities. And that's what it went about doing.

PAUL FAIN: And we know that the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on lower income Black, Latino families. CUNY obviously serves those populations quite well. Can you just give us a sense of how bad it was for those student, and for Professor Yarbrough and his colleagues?

MARJORIE VALBRUN: Well, he was telling me, and some of the students, I mean, a lot them had jobs on campus. They instantly lost their jobs. Their parents lost jobs. A lot of them come from immigrant families where the parents or relatives work in hospitals. So a lot of them come from families where the relatives were essential workers. And so lots of nurses, lots of nurses... And so those people were getting sick.

So, you know, the university ended up losing, well, at least as of, it was two months ago, it could be higher now. It was 38 people, and a good number of them were faculty, but a good number were also staff, essential workers, you know, like the janitorial staff, the cleaning staff, and also some students. You know, it was much more the professor side, but there were still a number of students who died, and then many of them who got sick and recovered.

PAUL FAIN: You know, the piece, what really just hit me in the face in mid-April, you know, six students in his class, which is 25 percent of his 25 students at the time, mid-April, had COVID-19. 16 students reported more than 30 total family members testing positive, and six students were mourning the loss of a family member or a close family friend. So just to bring that home, we're not talking second- or thirdhand here, but firsthand, just experiencing the pandemic like few places in the country have. So you came across one of his star students, Paula-Camila.

MARJORIE VALBRUN: I got to know them through the professor. I asked him if I could interview a student who would be comfortable talking about their experience. And he suggested Paula-Camila.

That's how we got to talking. And Paula-Camila was also the research coordinator for the class, so they were able to, you know, have a better sense of what the whole class was going through.

PAUL FAIN: Well, that probably gives us enough to get into this. Anything listeners should know before we turn it over to Professor Yarbrough and Paula-Camila?

MARJORIE VALBRUN: You know, beyond just the illness and the loss of jobs, there were students who were trying to finish school who all of a sudden found themselves incapable of paying for housing. There was people who were experiencing food insecurity. There were people who were thinking, Oh my God, my parent is sick, but also now I may be evicted. So there were just an array of things that were happening all at once. And what was most impressive to me was just how dedicated and motivated they seemed, you know, that despite all of this, that they were still trying to keep their eyes on finishing school, getting through the semester, and, you know, getting through the pandemic.

PAUL FAIN: All right, Marjorie. Been good seeing you, hope to see you in person soon. And thanks for doing this.

MARJORIE VALBRUN: You too. Thanks. Bye-bye.

MARJORIE VALBRUN: Hi, I'm here with Michael Yarbrough and Paula-Camila Caceres, and we're talking about the year at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, which is part of CUNY, the CUNY system in New York. And we're talking about the kind of year they had. As most people know, New York City was the hardest hit, at least initially. It was the epicenter of the pandemic. And like other higher ed institutions around the country, John Jay had to really hustle to go fully online, and still, you know, teach students while faculty, staff, and students were all in the midst of experiencing this pandemic. And so I wrote about it last month and I thought it would be interesting to have our two guests to talk about their experiences. And we'd just live to hear more about it. So why don't you just tell us a little bit about how it was. Maybe start with you, Michael...

MICHAEL YARBROUGH: Okay. It's hard to know where to start. It was such a big and overwhelming experience that it's hard to know. I'll say that I, you know, had the approaching pandemic kind of in the

corner of my eye from near the beginning of the semester, as we started to see the news coming out of first China and then Italy. And I remember talking about it in the class that we're here to talk about and how we might need to adjust our plans as the epidemic approached.

This particular course that I was teaching is the senior research capstone in the Law and Society major at John Jay. And this major is a social science major that studies how law works in the real world, using tools from across the social sciences. And this particular class is one in which students were doing individual research projects that sort of capped their academic journey before they graduated this spring. In March, as we started to think about how to adjust to the approaching pandemic, the students were sort of beginning their individual projects. And we talked in class about how to continue that as we had to transition potentially into quarantine for some, at that point, unknown length of time. And so that was the initial plan.

But then once New York finally shut down its schools, including CUNY, and we were living under conditions of quarantine, and then pretty rapidly the conditions of the actual pandemic, even those plans that we had made to kind of shift the individual research projects into an online supervision format, seemed like they weren't going to be really feasible given the realities of the pandemic. And at the same time, the pandemic itself was so enormous and overwhelming, and was impacting students often in multiple ways simultaneously, from health concerns, to mental health concerns, to employment, and, of course, changes in their education.

But I also felt like, what higher learning is for is for wrestling for events exactly like this that impact on the conditions of human existence. So not only did we have to shift our focus for logistical reasons in the spring, but also it seemed to me the right thing to do to enrich students' capacity to take something out of this overwhelming experience that they could learn from. And so I proposed to the class, and they enthusiastically decided to switch to a group research project on how the crisis was affecting them and their loved ones.

And so we shifted to that in a way that involved doing kind of group diaries, each, a group chat in which individuals would share diaries of their experiences as the days and weeks unfolded, and then that also was backed by interviews that they did with people in their lives, and who were having various experiences. For example, health care workers or students, and so forth...

So it was a very overwhelming experience. It was very stressful and it was very scary at many times, both personally and for many of us in the class. At the same time, I was ultimately really glad with the

decisions we made to shift our focus of the class, because it allowed us to come together, I think, as a community as we were experiencing this and offer each other support. The bright spot of my spring was definitely this class.

MARJORIE VALBRUN: And you said that the results were really powerful, even more than you expected. And this was all happening in the midst of students getting sick, family members getting sick themselves, correct?

MICHAEL YARBROUGH: That's right, that's right. Pretty quickly on after things shut down, we were starting to adjust to being at home, and within a week or two, people started to get sick. And in fact right now, Paula and few other students are helping us kind of collate some of the data from these students' diaries that I mentioned in the spring. And one of the ways that they're presenting that is the form of a timeline, because you see very powerfully in students' diaries that about a week after the quarantine started, after we actually started staying at home, lots of people started reporting symptoms, positive test results, either for themselves and their family. And it was often a lot of people simultaneously.

MARJORIE VALBRUN: Yeah. And Paula-Camila, you were going through this as well as you were leading the research project, right?

PAULA-CAMILA CACERES: Yeah, it was, like Professor Yarbrough said, it was an incredibly overwhelming experience. But, you know, for me, as a student, but also as sort of like coordinating all of the research, it was incredibly difficult because I had to not only balance everything that I had personally going on, because my family also got sick very early on in our quarantine that was eventually forced by New York state. But it was also like how do I hold space for people and for students, but also try to hold that for me, but also still try to...the ultimate goal of mine was to graduate. And so that became incredibly complicated and too nuanced to even just think that it was possible, but here I am, you know.

MARJORIE VALBRUN: How did you navigate it? I mean, in retrospect, are you like surprised, like, oh my God, I did this stuff... I got through it? Or were you just so focused on getting through it that you didn't think about all the things that were going on all at once?

PAULA-CAMILA CACERES: I think it was a bit of both, because I had to remain sane, mostly just because like my John Jay experience has been an absolute beautiful one and I was always loved by studies, so

that kept be sort of centered because I knew what was going to happen. I knew what was I was already studying and some problems of my senior year spring semester. I knew how things were going to run. But the overwhelming part was sort of adjusting to me being sick, my family members being sick, and then also sort of also taking on this other role of being the coordinator for an entire group of students, who I also am a student. And I'm like... I stepped into basically a role of like a TA within my seconds, and I had to sort of just go with it.

MARJORIE VALBRUN: And didn't you lead one class?

PAULA-CAMILA CACERES: Yeah, I did. I got the opportunity to teach a class, which was actually really rewarding for me. I actually want to become a professor, so, you know, I thought that...I thought and Professor Yarbrough thought that it would be pretty smart to see, you know, to hear from me personally like my experience with the research and other research that I've done, because I had mentioned to you, Marjorie, that I had also been part of a research lab during my spring semester. So a lot of that, I lot of what I had already learned and the foundations for social science research had been applied into my capstone, and then that like sort of helped me guide other students, even though I was also still trying to guide myself.

MARJORIE VALBRUN: Yeah... Was there a sense.... As an outsider looking in, I've got the sense, not just at John Jay, but throughout the CUNY system--I talked with others--there was a sense, we're all in this together. And, you know, it's scary, it's frightening, it's maddening, but we're going to help each other through this.

MICHAEL YARBROUGH: I mean, I think that's right for a lot of CUNY faculty and staff and students. I think for me it became clear very quickly that because New York was the epicenter and because CUNY is primarily a working class institution, that we were going to be affected very hard. And one of the way I experienced this was in the numbers of students in the class reporting positive COVID tests and symptoms, and so forth. And also the number of colleagues I knew who were sick at John Jay and at other CUNY campuses.

And I have to say in the early weeks of this, it wasn't clear to me that everyone in the management of CUNY really was prepared for those realities. There was a lot of preparation for moving online, but there wasn't as much attention paid to the question of what happens, for example, when faculty start getting sick, or if large numbers of students getting sick, beyond, you know, what would sort of be typical in a class. I honestly can't say in the early weeks that I really felt like we were all in this together if we

included the management level. As time as gone on, I felt a little better about that, that I felt that management's paid a little more attention to the humanity of CUNY students and faculty and staff. At the same time, the budget impact of this whole situation has been managed by CUNY management in a way that's led to the layoffs of over 2000 of our adjunct colleagues. And so, in that very material sense, it's hard to say we're all in this together when, you know, many of my colleagues have had their health insurance stripped by them, by, you know, some of our leaders.

MARJORIE VALBRUN: Yeah, and in the midst of a pandemic at that...

MICHAEL YARBROUGH: Yeah....

MARJORIE VALBRUN: You have said that at one point that you found yourself thinking that the numbers of deaths at CUNY and some of the affiliates are harbingers maybe of the death of the system as a whole, of CUNY itself. And if you didn't move to defend it now as values, that a lot could be lost. And it seems that, you know, I guess I should say that CUNY, at least so far, had the highest number of deaths of any other college system in the country. That may change now that, you know, other states are now, you know, in the midst of the pandemic. And they're now epicenters, I guess. Do you think that after experiencing all those deaths that that maybe kind of opened administrators eyes to some of these issues or that kind of centered what needs to be done in terms of saving CUNY?

MICHAEL YARBROUGH: You know, it's hard for me to know exactly how our management are making decisions and what's shaping those decisions. I do imagine that they're in a very tough situation. I can't... This is not a moment when I would want to be a college administrator. There are lots of difficult decisions they have to make right now. And a lot of different considerations they have to balance...

My sense of how things kind of unfolded at CUNY is not so much that the deaths in themselves woke up, you know, CUNY management, but it was more that there was a lot of criticism and critique of their initial response from faculty and students, that then led to a little bit of a shift in tone from them around this. So, for example, CUNY has now instituted an In Memoriam page where they're actually recording names and some of the biographies of a lot of the CUNY affiliates who have passed away. And it took a while before that happened. So that's a small shift that has happened, I think, in response to some of this criticism. The ultimate question, of course, about, you know, how many people are going to be laid off, how many classes are going to be offered to students, these very material questions, we'll see if there's been a change of heart on those questions as the fall continues to unfold.

MARJORIE VALBRUN: Yeah. And you also noted, and this is very true, that the entire sector is being transformed by the pandemic, a lot of it in negative ways. There's these budget problems that are now kind of an excuse to do more reductions like you just said with the layoffs. I wonder if you might have some advice, or not even advice, some thoughts about other systems that are now going through what you already went through.

MICHAEL YARBROUGH: You know, I think what's really important, the most important thing at this moment in my view is to defend the value of what we do at places like CUNY and other public systems that serve the true public. We're faced with a real dilemma right now. We're having to kind of immediately respond to the immediate crisis, how do we teach our classes online in the fall, and you know, so on and so forth. But then there's these bigger picture questions about the health of the sector moving forward. And those are being decided at the same time, right, as we speak.

In my view, you know, the thoughts I have about it are not really even only of members of the sector, but the broader American public. When I said the deaths at CUNY are sort of harbinger of the potential death of the system as a whole, what I mean by that is that the impact of COVID on systems like CUNY, on systems like the Cal State system in California, there's a reason they have their biggest impact on those kinds of systems, and it's because those are the systems that are embedded in the true public. And so that means that in this moment, we actually need to be increasing our investment in places like CUNY. It's exactly things like COVID that show us how much CUNY matters, because it's a respite from a lot of difficulties in the outside world for our students, but it's also a place where our students experiences get turned into the knowledge that can help us solve problems like COVID. I mean, that's part of what we were trying to do in the class.

MARJORIE VALBRUN: Yeah, yeah... Paula-Camila, you're one of the students who have had this kind of rare experience, especially for seniors, where everything you expected, you know, in your senior year was kind of ripped out from under you. Even things like graduation, right? You guys had virtual graduations. And you were experiencing this unprecedented public health crisis. Did it make you rethink what to do next, because I think you plan to go get your PhD next, right?

PAULA-CAMILA CACERES: Yeah, yeah. That's still the plan that, you know, that's set in stone, at least for now. But yeah, I had a huge change of heart. I went through waves where I was like, it is even worth it, you know? I think collectively as a class we all had to like have very serious conversations about, you know, what's more important. If it's more important to be able to put on the cap and gown and like to walk the processional? Or is it more important to be in family and in community? And that's something

that I've also had to like learn the absolute hard way, because I had to see, my mother, basically, almost slipped like from my finger.

MARJORIE VALBRUN: Um-hum...

PAULA-CAMILA CACERES: And that was incredibly hard. But for sure, being a senior, even in high school, I think, I can imagine, like let alone college, when you're supposed to go through this like ceremonial experience that's all about you and that's all about like the collection of the four years that you just experienced, and now they are like nothing, but they also mean everything, if that makes any sense.

MARJORIE VALBRUN: It does, it does. And in terms of you wanting to go into academia, did it strengthen your resolve?

PAULA-CAMILA CACERES: Yeah. I've always wanted to be a teacher. I didn't know in what extent. I went to college originally wanting to become a lawyer, because I was super-involved with my community, and especially like with immigrant justice rights and things like that. And then I found myself just like working with a lot of my mentors and like other professors on like small little projects here and there. And I realized that academia was something that was like really interesting, because you ask questions like most people were afraid to ask or that people weren't really asking, specifically about things that surrounded multitudes of like my identity. And I thought that that was like incredibly important, especially for me.

This pandemic has really, like I said, shifted by view of like what genuine community and solidarity, and like all of those things mean, because I've dedicated a lot of my time like post graduation, and even like when I was in the spring semester, to like a lot of community organizing, because it's incredibly necessary. That being said, you know, the like dreams and hopes of becoming a professor did waver a little bit. I was like, what can I really do and what is necessarily the safest right now, if that makes any sense? I had a conversation with my mother and my mother said that either working or having like a stable like job or having like a stable sort of other institution, like going to school, those were the only safeties that you have right now. And not even that. So I had to really navigate all of those things, eventually, I decided that, yeah, I will continue to pursue academia. And so I still want to become a professor. It's all too scary right now. That's why I ended up deferring a year, and I'm starting next fall instead of this fall, what's coming up.

MARJORIE VALBRUN: And you're going to get your PhD in, what is it again?

PAULA-CAMILA CACERES: The program itself is under the bracket of sociology and anthropology, but I would be sort of twisting it and making it my own like law and society, bender-pseudo thing, just because, why not? [LAUGH]

MARJORIE VALBRUN: Yeah. How would you... I hope this is a fair question, but these experiences that you had this year, how do you think you will apply that to as you enter a career in academia? Or even apply it to your graduate, your doctoral studies?

PAULA-CAMILA CACERES: I mean, I think a lot of what I plan on being as both a professor and just a person who like educates in like life, is based off a lot of conversations that I've had with various mentors, including Professor Yarbrough, that at the end of the day, there needs to be a lot humanity that needs to be reapplied to academia and to just teaching in general. A lot of that has been stripped and that's why that makes academia super-inaccessible to so many people. And the people to a border-lining extent academic exploits. And, you know, I've had to have those conversations, and a lot of that I've had to learn while navigating this pandemic and still navigating being a student, and then now thinking, oh, I'm one of the few chosen people that gets to be in a program that allows me to get a PhD. And like what does that mean for myself and for the research that I'm doing?

MARJORIE VALBRUN: It seems to me that the pandemic, you know, kind of crystallized a lot of stuff that people do talk about in academia... Inequality, right? Social hierarchy... But did it also... Was there some good that come out of it? I mean, it's changed...

PAULA-CAMILA CACERES: Maybe brutal honesty.

MARJORIE VALBRUN: Yeah.

PAULA-CAMILA CACERES: Maybe, I don't know. I know from various conversations that I've had as of late, well, obviously with this new wave of like everything that's going on with the current Black Lives Matter movement, while also managing, and sort of navigating the pandemic, a lot of people are like putting aside sort of the like correctness of things and just pursuing like brutal honesty, because that's what needed. Like, yes, transparency is a word that's like thrown around through like bureaucracies, but

there's never real transparency unless people really demand it. And I think that's what a lot of people are demanding right now, specifically in relationships, especially like even John Jay handled all of this.

I remember in the very beginning we got some many updates, and it felt like super-overwhelming to like constantly have to hear from President Karol Mason. And then at one point, she just went radio silent, and we didn't hear from her till graduation. And I was like that to me means, that, like, gave up like all of the little warning bells. I was like, there's more going on than I can see. But I can recognize that, whereas like other students are probably like, she's probably sleeping, you know, she's doing other things. And, yes, those are the realities, but to sort of abandon things like that completely, I think that also shines true completely.

MARJORIE VALBRUN: So the brutal honesty, and all these conversations we're having, tough conversations, right? And people are being held accountable. I mean, people keep using the word reckoning, you know, right? We are having this reckoning, and maybe at the end of it, how does that change higher ed overall or collectively?

MICHAEL YARBROUGH: You know, that's a good question. [LAUGH] I hope the answer is good in the long run. I think that, you know, I agree with Paula. This has been a moment that produced a lot of clarity, I think...

MARJORIE VALBRUN: Yeah.

MICHAEL YARBROUGH: ...in certain ways. And at multiple levels... You know, I think from the sort of moral level of each of us as individuals, our clarity about our own missions as, you know, humans in life trying to make good contributions. To very practical clarity about, you know, when it comes to teaching, which is more important? Teaching in a way prevents people from cheating? Or teaching in a way that invites people into learning?

And I also think part of what Paula's speaking to is clarity about the relations of power that we stand in within the academy, and between the academy and the rest of the world. You know, I think one of the reasons that the number of deaths at CUNY became a prominent way of speaking about CUNY and a way we speak about the fall, some of the dangers in the fall to faculty and staff, it is about the potential of extreme harm or death, is because there's a way in which that clarifies all the stakes. Right?

When human life is at stake, then the push and pull of struggling with university management starts to feel less like a push and pull and more about a struggle over fundamental questions. I think a lot of my colleagues at other institutions, I know, are feeling right now like it's become very clear their management doesn't particularly care about them as humans. They care about them as potential laborers to deliver a class that can bring in tuition.

And ultimately I think that is to the good. I think clarity about that can enable collective action that perhaps can lead to transformation within the academy, and beyond. I think similar kinds of stories we're seeing in different sectors in the whole society at large right now.

Ultimately, however, the other thing we learned is that it's not just the truth of what's happening that matters, but that there are power relations that ultimately shape what decisions get made. And so the answer to your question about will this transform higher ed in the long run I think depends on whether this new clarity can lead to rearrangement of power so that those of us who are in the trenches actually doing the work for the university have power over the conditions of the work we do.

MARJORIE VALBRUN: Do you feel that people feel more empowered to do that?

MICHAEL YARBROUGH: I think people feel empowered to fight back right now.

PAULA-CAMILA CACERES: Yes.

MICHAEL YARBROUGH: Not necessarily... Maybe not empowered, but they kind of have no choice too. So that I see happening, and that's very heartening to me. Again, as in the society at large, I feel hopeful in terms of the groups of people coming together to fight. What the ultimate outcomes of those fights will be I think remains to be seen.

MARJORIE VALBRUN: Yeah. I also noticed that it seems to me that college administrators are tripping over themselves to say all the right things. And I wonder how much of it is trying to get ahead of things, and some of it is virtue signaling. But how much they will put behind all those words, and if they really think that students are just going to be okay with just nice words and talking about values.

MICHAEL YARBROUGH: I feel like Paula would have something to say to this question, because I know that they've talked about it before.

MARJORIE VALBRUN: Please do, Paula.

PAULA-CAMILA CACERES: I mean, I would hope that they put more change and start moving around like, I guess, the chess pieces that they know, and that they start sort of redistributing like the power in all of these situations. But the reality of it is, and I speak solely as a student, because I've seen the institutions do some incredibly disheartening things for the sake of tuition and for the sake of enrollment, and for the sake of graduation rates. So I genuinely would not be surprised if they would put the lives of, you know, immigrant working class, black and brown students at risk solely for the sort of fake positivity that I call, that is like "New York, Stand Strong," you know, when there are more important things, like the security, the safety, the mental health, the access to money, the access to food, the access to literally anything right now, because what we're experiencing is not, you know, it's not only COVID, because COVID encompasses so many different things, clearly.

And that's why a lot of our research is focused on CUNY communities. It's not just the students, it's also their families, their loved ones, the people that they care for, the people that provide them care. And so I would genuinely hope that an institution, or CUNY in general, would see students and faculty, and even staff, as humans right now, and would put their interests forward instead of just money and capital.

MICHAEL YARBROUGH: Yeah.

MARJORIE VALBRUN: Well, it sounds like... I'm sorry. Go ahead.

MICHAEL YARBROUGH: Yeah, if I could just add to that. I think that that's right. There was a piece that someone wrote, I think in Boston Review, that talked about a culture of toxic positivity among academic administrators. And I think that was apt. I think that sometimes management has an impulse to focus on the positive. And I think that's understandable and to some extent should be done.

But I think it can erode trust among the faculty, staff, and students when administrators are not

acknowledging in a real way the challenges that people are facing. They're not acknowledging directly that people are dying, that people are, you know, dangerously ill. And I think once trust is eroded, it's going to be hard to get back.

So, you know, I would encourage administrators across the country to figure out ways to err on the side of being more truthful and honest with their constituencies, because they're going to need that trust if they're going to get through this crisis.

MARJORIE VALBRUN: That's great, that's great. I think that's a good note to end on. This was really a great conversation. I'm so grateful to both of you for talking with me.

[MUSIC]

PAUL FAIN: That's it for this episode of The Key. Thanks for listening. I'll be back soon. I'll be talking about the University of Arizona's acquisition of Ashford University, what that means for online education and market shifts we're seeing in higher education, and some of the regulatory questions that loom in the coming months and years. I hope you'll listen. Thanks again.