

"I" Statements Podcast - Episode 12 – Opportunity
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Rachel: This is "I" Statements, a podcast where complexity, vulnerability, and curiosity collide. In this episode we are talking about opportunity. My name is Rachel Sumner, I work for Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project, or IDP, and a word that comes to mind for me when I think about opportunity is "gratitude."

Kyle: My name is Kyle Muña, I am a facilitator for Intergroup Dialogue Project, I'm also a senior studying Human Development with a minor in Education, and a word that comes to mind when I think about opportunity is "progress."

Jazlin: Hello, my name is Jazlin Gomez Garner, I use she/her pronouns and I work with the Intergroup Dialogue Project. A word that comes to mind for me when I think of opportunity is "responsibility." I think about the responsibility that I have to leverage these opportunities or to create opportunity for others where it might not exist. As an educator, too I think - in a classroom or when we're facilitating a dialogue - when a challenge comes up, I think about turning those moments that could be stressful or full of conflict, leveraging those and turning those into learning moments and sources of connection. So on the one side I think of my responsibility as an educator to lean into the challenges and then of my responsibility as someone who has been given so many opportunities to be really active in creating similar opportunities for people around me or to even just make the most of the opportunities that I have been given.

Rachel: I also feel like I'm someone who's had so many opportunities and when I think about, like, the best opportunity that I've ever had I – there are so many to choose from, right, I, I feel so fortunate in that. And the one that feels, like, so special is, I think the opportunity to go to graduate school, just because it was a chance to, like, be curious all the time, like my job was to be curious and explore things that were interesting to me and work with others to do that. And graduate school itself is a great opportunity, but in particular I think it was such a fortuitous and wonderful opportunity to be able to work with my advisor in particular. So he's someone who is an amazing mentor, an amazing researcher, an amazing educator and teacher, and so just being able to collaborate with him and study things that were interesting and get better as a, as a researcher, really develop my skills. Like I learned a lot about good teaching just by watching him and being a TA for him, and also just being supported as a scholar and a person; I think of so many conversations in his office where, you know, I just really felt seen, you know, whether it was the things that I was excited about or nervous about or struggling with. So when I think about opportunity, like, that's definitely, I think, the best opportunity I ever had was being able to work with him when I was doing my PhD here at Cornell. But I want to hear from you two, what's the best opportunity you've ever had?

Kyle: I think one of the best opportunities that I've ever had was right before freshman year at Cornell I attended this program called the Prefreshman Summer Program. Cornell invites a lot

of students from low-income, first generation backgrounds and we spent about seven weeks taking classes, forging relationships with one another, and also getting mentorship from both faculty and other undergraduate peers. And I think the reason why this opportunity was so powerful in my experience is, you know, I didn't necessarily always know that I wanted to go to college and that was something that came pretty late into my high school career and so attending the Prefreshman Summer Program, it was the very first time that I had felt seen by other people in more privileged positions - that being faculty mentors that I met in the College of Human Ecology, which is the college that I'm in - but also other peers who are dealing with the same struggles of finding a sense of belonging on campus, navigating through the difficult academics of Cornell, and also trying to figure out just our place being in marginalized identity groups on campus, I think was, for me, so necessary in feeling like I can actually do well here.

Jazlin: I think the greatest opportunity that I had was definitely being accepted into Cornell and receiving an incredible financial aid package. And for me there are so many things wrapped up in that opportunity, there's this space where people can be really curious, where I didn't have to be just the smart kid because everyone here is the smart kid, so got to be creative and explore interests and, you know, discover my identity and find out who I really was and be challenged by professors in really profound ways. But in a personal way it was also that I got to leave my home. For me this was a huge, huge opportunity; my home life was pretty full of conflict, it was an abusive situation, so being able to have this paid ticket to leave and to just go figure out who I was for a few years outside of that space was the most liberating feeling and really incredible opportunity.

Rachel: A thread that I'm picking up on is how a change in context can provide an opportunity to understand ourselves in different ways. So, Jazlin, I'm really struck by the fact that you said "I didn't have to be the smart kid because everyone was fulfilling that already, I got to be creative," and so I'm thinking about defining ourselves and what that feels like to have an opportunity to do that.

Kyle: Yeah I think what's so interesting about my undergraduate experience is that. So I came in thinking that I was pre-med, wanting to practice medicine and be a pediatrician specifically, and I knew throughout my entire life that I wanted to help people and specifically working with youth was just something that interested me for a really long time, and so medicine was like just the most obvious avenue for that, at least at the time. And what my undergraduate experience has shown me is that opportunities come even when you're not expecting it. And so, I took a freshman writing seminar and so we went out into a local middle school twice a week and I worked one-on-one with a, at the time he was in the 7th grade, and we worked on writing projects the entire semester. At the time I was still pre-med, but this experience just brought me so much joy and I remember after the class I had told my professor, 'I loved this class, I really enjoyed the work that I that I got to do and if, you know, any opportunity like this comes around and you need an extra person to fill a role of some kind that I would be available just because I enjoyed what I did so much.' And then a year later I got an email from the director of the Education minor at Cornell and he basically emailed me saying, 'Hey, your

professor gave me your contact info because she said that you're interested in education. I have a summer opportunity to work with middle school students and in this fun, like, film camp experience.' And that was actually the experience that told me that I wanted to be an educator so it's, it's kind of interesting how opportunities come about and how, you know, you don't always expect them to come and you don't always expect them to impact you the way that they do.

Jazlin: Kyle, you're, you're making me think back to my own freshman year at Cornell, too. In my first semester I had these professors in these classes that really challenged me in ways I didn't think I could be challenged. I think it was kind of a steep learning curve because there was so much information at once, my worldview was being challenged everyday and the connection between education and, I guess, real life was made for the first time. Before college I'd been very good at school but I don't think I was curious, you know, I just, I knew how to get good grades and I could regurgitate information for a test, but I didn't have any kind of passion for understanding history or for writing, it was just 'let me succeed so that I can get the grade' and was very externally motivated. Coming into college it was this opportunity to actually question what was it that I wanted to learn, kind of like what you were saying earlier, Rachel, about being curious and what an opportunity it is to be allowed to be curious and to be encouraged or pushed to be curious, yeah.

Rachel: You both have articulated so clearly these examples of how attending college and the things that you encountered in that context were real opportunities, and I'm sitting here thinking about how this is not an opportunity available to everyone, right. So, I think my question is: how do you see your social identities affecting the opportunities that you do have access to?

Jazlin: I was talking about this with my husband, Bryan, and we, we grew up maybe 10 to 15 minutes away from each other, I was tracked from a very, very early age as like, smart kid, go to the good classes, you know, get the best teachers, get the best resources. Bryan was not put in that category and I think we could trace it back to if there were books in the house and who was, who had time; I was raised by a single mom but had this giant extended family so I never needed to go to preschool, there was always a tia or an abuela and someone was always reading to me. By the time I got into kindergarten I could read and write, I was labeled as good kid (and I just did the air quotes that no one can see) and so throughout my education I went to high-rated public schools, I would stay after school and help the teacher clean the classroom or do things like that and there are so many reasons I think that I was able to connect. All of my teachers growing up were white or Latina and all women, also, until like middle and high school, and so there was a connection there. Religion was a big thing in the place where I grew up, I was Christian, that was the dominant religion so I could stay after class and help clean up and the teacher could turn on the Christian radio station and I knew all the songs and she didn't need to be worried that I would be offended by that or something. So there were so many different identities that I think helped teachers to connect with me or get ahead. By the time I got to high school, right, I was taking all the Advanced Placement classes,

I went to a school that had Advanced Placement classes, that the funding structure there - they got more money if more students enrolled in these AP classes and they paid for our tests and everything, but then they put all the best teachers into the AP classes. So while I was having people with Masters degrees who really cared about education, Bryan, my husband, had a lot of coaches, so the football coach taught math. I remember at the beginning of the semester we'd get this, like, paper with this list of all the teachers who are teaching outside of their subject area or in places where they didn't have credentials and none of them were my teachers, right, but they were his. And a lot of that, I think, is because he went to a lower-income elementary school, there were not people reading to him all the time when he was a little kid, he was labeled a quote unquote bad kid who was always getting in trouble because he was frustrated that he didn't understand what was going on, you know, there was, like, so many differences there. A huge thing, too, is I'm white and was in a predominantly white area, again, mostly white teachers, so there were all these access points that I didn't even see, that I felt like I could go and talk to a teacher if I had a borderline grade and they would bump it up or give me an extra credit opportunity, or that I even felt like I could go talk to a teacher when I know Bryan did not feel that way, you know. So there's so many ways that the opportunities I have were connected to my social identities.

Kyle: Yeah, something that's really sticking with me is: there's opportunities that come with resources but also the opportunities to be seen by teachers and the messages that you receive as a young person, whether it be from your family, institutions like your school, all of those factors are so pervasive in our own educational experiences and, you know, I grew up in a lower-SES community and being Chamorro, which is Pacific Islander from Guam, you know, I never really saw myself as the, just like, the type of person that would end up in college. You know, like I, I did have amazing parents who really pushed me to go to college and they really wanted me to go to college, but they had not gone to college themselves so the path was very unclear. And I think, you know, the messages that I received from my community was that we just don't have enough Pacific Islanders in higher educational spaces and so I would say that the pathway to college is less clear for- it was less clear for me being Pacific Islander in high school. One thing that I think deterred me from applying to certain schools is just that many of them did not have centralized resources for Pacific Islander students. And I think that's so important for me, looking back now at how that's affected my college experience, you know, coming to the university and, and not seeing enough students that look like me, not having people in positions of power - whether it be student-facing offices or my peers, my teachers - you know, not identifying as Pacific Islander for me was a, was a big issue. And so I think that it relates to, you know, my goals as an educator, wanting to occupy the spaces that were missing, I think, in my experience, right, you know, I want to be an educator actually in elementary school because I think that's actually a space where you don't see a lot of men of color and I think there's something to be said about just, like, the messages that we can send to young people by having people in more privileged positions of power, like being a teacher, for example, can be meaningful, I think for young people and being able to see themselves in those roles. And, yeah, I'm going to I'm going to pause there.

Rachel: You were talking about the messages that we send to young people and what I'm hearing so clearly in, in all of our stories is: if you work hard, you can go to college and this is a great opportunity. And I'm wondering how you two see this idea of higher education as an opportunity connecting to the myth of meritocracy in the United States?

Jazlin: I think it's so destructive to the people who do not have the opportunity to go to college or who weren't sent messages that this is a viable option for them. I mentioned my husband earlier and, in the classes down the hall from him, I had university representatives from Florida schools coming into my classes talking about our application process, and he had military recruiters going into his classrooms. And he ended up joining the military because this seemed like the next logical option or the responsible choice to make for his future. And so it, it makes me angry to think that, had very tiny differences early on happened in our educational experience, we could have been flipped, you know what I mean? So I do not think it's, it's all about hard work at all.

Kyle: Yeah and I think this relates so clearly to, you know, college is not for everybody, and I think if whatever you want to do in the world doesn't require a college degree that it is totally okay to do that thing and pursue it in the ways that you see fit. Relating to opportunity, I think what's so important is not necessarily that we push kids in one direction or the other, whether it's go to college or go to trade school, and I know in my experience coming from the high school that I went to they were very pro, like, in-state public schools, they had a lot of options for trade schools, we had a lot of military recruiters on our campus all the time. And I think that what is so important is that we just provide more opportunities for our young people to see themselves in any position that they find interesting, and expanding their vocabulary of what a career can look like, giving young people actual and attainable pathways to do the things that they want to do and be the people that they want to be.

Rachel: Yeah Kyle, I hear you talking about making sure that young people have access to a broad array of options and experiences in order to engage with what feels interesting to them and get a sense of the breadth of opportunities that might be available. I'm sitting here thinking about, you know, okay, once people get to college, let's say that's a path they end up pursuing, it's still not the case that the people who work the hardest do the best. And I'm thinking about an article I read recently about someone who's, you know, working full-time in the midst of this pandemic and also attending college remotely, and thinking about my own mom who had two kids while she was pursuing her undergraduate degree, right; and so either balancing being a parent or balancing full-time work outside of the home with being a full-time student and I think about that, that's so much work, and that's so much more work than I did. So for me there's just an imbalance there of, like, people who can go to college like myself and focus on what they're studying and what they're curious about and then the people who are doing that and also working or parenting, we're having very different experiences of that opportunity.

Jazlin: Rachel, you're having me think, too, about, like, what people see as even the purpose of higher education, right. I know for some students it is a means to an end, but this idea of 'I'm going to college to obtain a degree that will help me make more money' was so different from the experience that I had in college where I could, like, 'let me explore, what do I want to do, what am I interested in?' And I think that's 100% because I knew I had family support and if I didn't have a job at the end of those four years that was going to completely sustain me, I could go live at home or I could, you know, get support from my family. So there's, yeah, what even are we thinking about this opportunity of higher education?

Kyle: Yeah that's, that's a great point that you raise about the purpose of going to college and, for me, like, I know that I want to be an educator and I think part of the reason why I struggled with that for so long is because, you know, if you're pre-med it's sort of easy to know the path to becoming a doctor: it's like, you're going to take the MCAT, you're going to go to med school, and at the end of the tunnel you know there's something there, at least you hope there's something there. But for other fields of interest, like the idea of being a teacher, like yeah, there is a pretty clear path of how to become a teacher, but it seems like there's a larger risk, at least for me, because if I did not succeed or if I do not succeed in actually becoming a teacher then what I fall back on seems a lot less clear. And, and being low-SES, I think for me that's, that's the scary thing about graduating is I'm no longer going to be in this more privileged position of being okay to just explore my curiosities and now I actually have to, to prove to myself and to, I think, my family too, that this experience paid off in some way and it was worth it, which I think is a little scary but we're working through it every day we're chipping at this idea [laughter]

Rachel: We are getting towards the end of our conversation about opportunity and as we approach the end what, what's on your mind? What is, what is going to leave this conversation with you whether it's a question or a thought?

Jazlin: It's funny, coming in I thought I was going to talk only from the perspective of being an educator and what opportunities we have to create spaces of learning or, or create moments of connection with students, especially in our current political moment now, and it was really interesting how through the conversation I got brought so much back to my experience as a learner within a formal education system and what opportunities were afforded there. So I guess I'm still wondering how do we as educators, what do we do with this, you know? I am also curious, this is going way back, Kyle, this is a question for you: you were talking earlier about how you weren't given messages that you should go to college and you didn't see yourself represented in these spaces. I'm curious about, like what shifted, like why it opened up in your imagination that that was a space that you wanted to be in?

Kyle: I think I'm still working on that, to be honest. I think I'm still working on me actually believing that I can succeed in this space and so it is an ongoing process. I will say what changed for me is having mentors in college, and having people that believed in me and

believed that I was capable of doing things and believing that I had good ideas was so impactful.

Rachel: Well you and Jazlin both have shared great ideas during our conversation today on this episode of "I" Statements, made by Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project. Listeners, you have the opportunity to help us come up with future episode topics! If there's something you'd like to hear about, please do send us an email. You can find our contact information and other details about our program on our website, www.idp.cornell.edu. Thanks and bye.

Kyle, singing: We did the thing, woo ooooooo