Lena Carew

CCSF Class of 2011

UC Berkeley, Haas School of Business, Class of 2013

University of Michigan, Rackham Graduate School, Master’s Degree in Digital Education, Class of 2015

***What brought you to CCSF and a little about your high school years?***

Oooh. Ok. Laughs. I came to CCSF in the fall of 2006 and I had basically been let go in a job that I hated (laughs) and since then I have never been let go – and it was one of those moments where it gave me an opportunity to return to school because I was actually on unemployment from that job and it gave me the opportunity to come back as a full time student and see if that would work for me. So, my very first semester I had you for business (General Business 119), and I would say that very first semester getting a 4.0 for my very first time in college or at any point in my academic history was really transformative – because I knew I could do it, and I continued to get 4.0 and to achieve consistently from that point on. I think it would have been hard had I just taken one class to get my feet wet. I think I was ready to dive into an immersive experience.

I was in my mid-20s and I had been working in retail management coffee for a long time. I dropped out of school when I was 19 – right when I lost my mom. I wasn’t committed and I wasn’t going to class (laughs) and wasn’t doing any of it – I was doing it just to fulfill my parents’ expectations. Right out of high school (Los Angeles), I went to San Francisco State, so from LA up to San Francisco. Stayed for a semester, but my mom was really sick. I was there with my sister as well. So, we both flew back to LA (that was spring 2001), to be with my mom – I went to Santa Monica College, the community college there (great school), and I was 19 and watching my mom die. It became easy to look for reasons not to participate and school became this thing not to go to and to get my parents off my back as a 19 year old and also, not to upset my mom. It was a moment that I knew that it wasn’t right for me at the time. Summer of 2001, I made a decision after my mom died, to take time off. I had moved back down to LA at this point – and now in hindsight, what I understand to be transformative in terms of social impact – I was 19 and running my own store -- and I became a manager at Ben and Jerry’s – and that was also really transformative because I understand in hindsight. It was a corporate Ben and Jerry’s and I did a lot of regional training, great staff and great mentorship from the corporate owners who took me under their wing and supported my development. So, I was there for a couple of years and I have to say that it was really great to have such a… responsibility like that at a young age. It was really important. While I was out of school at that point, I was always really productive and always interested in leadership.

In high school, I was an athlete, and I played on three varsity teams (Campbell Hall in Los Angeles/North Hollywood). I went to private school. I went to pretty high-achieving, competitive schools and I never saw myself as high achieving or academic. It was mostly white and mostly Jewish and pretty privileged. There were a lot of benefits to that, meaning that I was college bound because it had a 100% graduation rate. I was never not going to succeed, but I wasn’t necessarily challenged either. I’ve been reflecting on that experience a little bit and my intellectual curiosity and it wasn’t necessarily harnessed – which kept me doing okay, but what kept me in the game was sports. That’s where I excelled, and that’s where I excelled in my leadership as a team captain for varsity teams for school and that meant a lot to me. So, I had to pass my classes in order to play the game (laughs) and be a leader – you have to be a leader on and off the court – so I took that really seriously and I think that.. I liked leading and I knew that I liked leading teams and I like growing and learning from others – and I carried that on in some way – either consciously or subconsciously. But when I came to City College, it was such a different experience. It was good in the sense that I didn’t need someone to hold my hand at that point in my education because I was so ready to come back as a young adult and to really take ownership in my own learning in a way that I had never done before.

***You arrive at CCSF in the fall of 2006 – where did you begin? How did you know where to start?***

I went to campus – I went to the admissions and records department and I got a hard copy of the schedule (laughs) and asked many questions about placement because I knew I wanted to jump back into math and English. I scheduled an appointment to take my placement test which was at 8 in the morning, and I didn’t prepare at all, hadn’t taken a test in a long time, was really tired and had no idea at that time how important that test would be in terms of the length of time you have to spend at City College of San Francisco. So, I placed into remedial English and math, which was really frustrating for me at the time because math was my strongest subject. I took math in college when I went to SF State – and I placed below college level. Now I have done a lot of work around that to resolve that issue, which is really exciting (laughs), but at that time, I just kind of went with the program -- that’s what I was told to do, so I registered for those classes. I did go to a counselor right away once I had my placement test in hand, and I registered for classes with them.

I didn’t have a great experience with new student counseling. It wasn’t very good. They recommended that I take Spanish when I didn’t need a foreign language. It was recommended that I take classes that I didn’t need, and there was very little time to engage in a conversation about what my goals are.

***How did you build community at CCSF?***

It took a long time for me to build community at City College. A really long time. I went for three years before I got plugged in. I spent about three years taking full time and part time classes and went back to work, so I couldn’t take as many classes then – I was very much a commuter student – not engaging with on campus activities, but it got to the point where I knew I wanted to find out more about what was going on, and so I decided to transition out of work and instead look for jobs on campus. So, perhaps it was divine intervention. An opportunity that went out to all students came to my email. The Associated Student Council was hiring for participatory governance coordinator, so I applied, had no idea what it was, didn’t know what shared governance was at the time, and all I really knew was that it required to take leadership and to coordinate student voices on various committees, so I make the pitch that I could do that, so I get the job. All of a sudden, I am working on campus. I made connections with the student trustee at the time, Joshua Neilsen, and him and I became great buddies and almost immediately, I get plugged into political conversations particularly centered around student equity for students of color – which was a very contentious debate at the time as to whether or not there was an achievement gap at City College of San Francisco – which low and behold, there was unfortunately, and continues to be. So, I learned so much in my time as a shared governance coordinator and really got to understand deeply the structure of City College and the ways in which students are (or are not) included in real decision making.

***What were your most memorable times at CCSF?***

As a student, working as a mentor for students supporting students where I got to host workshops for writing personal statement and resumes as well as giving individual guidance around picking classes and picking classes that help get students to their goals. Consulting and talking through the day in and day out challenges of being a student. Students supporting Students – we work mostly with underrepresented students and students of color on campus. That was an opportunity to build my own leadership in supporting the agency of others. One thing that has also been valuable and probably transformative for me is understanding where people are and meeting them where they are with the end result in mind. People come to CCSF with all different backgrounds and have a variety of different challenges – and I think something that I’ve seen over time is students that spend 5 or 6 years at City College really trying to make it and then seeing some of them not make it – and then finding ways for them to make it outside of City College. Send a text and tell them you’re thinking of them. It’s easy for us to tell them to hurry up and take all the classes – but they can’t – they’re supporting a family and they have real life day to day obligations – and most of the time when they’re hanging out in the Student Union all day it is because they don’t have a safe space to be. So, for me, understanding how City College is one of the only places for people to be, excel, grow and challenge, it’s certainly been that place for me and one thing I have become good at is developing the leadership of others.

***How did CCSF shape you into the person you are today?***

The impact that City College has had on me has been a deeply transformative, not just as an academic, but definitely as a conscious person. I have been deeply politicized at City College as a learner, as a leader and I have also challenged what my passions are and those passions have been clearly about serving community. I am deeply invested in the success of City College students in particular. It has broadened and deepened my network – not just at City, but at community based organizations where their constituents go to City. Where they provide services, they do service learning opportunities for internship for students. So, really it has transformed me in the classroom as a student where I’ve gained confidence in myself – I used to have such a hard time just asking questions in class. And now that is not the case (laughs). There’s how to be successful and there’s how to take ownership in agency, and to be successful as City College students it is about non-cognitive skills. The semesters are long and a lot can happen, especially for students who live in high poverty where a lot can happen in that period of time. The quarter system demonstrates to be better because there is less opportunity for trauma. Imagine your brother goes to jail or someone gets shot – or someone gets sick, or someone has just had a baby and so all of these life things, and of course, education is situation in a context where students are experiencing poverty and everyday trauma – not all of them, but some people are in those environment and so people are coming with that to the classroom and to the computer lab. It’s interesting to think about structural opportunities where we can think differently about meeting the students’ needs and just the semester – it’s long and there’s something about an immersive experience where there are less roles and certain weeks where students are pushed to keep up and not slack off and you provide them with support on top of that, and they really do better.

***Tell me about the difference between the curriculum at Berkeley and Michigan***

My experience with instruction at City College was varied and I have had some professors where I continue to have deep and meaningful relationships with – and some professors who clearly are not passionate anymore about their practice. And this is very much so in hindsight, because I have studied education at the master’s level at the University of Michigan. I am really inspired at those professors who take their practice so seriously and continue to innovate on their own – otherwise institutions that don’t support that meaningful work. At City College, I had professors who

It was really all over the place – I have to be honest. I had some professors who were just like… I had to help them track what we were doing. Some weren’t necessarily inspiring, but you got through it. I was so hyper focused on my grades that I just did what I needed to do to get an A. There’s this lofty idea that I would consider myself a lifelong learner and I always want to take something away from a course – that’s why I am there. I’d feel frustrated when a teacher was unprepared, for example. It’s not very clear where you’re headed and how does this link to this and it’s not clear what we are learning.

Compared to Haas, it was very different in that way. Every professor was extremely well prepared and everything was very, very clear. It also means it was more rigid and meant that teachers were a bit less accessible. I felt like I could talk to my teachers at City College online and offline – access at City was much better as compared to Haas. There were some exceptions. I did make some connections, but for the most part, you’re in very large lectures and everyone is very high achieving – a rush to the front of the room after class. There wasn’t much opportunity in lecture to talk to the professor unless you went to office hours – and still, especially in the class you really need like finance or accounting, the tougher classes (mathematical modeling) and at that level, your success depends upon the competency of your TAs because the teachers are just much less accessible.

***What was your initial goal upon arriving to CCSF in Fall of 2006?***

It became clear to me that I could transfer to Haas – potentially a year later. It took a few semesters for me to get a few units under my belt, achieve a 4.0 – I convinced myself at that point that there was nothing that could be taught at City College that I couldn’t understand (laughs). And I knew that it was up to me to excel and do my work – and Haas is such a…. if you talk to any CCSF student who studies business, they want to go to Haas. It becomes this thing that is so ominous and so out of reach, so definitely, I feel like there was a mental game that you have to play with yourself where you say that I’ll still be successful even if I don’t achieve that goal – so I spent four or five years with that in mind.

I knew I wanted to do business because I knew.. I had worked Ben and Jerry’s and I had done Tully’s Coffee for six years and then I went to Ghirardelli and there was a culture that was too corporate and it was problematic – there were people above me that had left the company. But I also knew that there was a ceiling. Without a degree, I was just going to be this low-level manager.

***What can CCSF do better?***

I am going to start from the top level. I am not going to go into the variety of things or the nuts and bolts of that. I think there is a great opportunity for a culture shift. I think a culture shift is probably the most significant thing that needs to happen. A culture to allow for innovation and experimentation. I can understand and appreciate that schools move like molasses intentionally (laughs). They do this to stabilize so that people always have an institution to come to – they don’t want to fluctuate with the markets. However, they have to strike a much better balance around encouraging new ways, new practices and new research. How do we bridge what’s being done – evidence-based research and practice into our daily programs? I think City College is really behind in that way in that that is not encouraged on any level. Even with the new restructuring, there is still a culture around status quo and maintaining power among those that have had (inaudible).

What can we be doing better? So, I really believe that there is an opportunity first around this 21st century support – I am using the broad term, “21st century” because digital literacy might be a little too restrictive – but really around the nuts and bolts of being a student – so, how do you sign in and get your RAM ID? How do you get into certain classes? What are the resources for preparing for placement testing? All of these are around the business of being a student – and so there is a variety of opportunities for this to happen. This can be centralized and we can develop a model that can scale and be taken to every single center and adapted for the population for each – because the populations can be very different from center to center. So, I think there is an opportunity for that direct student service around the business of being a student. You have to be an insider to know what is going on. You have to talk to this person or that person. I would say that student services is important. I would say that another thing is – and this can be controversial – but I think this is important – the relevance of the classes. I have always believed that when you see certain courses packed and the same course has 5 people in it, there is obviously something wrong. It’s not always about the instruction because that is tricky and I am not going to get into that too much, but how do we get into and how are we meeting the market demand and what is the job market requiring and what are the skills people need? I think CTE does really well around this, but what about the broad curriculum?

***Tell me about your extracurricular and community-based activities***

As a City college student, once I became involved, I formed a student club called Students Making a Change (SMAC), and we are still going. We are actually a fiscally sponsored project by Coleman Advocates which serves youth of San Francisco. What we do is we organize underrepresented students of color to advocate on their own behalf around policy reform. So, a couple examples of the work that we had done is to improve placement testing across the policies. So, when we first started the advocacy students would come to City College of San Francisco and take the placement test and say that they needed to prepare and they didn’t know what they were getting themselves into, and say that it wasn’t really a great demonstration of what I can do. You would have to wait six months before you could retake the test and at the time, we asked Chancellor Griffin why it took six months – just kind of naively. Essentially, there we no reason, and it was arbitrarily made, so we pushed back on that and we brought in best practices from City College research center and Columbia University – brought in a variety of educators who were thinking about this particular issue/area and how it impacts disproportionately students of color who place into really low levels of English and math. And then what happens, it is not just about the placement testing itself – but more the trajectory for college. The lower you place, the more exit points there are, and the harder it is to get to college level coursework – so it makes it so much easier – they can re-take it after two weeks. So, right now the policy is such that you can re-take it within two weeks and you can do that twice within one testing cycle. And actually, we have gone a step further to add what is called the Multiple Measures Reform. So, you just take this test and counselors use your test score and that’s the only thing that is practically speaking to advise your counseling into whatever – you’re going to schedule into this class or that class. So, now they’re bringing in so a student can take the test, use the score to register for classes, or you can go in and take your GPA from high school, which is the last math class you took, or an SAT (I took an SAT. Why didn’t they ever use that?), or your attendance rate, so there are other indicators that are actually *better* at predicting where a student should be and how successful they will be than this one test score.

I never got involved in Alpha Beta Gamma (business honors society). It was interesting because the one thing I will say is that with SMAC it was certainly the policy advocacy, developing my peers and leaders and working together on initiatives. We worked on a proposal for launch a program for Associated Students now called VIDA which is Voices of Immigrants Demonstrating Achievement – which is a resource program for undocumented and all students, but focuses on the issues of undocumented students – so that was really transformative for me.

I ran for student trustee and lost to Jeffrey Fang (laughs), and it was the first and only time student activities tried to do online voting. This was in 2010. So, it was kind of a sh\*t-show and it really discouraged me to ever campaign for anything again (laughs). I really pushed myself out of my comfort zone to do that, so you know, a real learning experience, and it probably better that I didn’t… easy to say now, but I was able to continue to do what I wanted to do regardless. And actually, SMAC provided an avenue for connecting with community based organizations – SMAC formed as a fiscal sponsored project, but later we became a project of Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth which brought me on to the staff of a community based organization and really continuing to develop as a program director and working around being in this kind of corner of City College but it helped me deepened my understanding of City College’s role in the city. I worked on different collectives. I worked with jobs of justice and STIU, the accreditation, we really shouldn’t talk about the accreditation stuff (laughs), but that really also has been caused so much challenge around student organizing and has changed the landscape in a lot of ways for students.

It has been a challenge for student organizing. There are less students there, and it is a challenging time. Student needs are still there, and I feel like the people who are still there really need support, even more so and that there are no other options.