

Transcript: Candid Conversation with CCA President Yolanda Watson Spiva, Ph.D. & Excelencia in Education CEO/Co-Founder Deborah A. Santiago

Yolanda Watson Spiva: [00:00:14]

I have the honor and the pleasure of being joined by Deborah Santiago, co-founder and CEO of Excelencia in Education. Welcome Deborah.

Deborah Santiago: [00:00:26]

Thank you. It's great to be with you Yolanda.

Yolanda Watson Spiva: [00:00:28]

Yeah, certainly. I know these have been some challenges times for us as a nation, but also for us as nonprofits and as leaders of color who are leading nonprofits. What would you say has been the biggest transition for you in this I guess post COVID, pre-COVID, end-COVID, I don't know where we are with COVID right now. What has been your biggest challenge?

Deborah Santiago: [00:00:51]

I mean, I think it's a combination, and Yolanda it's the challenges we were already running so hard and so fast to try and create windows of opportunity, people to focus on – Latino students, students of color – and ways we need to think differently about more intention of serving our students.

So, I feel like in many ways we're already running, you know, a sprint for what needs to be a long-distance run, just to create awareness and attention. It feels like that public awareness above the structural systemic inequities that we've already known existed. That increase in awareness and attention – it was the first time they knew about it, even though we've been fighting and trying to get it addressed for a very long time – which created yet another other wave.

And when you don't think you can go fast enough or that you can address in a meaningful strategic way.

And then all of a sudden, these new entities that have resources or attention but not resources, start deciding that they're going to go into the space with what they do know without cultivating the relationship, the rapport and the trust of the community – that to me is a little bit of a challenge.

It's great to have more allies, but it's also challenging when everybody wants to frame it from whence they come, in an environment that I'm not as confident they'll be in another two years when something else comes on; we're still going to be in this space. So, addressing that is one, the other is, Frankly, just listening to the institutions.

Frankly, just listening to the institutions we work with, the challenges they are confronting and being more effective in serving our students.

It's heartbreaking, right? When you hear the stories of students and how they're trying to get the support they need to continue their education, institutions that are really challenged financially because

they didn't have a lot of resources to begin with, our students have me all of a sudden to try and double down themselves.

And in many ways, how do we help them? Maybe that's more than you wanted, but I mean, I feel like there are a lot of challenges and every single one of them is an opportunity to figure out how we can help add value, toe the line on how to frame issues and try to capitalize on this in a way that we don't forget the inequities, after we get at some point, post COVID. To not forget that this population, the transition that didn't seem possible before COVID, now happened out of the immediacy of need that we can sustain that in a meaningful way.

Yolanda Watson Spiva: [00:03:39]

So, let me ask you this. You and I have known each other almost 30 years and we've been, you know, sort of laboring in the vineyard trying to call out these inequities. And I think people would say, we're throwing out the race card, we don't see what you see – so now everybody got woke about three weeks ago, right?

And as you said, we have all these new allies, but what does this mean for those of us who have been in this work? We understand the needs, as you've mentioned, we want to make sure this is not a trend for us, right. This is the focus of our work, and so students who need it the most, what happens when a lot these allies come forward – and they may actually be competing with us for resources to do the work that we've been doing for 30 years or so.

What does that look like, and how do we make sure that those folks who are not legitimate don't get legitimacy in this space because it's trendy.

Deborah Santiago: [00:04:27]

Yeah, you know, I'm going to try and answer it, but I'd love to hear you do the same, dear friend. Thank you for calling out how long they are in the cradle.

Here's the opportunity, you know, we have more allies, genuine allies is a positive, and there's more work to be done than people doing it. So, I don't want to frame this as an either or, but I do know when it comes down to resources, I think the organizations that have been committed to this cause doing this work for a long time, have some resources. But to address it at the scale and the effort that we know is needed, I don't feel like we've gotten that, right.

And so, this is where it becomes a challenge of, for me in many ways, how funders prioritize the investment and giving. You know, for me, like many of the institutions and programs we work with, there's a trade-off and my time and effort. How much of do I give to development, marketing and evaluation, and how much do I spend with direct service provision and listening to my constituents to more deeply understand how I can add value is certainly bigger than my organization.

That means, you know, let's take the COVID example. There are a lot of people that immediately wanted to get into the space who immediately went to funders to try and get support, as funders I think appropriately tried to rally around. We chose to stop, listen to our institutions and give them a little bit of grace because they were trying to listen to students, and that creates a lag and saying, then let's come back with what we need.

People were saying we need money right away, without saying what do we need it for?

We tried to be a little bit more deliberate, and then when we were ready to say, okay, we've got a group of institutions that have a solid sense of what they're doing let's make some investments in support.

Why the money had already gone out the door. And figuring out how to serve these with intentionality was a challenge.

So, I don't mean to be roundabout, I think it's a great question, but balancing out who was an ally of long standing, and who are the organizations that have been there when it wasn't a sexy, and who have the trust with the communities in organizations to do the work. That's got to be one way of understanding from funders perspective.

And then those that might be bigger and have more nuance development offices, god love them I think that's a good thing, but that there's a way to partner authentically. Because, if they are the ones that are in investment, I've seen this too, then they want to partner with us for pennies on the dollar for us to do the work with our community, because they've got the bigger funds. And figuring out how do you balance the investment of support is a conversation that we need to have.

So that's how I've done it. How have you done it?

Yolanda Watson Spiva: [00:07:24]

Yeah, I was going to say the same thing. So, we did the exact same thing. We sat back and listened, and we wanted to, we really talked to our 47 states and Alliance members to figure out what was happening on the ground. We did not want to just make a stop gap decision around how we deploy our limited resources and how we ask for additional resources; and I agree with you, I think it kind of disadvantaged us because we weren't first to market to talk to funders, but at the end of the day, I think we were more favorable to our Alliance members because we showed our value to them and we let them know that we're there, right.

So, at the end of the day, I think that's always our goal and our purposes is to make sure they understand whatever resources we do have, whether it's toolkits information, knowledge, if it's access to technology, whatever that is, we want to make sure we can deploy it, and that's how we felt like we could serve our Alliance best.

I would also say we weren't one of those organizations that issued a statement, we kind of felt like, you know, we issued our statement based on the way that we show up and how we work.

So, there was no need to do that necessarily, but I think it was about okay, what's next? I would say to your point, you know, the emergency services and stop gaps are certainly important, but for us it was about what's the long game.

Again, this is all now sexy and nouveau and it's in, it's trending right, you know like a hashtag, but at the end of the day, this work is about the long game in terms of inequity. It's about the long game in terms of completion and what that looks like for the students that we focus on. So, for us it's really about now looking at what I posted that environment will look like, what resources will institutions need, how will the students need to be accommodated.

CCA's work has always been at the institutional system and structural level and less on the student side, but always on behalf of the students, right. So, now thinking more intentionally about all that COVID did was exacerbate what we already knew were frailties that our students had, and basically now said we need more of whatever we didn't have before.

So, I think for us, it's about continuing to have the conversation, stop putting our students' needs at the periphery through trio programs and centralize it to the work that you're doing, you know. So, just having more conversations about what the policies, practices and procedures that are on campus that can be structural barriers to students completing.

Deborah Santiago: [00:09:38]

I appreciate that. That's why in many ways you continue to be allies 30 years in and through multiple tracks. I do think that it's one thing upon another upon another, right. And so, you made a comment about where we are with kind of statements and such, you know, and addressing the awareness – though you use the term wokeness – of the community about issues that are race-based, and how critical it is to not negate that lens while we must address issues of low income and first generation students, which many of our students of color are also that, but not negating the issue of race and ethnicity currently.

I think it's not many people that are comfortable with that kind of conversation because they're not sure what it means. I think, well intentioned people don't want to offend and people who are not comfortable just don't think it's an issue. And I think we walk in the range between the range of jobs and sometimes in full devolution, because at least at Excelencia, we are unapologetically focused on Latino students.

And for us, that's not to the exclusion of other students, it's saying that instead of being a footnote or a side, if we start with this population that's young and fast growing, can we look at issues that seem attractable in different ways and that can hopefully address some of those structural inequities that transform institutions at their core – which is what we need.

Cause these institutions we're built on systemic, instructional and racial inequities from the beginning. That part, that's the harder. I appreciate what you said too, for us, that's a long game on this. I would love to accelerate it and get it done faster and sooner and more meaningfully.

I sometimes worry about the unintended consequences if we are not working with those that day in and day out, have to support and sustain it beyond a quick moment and a quick fix.

Yolanda Watson Spiva: [00:011:42]

No, and Harvard university was founded in 1636. There is no way we're going to controvert what has taken almost 400 years to establish and we're going to now mitigate that in a short period of time.

So, it's going to take a lot to dismantle these structures, but I would say, the way I kind of align what's happened with the George Floyd murder and where we are around policing is that, those same sort of structural up-endings that are happening in policing are the same up-endings that have to happen in higher education if we really want to be intentional, right.

We're going to have to redo this whole thing, because higher education was not meant for the students that you and I serve.

Deborah Santiago: [00:12:20]

That's right. That's right, and continuing to call that out and keeping the pressure consistently is going to be key to what we do, which is why it's a long game.

I would love to change things around, I mean, don't get me wrong. I think you and I are still been at it over 30 years because in some ways we're ideologues, we're very idealistic, we're also pragmatic, and that doesn't sit well in some settings, I think frankly. But I think our commitment to cause and mission, means that we have a responsibility as people with privilege to keep trying, to make sure that those... everyone can fulfill the American dream and everybody has that opportunity, and at my core I believe that, and I know that our work is like a small, small sliver of sand of what it can be. But it's what drives me, and I know you, day in and day out to keep pushing and prodding, finding vehicles, and you know, something gets in our way we jump over it, we jump under it and go around it, and not let up – but it is also... it's also tiring.

I mean, it's great to get the attention, but it has to be meaningful. And, I appreciate the comment because it's a dance here.

You know, there aren't a lot of people of color who are leading organizations that are trying to do this. And, I think for lots of people who are becoming aware of this, which is important, understanding our framework is a little bit different; it doesn't easily fit in a box, this is not kind of a, you know, flipping it in – there are cultural, relevant and responsive elements to this. There is a historical awareness of grievances. There is a being present in the moment that builds. That... is a different way of framing and talking about it than just give me three things, three solutions, implement them and I've checked the box, I'm done, I'm successful.

Yolanda Watson Spiva: [00:014:20]

This is not a job for us, right. So, at the end of the day this is our life's calling and it is heart work, H.E.A.R.T., not necessarily hard work in that regard. So, because of the heart work that's what makes it debilitating, because our goal is to work ourselves out of a job, as you said. Like we don't want to have to do this; we want for every problem to be eradicated and we no longer you have a job. Great! That's when mission is accomplished.

Deborah Santiago: [00:14:45]

Yeah, there are lots of other things I would like to do. I've got my family genealogy that I'm working on.

I think the staff stories must continue. I'm grateful for when people are paying attention to this... How do we address the historic equities in a more meaningful way, acknowledging that it has unfortunately been more incremental than we would like; means that there's a lot harder conversations than we've had heretofore. That we have to find ways to confront, and that's what we've got to find that stamina to continue to do more of it, and keep presenting it to people who I think are good intent – not everyone is – but I think who are really genuine or allies who are of good intent and allow them to know that we can

lead. We are leading and sometimes we need them to be supportive of us and not just asking us to support them and their bigger agenda, but to find ways to support us as we try to lead, to add value and make a difference.

Yolanda Watson Spiva: No. Absolutely. speaking of which, in terms of, the work that you do and the students you serve and how you serve a diverse set of students. So, even in the Latino or Latinx community, they're not a monolith or homogenous group, they are a diverse set of students. DACA, you know, the Supreme court recently made a ruling on DACA. And while we were saying, "Yay!" on one hand, it was more of a procedural sort of, a declaration and less about the substance of DACA. I wanted to get your feedback around how—although it is a victory, we don't want to say it's not—but at the same time, it still could be up-ended at any moment if the case is brought back before the court, again, I'm on the substance. So, can you talk a little bit about how that helps your work and how it sort of impacts the work that you're doing on a daily basis with the students that you serve.

Deborah Santiago: So, you all, we don't work with students directly, we work with those on behalf-of, so I will say that. I'll tell you this, that last week to have the LGBTQ law, as well as DACA was powerful because it was just an affirmation of the things that we know. So, taking it at face value, to know that there are other recourses in the way this democracy has been set up to do what I know I believe is good and right for our community, is not as significant. Doctors specifically know the procedural element. I mean, it's one to celebrate. I will tell you this, it's like, you can never let up, you know, that expression will keep your eye on the prize. You know, if we think that it is done and then we can move on to something else. What we know very clearly is that's not the case. And DACA was originally set up, it didn't satisfy all the ways we wanted it to be. And so that's an example of incremental, but we'll take that as we continue pushing. So, how we leverage this procedural success, in the short run, to not let up and committing to making sure that we do well in right by students, that we make sure that they thrive, that everyone who wants to contribute to our society and effort has the opportunity to do so with the structures we've created. It felt like a slight, like a small injection in your arm, when there's so many challenges that our institutions, our students, our families, our communities are facing.

And I'm trying to keep that slight infusion to remind us that we have to keep pushing. How do we now address, you know, after the first 16 years of DACA and the Dream Act, and didn't go through, how do we focus on that? And then for us specifically, you know, not all DACA and Dreamers are Latino. Although, we are often the face of it. While we are pushing on the policy and the practice priorities to make sure Latino students are included and that they're being served well. DACA are a critical part there, but a very small subset of that. How do we not allow the population to be marginalized so that we can show that we have political clout and might for policy push, and that DACA are a critical component of it. And that we have the size, and the power, and the scale, sufficiently, to ensure that our dreamers are a part of it, and that it isn't the only thing that dominates and leads us, but that we're paying attention to financial aid, and history to capacity, and student success, and retention efforts, and how we need to transform institutions to serve the students better.

And for me, that's how I am trying to balance this. No, I'm on the board of The Dream.US—it's a wonderful organization—trying to get private funds to support dreamers and DACA students. And we want to—how do we double down on that while we base these other things like the Higher Education Act and the things that need to better serve our students and try to keep all of that consistently, and not mission creep and not go off-topic is core for us in our effort to be successful.

Yolanda Watson Spiva: Absolutely. And thank you so much for also mentioning the fact that DACA students are not all Latino students. That's absolutely correct. And so, organizations like ours—yours and mine—are policy and advocacy organizations. And we are advocating for a broad swath of students with these various policies and laws that are on the books that we're trying to, in some cases, mitigate some elements of them and to, accelerate other elements of them.

Right. And so, thinking about the work that we do... Policy and advocacy, I would say, has been sort of underfunded, first of all, not really accepted as a real practice. It's not tangible. It's kind of squishy. Right? So folks are looking for direct services. But we know that what changes, hearts and minds are sometimes compelled by law. So, you know, de jure versus de facto. We're basically focusing on the de jure part that will impact the de facto part. And so what advice or feedback would you have for philanthropies who may not necessarily fully appreciate what we do in our work around systems and structures, dismantling systems and structuring and structures, building systems and structures, but utilizing policy as a lever—how do we get them to understand that this is worthwhile work and that it actually does have outcomes that impact the students that we're attempting to serve?

Deborah Santiago: Yeah. For me, policy is about scale. Remembering that, those who choose to invest in a transformation change in education want to do so at scale. The most powerful that we can do is one-on-one, but in order to make sure that the system and structure changes, I think we have to be oriented to scaled change. That, to me, is a way of framing, at least our role, as we try to do it. And that we believe that good policies are from a good practice. So, it has to come up and build to that. I know I've been challenged in talking to some good partners who want to invest in some of this work. And that is the board members and others who might misconstrue policy and politics. Yes. And I can appreciate that many philanthropic entities can't and don't want to cross that line between policy, and politics. So, I understand that part of it. And do think that we, as an organization, we cannot lobby—we're a nonprofit. So, we really focus on what does it mean to be an advocate? And on our efforts and not lobby. And so, we try to educate and inform the difference between advocacy and lobbying, and policy and politics in hopes that it creates face for, those that would like to invest in scaled change, scale transformation.

And, I think just like focusing on communities of color, focusing on structural systemic inequities, good, bad, and ugly, the onus is on us to frame it and articulate it to those that would choose to invest. And I no longer assume that it is what it is. I think often we don't have to talk about equity, not because I don't passionately believe it. But I feel so many people talk about it—they're talking diversity or they're talking inclusion. Both that are important, but it's not the same. And so, we talk about intentionally serving, because if you meet students where they're at, you have to be very intentional. And I would say to those that are looking to invest, pay attention to policy, it's not just legislative. It can be scaled. But sometimes it necessitates legislative change. And the investment is in solid advocacy that is framed around students of color and structural inequities to make sure that we make the change that we want to see as philanthropists, and that we want to see as advocates for our communities.

Yolanda Watson Spiva: Agreed 100%. And I can tell you, as we work with States and systems, we've had some states that have had some of their policies on the books for 80 years, eight-zero. So, if you, think about were our world was eighty years ago, right? And if you're now still operating based on those policies... Again, this doesn't require legislation to change them. It just requires right-headed focused folks, to sit down at the table and make the changes. And so, those structural deficits can actually impede how students progress toward completion. And so, we know that's the case and that's what we're really talking about when we talk about what change looks like.

Deborah Santiago: I think that's true. I think, you know, just add to that Yolanda because I 100% agree. At Excelencia, we try to look at policy with a Latino lens. So, if those policies that have existed for 80 years, as you've said... We can just do this crosswalk and say, "Well, is it helping or hindering Latino students?" Because those are the students of today and going forward, are post-traditional students. And if you do that stress test and it doesn't hold that these students that are young, fast-growing coming in—if it's not serving them well, are they not the bellwethers of our students that are going forward, of all backgrounds and income levels and such, can we not calibrate to that? And use that as a way to transform rather than sticking to 80, because that's the way we've always done it. You know? No more sacred councils. We think about that. The conventional is no longer the way we have to approach things because that's not serving. And it perpetuates the inequities and the structure we always knew existed. At the very time that our students of color and the majority, and they already are in K-12, we're going to want to see them in higher ed. And then the last thing I'll say is that, you know, I mentioned from students of color perspective, I do get concerned as people flash the pan and now find this issue, that there is there are perpetual attempts to cast black versus brown.

And, the reality is that how powerful it is when we work together, as black and Brown, because that's when you see that majority, not just in K-12, but increasingly in higher ed. And as we look to the projections so that we're not slicing up in smaller pieces of limited pie, but that we're expanding it. That has to be a framing of our conversations, that pushes that thinking.

Yolanda Watson Spiva: I know you and I are not having that at all. And if we educate people about where all people came from, is Africa. So, actually, we're the same people.

Deborah Santiago: But you know, this is why policy is so important too, Yolanda, in what we do because we have to frame it in a way that allows people the opportunity to learn and to act. And we spend a lot of time, back to your point about philanthropy, it takes a lot of time to frame it and get people to understand and uneducated, or de-educate, all the incorrect—the traditional way to go forward. And that, to me, is a core commitment that we have. It doesn't always work, but, as we say, I was in *lucha*. I was in the fight to make sure that we frame this and don't apologize for making sure we are including and looking first at our students of color, and then making sure that then everybody goes. We want—I want everybody to improve their degree attainment to benefit this country. I just know in order to close equity gaps in attainment, we're going to have to accelerate for our black and Brown populations, if we're going to close that gap. Otherwise, everybody's just to be increasingly—they don't close the gaps.

Yolanda Watson Spiva: So that's right. And that's a wonderful note to end on. I want to acknowledge that I am speaking with the inimitable, Debra Santiago, Co-Founder and CEO of Excelencia in Education. She has been a forerunner in this work in-terms of all students, but especially on behalf of Latino students, in making sure that they are successful and making sure that Latino institutions, Hispanic-serving institutions are doing well and thriving on behalf of the students that they serve. Thank you so much for this conversation. You and I talk often, but don't get enough time to talk about all of the issues that are before us.

I am Yolanda Watson Spiva, President of Complete College America. And thank you Deborah for being our inaugural guest.

Deborah Santiago: Thank you for having me. Thank you for the partnership. And as we continue to move forward for a common cause

Yolanda Watson Spiva: Absolutely.