Serena Collins

Lowell High School Class of 2009

CCSF Class of 2011

Pace University, BS Business, Class of 2013

Events Planning Manager One Market Restaurant

***Themes: continuing ed, transfer center, counseling, clubs, hands-on teachers with experience***

*After Lowell High School, what were your thoughts about college, and how did you choose CCSF?*

So, originally my end of junior year in high school, I started to look at four-year universities, and I also started to look at their price tags, and just realized that I wasn’t going to be able to afford it right after high school. I was going to put myself through school, and even if I was able to get certain scholarships, I didn’t think I was able to get a full ride, so I talked to my high school counselor and they suggested City College of San Francisco – because I am a San Francisco resident, and it is the closest community college.

So, I looked into the different programs that were offered and it was a good opportunity to get in – originally, I was just going to go in and take my GEs and transfer, and I realize that they had the hospitality program, and at the time, I wanted to go into hotel operations – and so, I enrolled in the Culinary Arts and Hospitality program and it was great.

*You arrive at CCSF – how did you make sense of this massive place and where did you even begin?*

At the time, I wanted to go into hotel operations, so for me, I actually wanted to start the summer right after high school, so I didn’t wait until fall. I jumped right in. I didn’t take any of the intro classes, the orientation and all of that. So, even though Lowell had a system where you picked your classes every semester, the class selection process was a little more frustrating because of the seniority in terms of taking the classes (laughs) – there was like the bottom of the barrel and I was like the dirt under that (laughs out loud). So, that first experience was extremely frustrating for the first class. Going into fall, it was a little bit better because I was officially enrolled into the CAS program, so that gave me a little bit more seniority but I had a little bit of rearranging to do just because of the budget cuts that were going on at the time. There were some key classes that I wanted to take that semester, and I got the email that I had enrolled and the classes were no longer being offered, so that was a little bit of… I don’t want to say a stressor, but it wasn’t necessarily how I wanted to start off my college career (laughs). I eventually ended up getting a pretty nice college schedule, but I don’t think anybody should take classes six days a week their first official semester of college, which I did. I was enrolled in classes Monday through Friday and my Saturday class was an 8-hour class (front desk operations) at the Southeast campus starting at 8 AM, and I live very close to the main campus, so you can imagine me having to wake up when it was still night time on a Saturday. It was a really great class and a lot of hands on experience, but I just wouldn’t recommend taking that your first semester (laughs out loud).

*What are your favorite things about City College?*

My favorite things about City College were the opportunities that presented itself. There were so many different programs there, and even with the budget cuts, there were so many different classes that you could take – the program that I was in (CAHS) had their own counselors in addition to the regular counselors that were offered, which I thought provided additional support. A lot of the teachers that I had, including you, gave a lot of advice and had a lot of real world experience which I thought was most important – teachers who actually knew what they were talking about instead of teaching from a book. A lot of clubs that – when I was in high school, I wasn’t really as active as I was in college in terms of extracurricular activities and I thought that was a really great transition. City College, especially the main campus, is such a large campus -- it was a great way to meet other students who were not necessarily enrolled in my classes.

*How did you choose Pace University? Tell me about the selection process and the transfer process.*

I started looking at Pace University during my junior year of high school. It was one of the schools I was really interested in going to at the time – mainly because I was looking primarily at hotel operations. They had my program, but their price tag was just crazy. At the time, I was looking at a bunch of schools that were not in California. UNLV gave me quite a bit of money, but the credits didn’t all transfer over. By the time I had to make my decision, I wanted to get a little further away from California – so for me, in New York, I applied to Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), got in, applied to Pace, got in, and a couple of schools in Florida. I really wanted to live in New York. I thought it would be a great experience, and even if I didn’t end up staying, which I didn’t, I just thought it would be a nice place to live to say I experienced this and I can make it in New York. As the saying goes, “If you can make it in New York, you can make it anywhere.” Also, they had a lot of connections and they were really pro internship. I had a cousin who graduated college two years before I started and she had the worst time trying to find a job in her field because she didn’t have a lot of hands-on experience. She only had class experience, and I am a really big believer of learning from other people’s experiences and if you can avoid any negative experiences by learning from others, I am very big on that. So, when I heard that Pace is really pro-internship with a lot of classes scheduled around where you can do an internship and still take the necessary classes to graduate, that was the key factor for me. In addition, they did offer a significant amount of scholarship for me. One of the downsides was that I was the first person from CCSF to ever transfer to Pace – so I had to fight for some of my credits. When they first send you the acceptance of “this will transfer over, this will transfer over,” and then when they give you your final list of transfer classes, there were a couple of classes I’d say I really wish to never take this class again. So, it was like fighting tooth and nail to get a couple of classes transferred.

All in all, I was able to get 57 out of 63 credits transferred at the end of the day. For me, that was fine. Originally, they were saying 48 – and I said I am not doing all of those classes again. The transfer process itself – it was a little interesting just because I was basically going at it – I don’t want to say with little support, but I didn’t necessarily reach out when I should have for help. I started the process on my own. I looked at a bunch of colleges in high school and had the list that I was interested in originally. For me, I think that was part of the problem. I should have asked for help earlier in the process.

I went to the transfer center in the later part of my process to see if there were scholarships or things of that nature, but when it came time for me to start applying, I had my list and cut it down to the schools I really wanted to go to, and for every college you apply to, you have to pay a fee, and I was really trying to save up and factor in the flight costs and you know, (laughs), and so I didn’t want to apply to 10-15 schools and pay all these fess for that.

I didn’t start asking for help until later on in the process – I’d say one or two months before I really needed to get those applications in. I could have asked for help from counselors and teachers a semester or two before by going and telling them that I was interested in these schools and if they knew anything about them. I was aware of the transfer center, but I didn’t know about all of the resources that went with them – like scholarships for transfer students – but I didn’t know about the other resources that they offered.

*Why did you decide to take business coursework?*

After high school, well, my second semester of senior year of high school, I did a program with Salesforce called BizAcademy, and it was basically a week-and-a-half long program and they assign you a role which covers their department, so I was a VP of sales with four other people on my team and basically, you go in and act as consultants to their business and you have to solve a problem (it was a competition and there were four teams), that they presented to us. The group with the best solution for the problem won the competition – and that was my first real exposure to the business world and I loved it, and even though I was initially interested in hotel operations, I thought that maybe I shouldn’t be so specific about taking only hotel classes, because if I want to do something outside of that, I have only learned – and although hotels are still businesses, there are different things you can learn about other businesses, so I didn’t want to limit myself by only taking classes related to hospitality.

*How would you compare your experience with the instructors at CCSF to Pace University?*

I think that at City I got a little bit more hands-on experience, and usually, as least what I’ve heard it vice versa, when you got a university, you can get a little bit more hands on experience. Some of the classes I thought I was supposed to get hands-on experience with when I transferred in, they had taken out of the curriculum that involved the hands-on experience at Pace, which was really a negative for me, but I learned to work around it by getting internships. Especially in the CAHS, I did the hands-on experience, with the front desk Saturday class that I took for 16 weeks and I took a catering and events class downtown campus and it taught you how to plan an event, do your budgets, run a restaurant, work in management, and it was that experience that really propelled me to want to continue getting that hands-on experience when I transferred to Pace. There were a lot of students who didn’t think that hands-on experience as really necessary, which I don’t agree with at all, but City gave me that upper edge when it came to knowing what was necessary. The classes at Pace, just because it was a smaller school, were a little bit smaller, a little more intimate. The classes, I would say, were about 15-17 people at the most – the more general classes that you had to take. There were some lecture classes that easily had 200 kids in them. That was a major difference. The lecture classes that you had to take at City – I don’t think I ever had more than 40 students in the ones that I took.

I think they both were really great experiences. City offered chances to study abroad that I didn’t take advantage of – but I did so at Pace. I studied abroad (on scholarship) in China for a summer. Because I was a transfer student, it was a little tighter for me. I didn’t want to get stuck (doing an extra semester and being set back), so if I went, I had to go during a summer and that turned out to only be six weeks. I also got a chance to do a travel course in Brazil on scholarship for six weeks. It was great. One thing that Pace was also big on was local leadership and global citizenship. This world, especially in the United States, where we are more and more becoming a melting pot, so understanding cultural differences is major. I think before, maybe 20 or 30 years ago, it wasn’t taught, but Pace was a big pusher of that, and I think that was great. Especially for me. When I transferred, I was in their business program with a major in hospitality studies, but I also decided to minor in communications. In fact, one of the internships I did was at Spike TV. It was really interesting because I had such a hospitality background so to jump from hospitality to communications to entertainment was…. It’s a TV station under a parent company, Viacom, VH1, BET, Comedy Central, and I got to do a bunch of different projects with different TV brands.

I decided not to stay in New York mainly because it was a financial decision. The winters are really cold and they last for 7 or 8 months, and the last winter I was there, it got down to 6 degrees and wind chill, and it hurt to breathe. For a lot of the entry level jobs, I didn’t want to have to choose between rent or food – or having 6 or 7 roommates.

I did live on campus for my first two years and then I moved out and moved in with a friend by renting a room in their house. It worked out for me financially at the time, and I didn’t want to overstay my welcome, and they would have continued to let me live there, but I didn’t want to overstay my welcome and finding my own place in New York wasn’t going to work on an entry level salary. I ended up moving back and temping and then getting this job here (at One Market Plaza Restaurant).

David Bouchard has been here since the beginning of time – 1993. We have become one of the staple restaurants in San Francisco. Whenever you want to come by, just let me know. So, essentially, it’s a chef-driven restaurant and Mark Dommen and our GM Larry Bouchard, the GM both run the restaurant. The executive chef has his staff under him – our sous chefs are front line managers for the line cooks in the kitchen and we have a pastry chef with her own kitchen and she reports to our executive chef. She is also a manager with her own separate staff. Our GM, the director of our department (sales and banquets) is who I report to – myself and my colleague report to her. She is new and my previous manager was here for 17 years, and she built up the department. Before her, we only had this one little banquet room. Before we took this room over, it used to be rented out for meetings, and we got this space six years ago. I know they did have it for retail at some point.

So, on a day to day basis, I am involved in sales and event planning. We do the event planning process from start-to-finish. From inquiry, taking the phone call, to email – seeing what the goal of the event is, planning their menus, setup and AD. Often, we are working with a random person who doesn’t know what they’re doing and you have to be patient with them because it’s not their main job. When you send them a list of line items to fill in, they don’t do it and they don’t understand that we are not a hotel with the same audio visual capabilities or stages. WE have started to get some inquiries for graduations like the police academy and working with companies and organizations who want big, huge events. We can do it, but can’t source stages for them. We don’t have it in-house and we have to pop them up. We get confused for a hotel a lot of the time because of the size of the restaurant. We are the largest restaurant in SF not associated with a hotel, and it does not include this atrium space.

We were the NFL house for the NFL for their families. We were closed 9 days for the event. Most of our regulars stayed away from the area for the week. We had about 3,500 to 5,000 people a day, so it was invite only to the NFL house. You had to be a player or a corporate sponsor to affiliate. We re-did the restaurant, took out all of the tables and it was completely insane. It took 18 months to plan. Part of that was the selection process. They have an intermediary called Giamonte Marketing. They come, scout and plan and then the NFL comes in and looks at the menu. For the most part, we don’t do sampling because we are alamanut – we make it to order. Shows me pictures of a built-in bar, bocce courts, funky tables to sit at and completely re-did the space. Lounge furniture so people can hang out. Sponsored by Verizon, the #1 sponsor of the NFL and there were different organizations we had to work with. There we candy and nut sponsors and we had to incorporate all of those sponsors into the event.

*How did you find community at City College?*

I think, for me, I joined the African American Scholastic program, and that is the way I found my sense of community. My counselor was Ms. Clark, and it was great. I had access to a bunch of different resources, along with the chance to meet students outside my classes. Since CCSF is such a large campus, it is easy to make your way to class and then leave. Since you’re not connected, joining that program really solidified my sense of community – in addition to the culinary arts and hospitality program.

Think back to high school, then CCSF, then Pace – and now at One Market Restaurant. What about you has changed, and how did City College contribute to that?

I think that actually just coming to this realization rather recently, that not only education, but continued education is key. Keeping up with kind of trends, actually, I went back last spring, I took an introduction to wine class – I don’t drink personally or socially, but being in this business, you need to know about wine. I just never saw the need to drink, but being in this industry, but I want to know what I am telling my clients about and not have to always defer to my sommelier. As a salesperson, you have to be confident with what you’re selling. I did get to taste, but I always spit it out, and the person who taught the class had taught be before. In most tastings, in the professional sense, they encourage you to spit. Continued education is key and looking forward 4-5 years from now, One Market is great for certain experiences, but I think about how am I going to bridge that gap. I don’t think I am going to retire here. I don’t think people of my generation think about staying somewhere for 25-30 years.

I am always looking at job boards to see what the current market is requiring, just seeing that there are some skills -- I know some things that I am not proficient in. I am constantly looking at classes that City offers, because I don’t think I want to get an MBA right now. I JUST paid off my student loans in April, and one of the reason I moved back is to not have that debt hanging over me. It’s not bad considering that I went to a private school that costs $54,000 a year. Which again, it isn’t bad… It’s crazy. I literally just got out of debt, so I have looked at a couple of MBA programs. I want to own a home.

I think that City College made me realize how important education is. And continued education – even after getting my bachelor’s degree and how much you need to stay up to date in current markets. Required skills are forever changing and it is really important to stay current. I know some people who are in management positions who went to college 20-30 years ago, and their excuse for not knowing what is happening now is that they went to college 20-30 years ago. There are so many classes that are offered at night at City College where you can keep up on skills – and they’re affordable, which I think is great – especially if you work in a company that doesn’t offer any form of tuition reimbursement or assistance, so City College is the perfect solution.

I think that one of the things that I wish I would have taken advantage more of, and I always joke around when I say this, I think I was really excited to get in and out in two years. But if I could have changed something, I would have stayed for another year. I would have taken advantage of opportunities to study abroad. The culinary program has a trip every year to Oaxaca, Mexico and I would have gone for a semester, and while my program was great, it wasn’t a long length of time (only 6.5 weeks). Also, I probably would have gotten more involved at City. When I got to Pace, I was involved with the Black Students Union, Campus activities, the spirit committee, the resident housing program (I became my dorm president). For me, it was a lot harder to find a sense of community at Pace then it was at City. New Yorkers keep to themselves.

*Were they many people of color at Pace? Not many. Our sommelier here is African American. That’s it.*

But also, just being a transfer student, all of the friend groups, and if you come from the same school, there were people who would transfer in from the same school, even if you weren’t friends from the previous school. I was the only one from City College and from Northern California (they mainly promoted from Southern California). Because I was already in the CAHS program, I had already taken a bunch of my major classes, and the first year, I was taking lecture classes in rooms full of 250 people, so you don’t talk to people. You just sit for three hours and wish that you had decided not to come to that class.

*Last question. What can City College do better?*

I think that one of the things is that when I first started my matriculation into City, the counselors – the general counselors gave me a little bit of a rough time because I wanted to start in summer instead of fall. It was still my senior year of high school, and I went to two different counselors who couldn’t understand that I wasn’t signing up for concurrent enrollment. I was signing up to start the summer after high school and some of them gave me a hard time with that and made it sound like I didn’t know what I was taking about -- and I got a hard time for that, which was a major frustration for me. Other than that, I think that for me, just knowing more about what resources the transfer center offered, and what the transfer center offered would have been great. I knew about scholarships, but that was about it. It’s one thing if you’re still trying to figure out what to do, if you’re just taking classes, there should be some structure to that.