

Conversations on Economic Inclusion with Sara Elaquad

Dionissi Aliprantis:

This is Conversations on Economic Inclusion. I'm Dionissi Aliprantis, the director of the program on economic inclusion here at the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland. In our program, we aim to bring together researchers and practitioners to learn about what it takes for more people to participate more fully in the economy.

As a newly arrived Bosnian refugee in the 1990s, Sara Elaquad lived in at least four states with her parents, who were trying to reestablish their careers as academics, and in the process find decent schools for her. In their travels, the Elaquad family learned the painful truth that public school quality in the United States varies widely depending on location and social class. This realization led Ms. Elaquad to a career in education, supporting students from underserved backgrounds. I recently spoke with Ms. Elaquad, executive director of Minds Matter Cleveland, about her work to close the higher education opportunity gap for low-income high school students through mentoring, test preparation and summer college programs.

Before we get started, I should mention that the views expressed here are those of the participants and not necessarily those of the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland or the Federal Reserve System. And now here's my conversation with Sara Elaquad.

So today we have with us Sara Elaquad, who was appointed executive director of the non-profit Minds Matter Cleveland. In February 2018, she graduated from Case Western Reserve University School of Law and received bachelor's degrees in international relations and French from the Ohio State University. She also serves as a board member for the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. Minds Matter Cleveland is a nonprofit organization working to overcome the education gap that holds back high performing, low income high school students. The organization equips under-resourced high school students with the tools to gain acceptance to, and graduate from, top tier academic summer programs and four year universities. They do this by providing academic and mentoring resources, support and opportunities to help students navigate the path to college and career success. Welcome Sara.

Sara Elaquad:

Thank you, Dionissi. Thanks for having me.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Could you tell us a little bit about your background?

Sara Elaquad:

Sure. So I guess I think of myself as having grown up a little bit of a nomad, and I am a Clevelander through and through now. I've lived here over a decade, but I grew up really moving around a great deal, and that was started by... My family and I lived in Bosnia. I was born in the late eighties, and the war began there in the early nineties, and my parents found themselves without their own desire, displaced from their home in Sarajevo, and eventually moved to the United States, got refugee status before arriving, and came to the US with nothing, again, completely unplanned and started to rebuild their careers. They were academics, they moved across the US. We lived in Arizona, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Ann Arbor.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

National Tour. How old were you when you first moved to the US?

Sara Elaquad:

I was almost seven years old, so we were a week out from my seventh birthday when we came.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Wow. And did you have any family here or it was just?

Sara Elaquad:

Yeah, so my dad's family was here already. My dad is actually a two-time refugee, and so his family had already immigrated to the US before us, and so we did have some family here and some supports, and as we moved around, when you say, tell me about your background, it all goes back to education every time. As we moved throughout the country and settled in different neighborhoods, my parents quickly realized that the education system in the United States is extremely disparate in resources and quality, depending on frankly where you live, who you are, and especially what your socioeconomic status is. And so they did their very best, as we moved around, to assess what the best public school was that they could get me to, once they realized that.

And for me it was very eye-opening as a child to see that it was so important to my parents to try to figure out and pick the best school for me. And in some cases, that was the best of the worst. So Chicago public schools in the nineties notoriously were in need of some repair and building. And so I really got to see that firsthand. Unfortunately... Fortunately for me now I've learned from it, but it really brought me to a place where I wanted to have an impact in education and the opportunities that students, especially students who have been chronically disenfranchised from their right to education, experience.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

What do you think makes Minds Matter so impactful?

Sara Elaquad:

Yeah, so it's a few things. A big part of it was the special sauce of the mentoring relationships and the depth of the relationship, the focus on the relationship between the students and their mentors. Minds Matter is a really intensive program. It's a three-year program from 10th to 12th grade for our students, who are there nearly every Saturday during the school year, and then have some work with us over the summer, and for our volunteers. So we have a real depth of, I guess, a high expectation for everybody. And that relationship and that ability to have a consistent adult outside of your family who supports you, I think, is a big part of it. Another big part of it is just that we really pour into our students. We have a personalized focus. Our goal for our students is to have the best possible options when it comes to going to college.

And we treat that very seriously. I like to say to my staff, "You got to do what it takes. Don't do what you thought you were supposed to do, what it takes to support each student." And that's how highly resourced families operate with their children. And so we, at Minds Matter, we're not highly resourced. I get we're a small nonprofit, but we have the high resources specifically for this purpose. And so we have a holistic program. We work through ACT prep, we know the ACT to be a gateway to college, opens more doors for students.

And we focus on that a great deal. We support our students in writing and critical thinking skills, which are going to be integral to college success almost no matter what you major in. And we expose our

students to college opportunities. We send them and we pay for immersive summer college programs at top universities around the country, so that they experience the enrichment and the networking, and just the practice of being in college. And so that, in a way, the intensity of the program and the level of resources that each student receives, is the reason for the success.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

So if I were mentoring a student, would it be something where we're sitting down in your offices going over some homework or some ACT prep, or would it be something where we're going to the zoo and just hanging out or a combination of those things?

Sara Elaquad:

So it's primarily onsite, and we actually operate our program out of the Sherwin-Williams Global headquarters downtown. We've used their space for the entirety of our time almost in existence. And what it looks like is it's a combination of group and individual activities. So in the mornings, students come in, we've got breakfast and everything like that. We start the day with group work with students and either staff or volunteers. Sophomores will work in, what we call, our community and personal development class. It's essentially a socio-emotional learning class, and the goal is to help students build strong self-management skills, growth mindset approaches, things like that. We then have students across all grades working on ACT, and that is a curriculum that we've built where our students are either doing foundational instruction on the ACT in a classroom setting, or they're working in small groups with tutors on specific areas of study.

And then as they get older and they've got the skills and concepts down, we're working really intensively on timed practice and review with tutors. And that's in an individual setting or in small groups, depending on the day and the topic. That is really important, because the way to learn a concept is to practice it, to see it first, then to actually do it, and then to review it. That's the way we approach the ACT. We rely on volunteer tutors for that as well where we give them the work of the day and they work with the students that they're building those relationships as well. We are also doing writing and critical thinking classes. Those are seminar style classes where our students are working through reading a text, and then having the opportunity to discuss and debate, similarly to how they will need to do in college. They're doing weekly writing assignments where they're getting feedback. Feedback is critical to developing writing skills. We always tell students nobody that writes for a living ever just submits their writing to people.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Just doesn't work like that.

Sara Elaquad:

Yeah. They have other people help them strengthen it, and then they submit it, whether they're a lawyer or an author, whatever it is.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Economists, whoever.

Sara Elaquad:

And then our mentoring happens in the afternoons. And so that is typically in a group setting. It's a guided mentoring curriculum. Well, it's a group and individual setting. We've got students paired with mentors, who will be their mentors for the entire three years. And we've got curriculum where we might be talking about time management or networking or even how to pick your college classes. And our team, whether it's our staff or our volunteer leaders, will deliver, for lack of a better word, the lesson of the day, the content that we're going to be focusing on.

And then we'll hand it over to mentors and students to work through together, to talk through together. Mentors get to share how they have experienced that topic in their lives, and so they help students in that way. There's also informal time to chat and catch up and build the relationship. Our mentors are also our students' number one supporter when it comes to applying to summer college programs, and ultimately college and senior year. So we'll send each sophomore and junior in the summer to a two to eight week immersive college experience. Our students will choose... They'll research college programs, they'll choose where to apply with their mentors, based on their interests, and they'll study things like the neuroscience of mindfulness in the teenage brain at Harvard, and the impact-

Dionissi Aliprantis:

I'd like to do that, I'd like to study [inaudible] It sounds really interesting.

Sara Elaquad:

Yeah. They get to choose really cool areas of study at top universities and their mentors, guided by our team, will support them through the application process as well. And then senior year up the ante, we're working on college applications and that whole process. And we take a very personalized approach to that because ultimately best fit college is unique to each student. We want our students to get into, what I call, I say, the best fit of the best possible option. So no one is just getting one option and having to go there. Our students, we want them to get to choose what's best, senior year.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

So I'm curious, I really want to talk about best fit of the best possible, and I want you to unpack that for me. But first I'm curious about something else, which is, I'm curious if you could tell me a little bit about the students' motivation. How motivated are they initially in the program and how much does just having that relationship help to motivate them? What are the main factors in terms of motivation for your students?

Sara Elaquad:

When you talk about motivation... So motivation [inaudible] it's not a consistent trait that any of us have, as we all know very well.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Yep. Basic feature of human nature.

Sara Elaquad:

Right. So we present the opportunity to students, and we really believe that... And we present it early, in ninth grade, and then again later on, before they are invited to apply. But we really believe that seeing an opportunity, your work can pay off, is a big motivator. So having information about the mindset or opportunity is, in itself, motivating, perhaps for a student who may have been like, "Well, I don't know.

Why would I work hard in school? I'm not seeing how this will help me. I'm not seeing perhaps people I know getting really great opportunities, and so maybe that's not going to happen for me either." So getting the opportunity in front of students is important. Our students, when we talk to them initially, we're looking to see motivation and interest to go to college, because that's what we need. Once they're with us, they want to go to college, they're willing to put in the work, we're there to support along the way and to motivate along the way.

Like you said, having an adult who's going to be your teammate in this journey to getting to college is important. And it really goes for anyone. It helps to have people on your team, but it's really critical for young people. There's a lot of research around consistent, sustained academic environment, adult relationships by Dr. Robert Balfanz out at Johns Hopkins, many others that says that it is a game changer for students to have those kind of relationships. And I want to be clear that that's not to indicate that families are supporters of students. There's often discourse around low income families not caring or not putting in investment in their students. That's absolutely not the case that we see in Cleveland. Parents and caregivers absolutely do care. It's just a little different when you have someone outside of your family, you're in an academic setting, and in the case of our program, it's a person who has gone to college who can share the ins and outs of that with you, and make sure that you have the information you need to be successful. So that's-

Dionissi Aliprantis:

It's interesting. That is the kind of missing resource, in some sense. That's the missing piece to the puzzle for a lot of those kids that you're working with. There's networks, maybe some tacit knowledge about how to navigate the education system.

Sara Elaquad:

Yeah, absolutely. Our program, at the core of it, it's about academic tools and building strengths and things like that, but it is about building social capital, and social capital is having access to relationships and information and support. And it's the way that many people become successful, or remain successful, is knowing people who can support them in their goals. And so we want to build and strengthen that for our students as well.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

I'm curious to talk a little bit about outcomes. So what are some of the outcomes you all have had?

Sara Elaquad:

Yeah. So our students outcomes are a hundred percent of our students over our time have attended a four-year college. And we are currently researching our up-to-date graduation rate, but it tracks it over 91, 92%. And ultimately that's our-

Dionissi Aliprantis:

It's college graduation rate?

Sara Elaquad:

College graduation. Yes.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

And so this is for probably most students in Cleveland, I would imagine that their college completion rate is well below 90%.

Sara Elaquad:

Yeah, it's much lower. And nationally for low-income students from first generation families, which is the majority of our students... Well, a hundred percent of our students are from low-income families. Majority are from first gen or first gen, tracks at about 11% college graduation rate. And so-

Dionissi Aliprantis:

That's an incredible number.

Sara Elaquad:

Yeah.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

So these are people that have applied and successfully been admitted and have enrolled, 11% of those complete.

Sara Elaquad:

Yeah.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

That's just an incredible number.

Sara Elaquad:

Yeah. And so for our students, we see them be successful. Our goal is not college access, it's college success. And that time in Minds Matter, over the three years, is intended to prepare students to be successful in college, not just to have the tools and knowledge and skills, but to know how to build those skills that they will find that they need in college, to know how to advocate for themselves, to know where to find support and resources, that includes at their college, but includes the people in their lives through Minds Matter. We typically have students reach out to us for all kinds of things, and we are actually building an in college support program to have a more formal system of support, but we'll have students reach out like, "Hey, I am looking for an internship in local media. Is there anyone that you know that I can talk to?"

And anytime a student reaches out in that way, I will either find someone I know or someone on our team will, or we will ask someone else in our Minds Matter network to find someone. And that's what I'm talking about, is knowing that there are people that you can go to, to say, "Hey, can you connect me to someone? Or how do I even do this? How do I access, in this case, a career in journalism?" And so we maintain strong ties with our students and that's also important for their success.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

So I'm curious, you said earlier your goal is for students to have the best fit of the best possible, I guess, college, university. And so I'm curious if you could unpack that a little bit for me. What have your students' experiences been once they get to college? And what do you think are the most important components of their success there?

Sara Elaquad:

So first, best fit of the best possible. We think about a few things there. So I'll start with best possible, and best possible envisions, in part, selectivity of college. And so we do know that when students, there's research on this, when students attend, especially students from low income families, when they attend more selective colleges, they will typically earn much higher incomes over their lifespan than a student who attended a less selective school. That in part is, again, due to social capital, the network that they build at a more selective school and the opportunities that come out of some of the more selective schools, are frankly just easier. It makes it easier to get a job. That's a reality, and that is something that we want to be a reality, not for only the most resourced or the most wealthy families, but for our students as well.

And so that is a component, we want to make sure that our students are not under matching when it comes to college, and that means that they're applying to colleges that are at the caliber that they are with regard to their academic achievement while they've been in the Minds Matter program. Best fit is a lot more individualized. And so we don't only focus on the most elite colleges. Our goal is to... And options also goes to having options, knowing about all of the colleges that are out there that might be a place that you may want to go-

Dionissi Aliprantis:

And why. [inaudible]

Sara Elaquad:

[inaudible] Whatever it is. Yeah. And so best fit goes to the student and their family and their needs. And we do our very best to ensure that our students go to a college where they will have the supports that they need. When a conversation that's been really important nationally the last several years has been how do colleges ensure that students from first generation families, lower income families, are really strongly supported and have tailored supports for their needs while they're in college? Because college has historically been, in the US, a place that was built for the white and wealthy, and that has changed a great deal, but there's still a little bit of work to do. And so we look at colleges where our students will feel supported. Obviously almost every college in the US, with a small minority outlined from that, is a predominantly white institution.

Our students are not predominantly white. And so we want to make sure that they're able to feel comfortable on campus, that there are places and communities built for them, and that's a big component of fit. Another component of fit is financial fit. And so, one thing that we really focus heavily on senior year, but also through building our students' college profiles through the ACT, through writing, through the summer college immersion experiences. But the other thing that we focus on is getting enough funding to go to college. And so there's a lot of money out there. You just have to know how to get it, and it's not always straightforward.

And so being a top candidate for college, having these experiences through Minds Matter, helps ensure that colleges will offer you more in scholarship money. So that's merit aid on top of need-based aid, but also having outside scholarships to ensure you can go. And so Fit matters for us because we want to make sure we figure out the best financial aid package for a student possible, so that they and their family can avoid debt as much as possible, and are able to go into their careers without that burden accompanying it. And so we have to be really careful, senior year, about that type of fit as well.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Yeah. Okay. So many aspects of the decisions that you all are supporting the students with, it's very cool. But I'm curious to know, do you have some students that have made it onto the labor market and how are they doing there?

Sara Elaquad:

We don't have research per se, but we do monitor our students and their success and their outcomes. And one, anecdotally, our students do... Our goal is for them to get into careers, and that means stable jobs that will allow them to create, be a part of the type of work that they want to be a part of, have the kind of life that is thriving and successful and flexible in the way that it needs to be. And we see a lot of our students, one, they do go into careers. One thing I really noticed is that a lot of our students go into professions where they are looking to make an impact in the world. So we've had a handful of students become teachers both in other states and also here in Ohio. We've had students start nonprofits, regional nonprofits. We've had students who work... We have a student here who worked for a maternal health nonprofit in Cleveland.

We actually have a Minds Matter Cleveland alumni who works for Minds Matter New York. And so we see a lot of students dedicated to helping and making the world a better place. And I completely missed a couple. We've got a student who is the head of Community Impact at Microsoft. We have a student who recently, in the last couple of years, built an ed tech startup. And so I tend to think that our students see how impactful others have been in their lives, and so they too see that that's possible and they want to do something to help others and make a difference in their community or in our country and the world.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Really virtuous cycle there. Pretty cool. Yeah. Okay. So I have a couple more questions. But I guess one question I would have is, have there been any surprises for you all? And are there other needs of your students that you feel like you all have had a difficult time addressing in terms of their college success, their labor market success? It sounds like you have a sense of what the needs are and you're providing those, but are there any areas where they're still difficult for you or you wish you had more resources or just that you're still working on?

Sara Elaquad:

There's been a lot of talk about paid and unpaid internships and how critical it is to be able to have a career building internship while you're in college. And for our students, and for many students from Cleveland or from Ohio, around the country, it's simply not possible to take on an unpaid internship in the summer. And so if your opportunity is to have, let's say, an unpaid internship, that's really going to help you build important career skills because you want to be an architect, let's say, but you need to pay bills, you need to live over the summer, you might take a job at a local fast food restaurant for an hourly pay, which is totally fine, but it's not necessarily going to help you become an architect. Right?

Dionissi Aliprantis:

It's setting up different kind of long-term trajectory.

Sara Elaquad:

Yeah, I worked at Baskin-Robbins when I was younger. It's all good, but we're missing opportunities.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

That's the issue.

Sara Elaqaad:

Students from Waller families are able to take on unpaid opportunities because they've got support. And so that's a place where if I were to say, "I wish we could give a Minds Matter stipend to those students and make sure that they can take on an unpaid internship." When I was in law school, I did an internship at the NAACP over the summer, and that would've been unpaid. But for the law school having a public interest law fund, that I got a stipend from so that I had funds over the summer. That kind of support is really important. And it's either on us to find those stipends for our students or we've got to make sure that there's more work on the corporate and to ensure that opportunities are paid and that they're an equitable opportunity for all kinds of people from different backgrounds. So that's one challenge that we often see that we try to help navigate.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

I do want to ask if you were speaking to, say, for example, Eric Gordon, the CEO of CMSD, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, what specifically would you think about in a conversation with someone like that, or Chicago Public Schools or wherever? But I think very generally, if you take a step back, what do you think are the lessons from your work for the entire, I think, K12 system, and maybe even more broadly thinking about the interaction between our education system and the labor market?

Sara Elaqaad:

Yeah. I think with regard to K12, and what I do say to Eric is that he and I talk about high expectations for our students, and we're both on the same page around that. And that's having people in your life and understanding that society around you believes in you and that you can be successful, it's critical. And I think that that's something that CMSD has worked to build into their culture, but I think that's number one. Number two, and maybe tied is as much individualized support as possible. We've got the biggest urban school district in Ohio, which is in the highest poverty city, and that means that the schools alone cannot fully impact students' lives and their success.

And we have built a lot of supports in other schools in Cleveland, really unprecedented levels of supports in the Cleveland schools that are wraparound attempts to support students and families. But it's hard to be like, "Hey, you CMSD or you K to 12 district, you've got to do what we're doing when you've got so many different levels of students." We've got lead exposure at the infancy level, and then we have to support students who have been poisoned by that. And CMSD and other districts have to work with a lot of different challenges that are a little bit... They're not insulated from Minds Matter in any way, but they're responsible for students every single day, almost all the year long.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

It almost sounds like, and I don't want to put words in your mouth, but almost that you see yourself and Minds Matter has more of a support for public schools. And I don't know if it's a direct support of public schools, but just that what public schools are dealing with. There's so much that it's hard to put it all on the public schools.

Sara Elaqaad:

Yeah, absolutely. So we've got to support them as much as possible. And Minds Matter is one of those ways. We're the add-on, "Hey, you don't have to do all this individualized college advising and sending students to summer programs and doing a whole ton of ACT preparation. We're going to do it." And

schools can focus on the other things that they need to focus on and the educational environment within a school.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

I hope you enjoyed this conversation on economic inclusion. Check out the other resources we have on our website where you can subscribe to receive updates on all of our work, and most importantly, reach out with your insights on these issues. You can find us at clevelandfed.org/pei.