

# The Power of ePortfolios as Advocacy Tools for Students Facing Systemic Barriers and Racism

With Abiodun Durojaye

**Urban Alliance**

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Immigrating into a new society could be challenging, regardless of age or gender. The greatest challenge, however, is coming to terms with institutional racism at an early age, which can create systemic barriers to education and alter the trajectory of life in many ways.

For Dr. Abiodun Durojaye, her experiences as a Nigerian child in the United States shaped her to advocate for creating opportunities for young people. As one from an ethnic minority background, Abiodun believes in creating a world where young people wouldn't have to change parts of themselves to fit in or face systemic deterrents.

In this episode of the Digication Scholars Conversations, Dr. Abiodun Durojaye, the Chief Executive Officer of Urban Alliance, shares her experiences. As an immigrant, she has had to deal with the issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and decolonization. Like having to go by the name Abby for 25 years because someone had nicknamed her in Fourth Grade as "Abby," perceived as easier to pronounce than Abiodun. It took getting a doctorate around ethnic and black-sounding names and workplaces to embrace her original name.

Having worked as the Executive Director of Career Services and Placement at a University, our guest realized that mentorship for young people must start early. This realization also stems from her wanting to be the advocate she never had as a young black girl. As a result, she now encourages people to gain different perspectives for the good of young people. By creating opportunities for those who do not feel included, she hopes that, unlike her, they won't take 25 long years to feel valued.

## The Place of ePortfolio as an Advocacy Tool for Marginalized Students

At Urban Alliance, the goal is to help young people hone their career development skills before they get to the College. They do this by creating opportunities for and linking high school students up with professionals to help them expand their network. This non-profit organization aims to create a level playing field by nurturing social, emotional, and career development skills. Unlike traditional internship programs, Urban Alliance has a high school internship program connecting young people to one-on-one mentors at internship sites.

Creating opportunities for young people is not without challenges. First, potential partners need to see the value of high school internships. For Abiodun, waiting until college to start an internship might be too late. This program, therefore, works to get employers to "see the value in a 17-year-old

resilient kid from the south side of Chicago who wants to do good work."

Having undergone these mentorship programs through their internship, these kids have professional stories to tell even before college. The ePortfolio, therefore, comes in handy to help students gain career exposure by showcasing their unique stories and overcoming systemic barriers to education. Emphasizing the value of the ePortfolio to these students, Abiodun marvels at how much she could have done if she had her hands on a digital portfolio at 17.

Being able to tell their stories using ePortfolio creates a level playing field. Regardless of one's background or privileges, everyone can share their stories to connect with the same employment opportunities. Considering the number of students Urban Alliance works with who would ordinarily not have access to opportunities, ePortfolio saves the day.

*"See the value in a 17-year-old resilient kid from the south side of Chicago who wants to do good work."*

**Dr. Abiodun Durojaye**

CEO, Urban Alliance

## Unconventional Decision-Making Patterns

The regular approach to career development often goes from high school to college, seals that first job, and proceeds to achieve other career goals. Our outstanding guest tells us this may not be the case for everyone, especially those facing systemic educational barriers. While some people go to college and later get jobs, others must do both concurrently.

Moreover, the mother of three would tell young people to see the forest for the trees while making career choices. For example, some people, perhaps, enjoy high school and would love to go to college, but they don't have the resources to do so. As a result, such people must work for a while to save up for college. She suggests people should "start from the end and work their way right back." The first question young people should ask themselves is what they want to do and what they want to be.

While some careers, like medicine, are tied to college, others, like entrepreneurship, are about the length of experience. They must go through a decision-making process to gain career exposure and tap into opportunities for young people in fields like entrepreneurship. One must consider what they wish to sell and get certified, go for workshops, or do skill acquisitions to help them excel in their chosen fields. Each person's decision-making process is unique, so what works for Alice might not work for Geoffrey. Based on this premise, it is consequential to remember that young people have different privileges. As such, some are bound to be more privileged than others, and these privileges largely determine their decisions at every point in their lives.

By starting from the end with their goals in mind, young people can find their unique pathways to success. With this comes the realization that although it is good to go to college, it may not align with their career goals.

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