

1. When I first got presented with this project, I was quite hesitant to proceed with it. The goal of this project was to directly communicate with refugees and migrants to gain access to basic education resources in Chicago. I was unsure whether to trust, be safe, or advocate for their rights to education. When coming in contact with a family, the mother was quiet and hesitant to share her story. It was after some patience and getting to gain her trust that she was able to share her cultural background and open up about the obstacles she had faced. The language barrier, unfamiliarity with the school system, and concerns for her children's social life worried her. It started to grow on me how unfortunate the events of what I had heard were, I still have hope in finding a greater light in the future. It shows how families are willingly striving to create a better future for their children. This experience revealed the challenges families like hers face in accessing resources.
2. In this progression throughout this course, I have been active in collecting and distributing clothing, and organizing community support provided me with an understanding of mutual aid beyond theory. As I had done some distributing myself while it was still quite chilly, I had some conversations with the people. I saw the profound impact not just of my contribution towards helping others, but there is also of a whole community that does it. After conversing with a few people, this experience transformed my view. Instead of just giving out to help, I got to speak with them directly, which invoked a sense of empathy and frustration about the condition that they're in. This had reaffirmed the importance of supporting community-led agencies to lead to a better society.
3. The research study on barriers to college access for first-generation students deeply resonated with my own journey in which reflected my own experiences. As a first-generation college student, I've faced the challenges of navigating complex application processes, limited guidance, and financial uncertainty. All of which struggles are shared by many of the individuals. Participating in this research offered meaningful insight into the disparities of the community around me. Hearing students' personal stories of both hardship and resilience reinforced by how data can reveal invisible obstacles these students face. This experience changed how I see data, not just as something to study, but as a powerful tool for advocacy. I realized that when research is done ethically and includes diverse voices, it can highlight the challenges faced by marginalized groups and support real policy change. It also showed me that researchers have a responsibility to make their work clear and representative, so it can help inform the public and lead to a fairer education system.
4. This experience largely confirmed my belief in the crucial power of community organizations to address complex issues like job searching, educational access, and technology in daily life, while also revealing important limitations. Witnessing the dedication and resourcefulness of ChiEAC and its partner organizations in providing direct support, workshops, and mentorship to community members facing these challenges was inspiring. The ability of these organizations to build trust within communities, offer culturally relevant services, and adapt to the evolving needs of individuals demonstrates their significant strengths. For example, the job search workshops not only provided practical skills but also offered a supportive community for

individuals facing unemployment. Similarly, the efforts to bridge the digital divide by providing technology access and training were essential for educational and economic participation. However, I also observed the limitations inherent in this kind of work. These organizations often operate with limited resources, relying heavily on grants and volunteer efforts, which can create instability and restrict their capacity to address the full scale of the issues. Furthermore, while they provide vital direct services, their ability to address the root causes of systemic inequalities is often constrained by broader policy and economic structures. This experience reinforced the necessity of community organizations as frontline responders and advocates, while also highlighting the need for systemic change and greater public investment to address the fundamental drivers of these complex social problems.

5. Looking back on my time with ChiEAC, I see it as a formative experience that deeply shaped my goals, values, and vision for the future. Engaging directly with marginalized communities, conducting research, and collaborating with the community solidified my commitment to social justice. In a way, it inspired me to pursue a career focused on addressing systemic inequities. To shape work that not only offers immediate support but also drives long-term change, which I can use as a foundation for a business. I developed essential skills in communication, active listening, and ethical research, all of which I intend to carry into future endeavors. Moving forward, I aim to stay rooted in community-based efforts through volunteering throughout my professional life. This experience left me with an everlasting desire to contribute to a more just and equitable society.