

CRISJ Building Justice Podcast

Note: Transcriptions may be imperfect. Please contact conversation partners directly should you have questions.

Episode 9 Title: The Odyssey Peer-to-Peer Mentoring Program and Engaging in Student-Led Research: A Conversation between Dr. Kristina Flores Victor and Dr. Danielle Slakoff

Music lyrics

Company under construction, the function, justice for the human family we demand it. Justice, true freedom, equality is a must. Thus, decolonization of the planet. So bust this. People be the power now we're Building Justice. Pulling out divinations, now we're Building Justice. Welcome the planet to the Podcast, "Building Justice," "Building Justice," "Building Justice." Building is to add on, or to do away with.

Dr. Danielle Slakoff (host)

[00:02] Welcome to building justice a podcast that originates from Sacramento state university's Center on race, immigration and social justice, also known as CRISJ.

This podcast explores critical issues affecting our communities with the hope of creating a healthier and more just world. The ongoing conversations between the Sacramento state community and regional partners, aim to spark understandings empathy and motivation to join the struggle for a better future for all.

Today, I will be your host my name is Dr Danielle Slakoff, and I am currently an assistant professor in the division of criminal justice at Sacramento State. I have the honor to be interviewing Dr Kristina Flores Victor today, Dr Flores Victor is an assistant professor of political science at Sacramento State Dr Flores Victor thanks so much for taking the time to be here with me today. I want to discuss with you but let's first start off with your personal background, can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up and your childhood.

Kristina Flores Victor

[01:09] Yeah, of course, thank you very much for having me you today I'm from California and I'm actually from northern California I grew up in Fair Oaks here in town and I did my elementary in high school here and I eventually went away to college and had a completely different major I was majoring in the sciences and before I graduated and applied to Medical

School I just felt like something was wrong something was off I couldn't quite figure out what it was, and I ended up moving home before I finished my degree, and much to my parents disappointment obviously didn't finish my degree and I came home and started thinking a little bit more about what it is, I wanted to do. What my career would be and when I came home, I ended up enrolling at Sac State to finish off my degree, and when I did, I took a political science class just to fill out my schedule and it was on Latin American politics and right from that moment I just knew that this is the thing I wanted to study and ended up changing my major and doing three additional years to finish the degree and that's kind of the start of the career and my relationship with Sac State.

Danielle Slakoff (she/her)

[02:36] Absolutely well that's a perfect segue because I was going to ask you about what led you on the path to Sacramento State as a professor, how did you end up coming back to Sac State.

Kristina Flores Victor (she, hers)

[02:48] Well, when I came here, I come from a smaller kind of liberal arts college with small class sizes and things like that, but even with that I didn't really have that close relationship with any of my professors it wasn't until I came to Sac State and I took some classes in ethnic studies and sociology and my professors there they really took the time to make comments on my assignments, to talk to me after class to encourage me and told me what a great student I was and how I had that aptitude for studying which I hadn't really been told before and never really thought of myself as that type of a student I'm first-generation college student and I just had never really thought of myself as someone who was, you know that good at school and so being at Sac State a lot of professors and a lot of different departments took a lot of time and energy. to mentor me and encouraged me to apply to graduate school and encouraged me to take other classes, they were taking a teaching and, you know, encourage my writing and kind of this inquiry, and so I feel like I developed, both as a kind of wanting to be a professor from my time at Sac State and learning from those people who can who spent so much time and energy mentoring me.

Danielle Slakoff (she/her)

[04:13] Absolutely well that sounds like an awesome experience that you had as a student, as you and I have talked about before I'm also a CSU alum, so I think it's interesting that we both ended up coming back to the CSU. Was Sacramento State your first academic job after your PhD program or was there something in between?

Kristina Flores Victor (she/hers)

[04:35] Yeah that's a great question, there was something in between as I'm sure most academics know the job market is tough for academics. I actually spent a few years at a policy Center in downtown Sacramento here in the capital. And it's a part of the UC system it's called the UC Center and they do work on public policy in California, so I was a visiting assistant Professor there for just over two years. And they have a really innovative program there that

allows students from all over the UC system to come and do internships at the state Capitol so they come from LA, San Diego, Santa Barbara Santa Cruz, and they come up for the quarter and they do internships in you know Assembly and Senate offices.

[05:24] And then they take classes at the UC Center where I was a visiting professor and they work on real policy problems so part of what they did in their classes at the UC Center was to pick an original research project and during the entire quarter that's the thing they worked on and they partnered with their office that they were interning at to work on a problem that was of interest to the office and then that became their academic project too.

So, when I was at the UC Center part of what my job was to do was to redesign the curriculum. To make that possible, so that they could get there's a lot of students don't really have an opportunity to have this real-world policy to do policy evaluation to do research, even at the UC right that might also still be kind of a small opportunity that only a few people get so my time there I, I really enjoyed my time there the students were phenomenal their projects were groundbreaking the work they did for their offices and probably the best part of that job is so many of the students go on to work in offices in the capital, and just seeing what they're doing now, I love getting their emails where they send and say you know they've been promoted or they're going to grad school and I feel like for sure, one of these students is going to end up being the governor and then I can say ah that was my student.

Danielle Slakoff (she/her)

[06:48] That is so cool and you know, listening to you discuss your experience as a student, as well as in this role that you had and now, as a professor at Sacramento state mentorship seems to be a key theme running through all of it, and one of the things that I admire about you so much one of the many things is your role in the Odyssey mentoring program so, can you tell me more about the Odyssey mentoring program and how that came to be.

Kristina Flores Victor (she, hers)

[07:19] I would love to. The Odyssey Mentoring Program is a peer to peer mentoring program in the political science department and I actually started it when I was a student back at Sac State when I was in the Master's Program and I had a really fantastic mentor who was also in the political science program and I worked for him for a while, as the student instructional assistant, and what that is, is a student who-- if you have a class on campus that has a high fail rate sometimes they will, the University funds these student instructional positions that's kind of like a tutor or in the UC system, a teaching assistant that helps students succeed in these classes that are more difficult, so I had worked for this particular Professor for several semesters as an instructional assistant.

[08:11] And again, he was one of these people who had kind of just this unwavering faith in my ability to do things probably misplaced it at times and he, let me know that the Dean, our Dean, at the time had some special funding and the professors were able to propose programs.

[08:31] And he thought you know you're really interested in mentoring, maybe we should propose a program and would that be something that I was interested in helping write this grant. I've never written a grant I don't I had no experience whatsoever, I have no business writing a grant and we spent almost an entire semester, putting the grant proposal together and he was great at that we ended up getting the grant and so, then we had a program to design.

[09:01] We had a year to kind of get it up and running, and so I spent the year doing literature reviews of other mentoring programs in other fields, you know in what mentoring programs look like in medicine in law in trade, schools, you know professional mentoring programs versus academic and from that kind of really broad we took a research approach to it. And from that really broad kind of review of the literature, we came up with the structure of the Odyssey Mentoring program which, which was a program to have juniors and seniors in our major mentor incoming freshmen and transfer students who need the most support when they get to the university, because a lot of them like myself are first generation students.

[09:46] Maybe they did really well in high school, but now you get to college and you know what's going on, what do I do and how do I get classes and how do I navigate and one thing I found as a professor, is there are so many programs on campus aimed at student success and I think students just sometimes don't realize what they're called or how to get into them, and so we felt like this mentoring program would help students connect with the resources that were on campus and one of the ways I think one of the innovations and I really want to give credit to the Dean, at the time for believing in this was that we proposed it as a one-unit class, so we had to have some way to kind of compensate the mentors for their time.

[10:28] And also to encourage the mentees so the Dean, at the time, agreed, and so it became a one-unit credit no credit class. To kind of help compensate them for all the time they were spending working on this mentoring program and most of our mentors are matched up for the whole year, so they do through the fall and the spring. And just the relationships that come out of this program I mean, I still to this day, people will tell me like "Oh I'm a senior now and I'm currently serving as a mentor but I call my mentor all the time to ask them questions" and seeing that kind of a multi-generational relationship across mentors and mentees it's like that that was the dream.

[11:12] You know and seeing it come true so yeah it would started when I was a master student because of someone who believed in me, and we tried to design it to be kind of foolproof that it would have a student coordinator run it every year, so the faculty are a little more hands off and it's a student run Program. And I think that was the right choice because every new student coordinator brings some different innovation to the leadership position and makes the program better every year.

Danielle Slakoff (she/her)

[11:39] Absolutely, that is so cool I did not know being new faculty myself at Sacramento State, I did not know the ins and outs of the Odyssey mentoring Program. Other than that, you had a connection to it, and that is so amazing to hear that it started when you were a master student

that you were able to receive that mentoring for grant writing and that it blossomed into this beautiful program that still exists now, that is, that is awesome.

[12:06] I will say once again mentoring has come up a lot through this and you are clearly so passionate about mentoring, the next generation of students scholars practitioners and really just citizens going out into the world and I know that you recently worked with three undergraduate students on a book chapter collaborate and that you titled the project language acquisition and proficiency for immigrant children in K through 12 the lasting impacts in higher education, I would love to hear about how this particular project came to be.

Kristina Flores Victor (she, hers)

[12:46] Yeah, this this project is really special to me I--I try not to cry sometimes when I think, because again kind of like the Odyssey program It really is this kind of manifestation of everything I hoped and dreamed academia would be like.

And the things that could happen for my students so it's very special to me this book chapter came about all condensed the story a bit, but when I teach in my classes--I am recent I'm relatively new professor at Sac State I would tell my students in my classes, sometimes when they were working on papers or projects, you know, when the work is really good if you want to continue to work on this, I can help you, I want to support you if you want to try and get this published or maybe go to a conference or do go to graduate school. And I would always tell them that in class and try to call out and praise work so that they would hear the things that I heard as a student. And so, then I decided, you know one semester, probably the best way to do this was to be a little more formal about it and start an undergraduate research group and have monthly meetings and tell people you know they're welcome to come and I invited all of the students in this immigration politics class that I teach.

[14:05] And you know, we have, depending on the week or the month, you know between five to 10 to sometimes you know up to 20 people on our email chain and that's exactly what we did we help them apply to undergraduate student research competitions on campus and in other places, there are a lot of academic conferences that have things that are specifically for undergrads so posters, you know, we have some students do research poster sessions and things like that and we what I really wanted to do was have them take work that they were already doing in a class and kind of turn it into something more right like expand the project or get feedback from another group or have these experiences that are still I think really hard to come by.

[14:56] Maybe at the CSU or even in the UC for a lot of our first-generation Students, so we started this group, and it was really fun, I have to say. The students, I feel like really enjoyed seeing each other outside of class I think that's also hard on a commuter campus is you know, you're an adult and it's hard to make friends, you know how do you make friends on campus you know you see these students in your classes, and so we began to meet and we kind of began working on all these goals of applying to conferences and working on papers and this call came out for book chapters in an edited volume on immigrant literacy and teacher education and so

anytime I would come across the call I would send it out to the group so that they could know about the opportunity.

[15:41] And I said "hey Is anyone interested in this book chapter I'd be willing to work on a proposal if someone wants to work on a proposal" and three of my students responded back that this was something that they were interested in but since this isn't really an area that's my specialty, you know I asked them what is it that you want to propose so as a group we began talking about their experiences, you know coming from immigrant households mixed status families. What was their experience, like in higher education and just talking in the undergraduate research group they began to share and have all these common experiences.

[16:18] Of this kind of imposter syndrome in higher education, even though these are super high performing you know really great students. They talked about the difficulty of taking notes in class that professors use words that they still didn't know, even though they were in college and talking about how they felt like the reading took longer for them, because they themselves were English language learners at an earlier age and we began talking about some of the themes that are then talks about in the paper things like social vocabulary versus academic vocabulary, support in the home, having supportive parents, but yet, even though they're supportive they don't really understand what's going on in higher education, I definitely I felt that one for sure.

[17:05] Absolutely, and you know, the more we talk to it began to kind of come together around this research question of like how do these these experiences that we have as children living in mixed status families or coming from Spanish dominant households, being an English language learner classes How does that impact, how we are now in higher education and it came from that was the student's idea was what they kind of wanted to study. So, we put together a proposal and submitted it and then it got accepted so then we then we had to do the work after that.

Danielle Slakoff (she/her)

[17:41] That's so awesome and I know it's about English language learners and their experiences in the K through 12 could you talk a little bit about just some of the interesting findings, there are a lot of incredible findings in this piece, but something that you would highlight, as being an important point.

Kristina Flores Victor (she, hers)

[18:03] Yeah, I think, because you know you and I have been talking here about mentorship I think one of the findings I'll highlight is that we ended up doing a survey a quantitative survey of around 230 individuals and we did this survey online and then my students ended up following up and doing in depth interviews with these people, so we train, we did put together the survey, as a group, and then I train them on interviewing people, and they did the interviews themselves, and one of the things that came up both in the quantitative survey and also in the interviews was the impact of a single individual.

So, a lot of people and my students included said that they felt like their academic successes, you know hinged on this one person, whether it was a school counselor whether it was a teacher,

whether it was a coach and that's kind of another important finding is that--you know our view of who has an impact in education should be a little bit more broad than just the teacher right, so people say tutors, teacher's aide school counselors, anyone who they had contacted school that took just a little bit more time to read their work or give them feedback on their English or their vocabulary their pronunciation things that the students in the survey respondents and the interviewees found helpful that just this one person had this really profound impact on their life and making them feel like they belonged that their their work was seen and that, I mean it might sound kind of corny, but they kind of believed in them right that they had these expectations for them that were maybe higher than what other people had previously kind of thought that they were capable of.

[19:55] So I think that's one of the biggest findings is just like this, the impact of this one person, and then I would say the second really important finding was that it's not so much that there are bad teachers out there, but another important finding was just the indifference. So just feeling like you're invisible in the classroom and that no one really maybe understands your background or what you're going through and it's not that teachers are out there, you know sabotaging students lives but rather just that students felt. Yeah, I guess invisible in the classroom and that no one really took the time to recommend them for AP classes or encourage them to go to college or to help them with their their essays, and so this feeling of indifference, maybe from educators, lead to a lot of students in our survey respondents interviewees saying that they ended up self-teaching a lot.

[20:55] So this idea that if I want to get ahead, I'm going to have to teach myself, and I think where that harms us is when the students get into higher education they're so used to not asking for help, or they're used to I'll just do it myself that everything their success or their failure becomes completely internalized. And it's not the structure of the university it's not the availability of resources it's very much this I had failed in some way or I have succeeded in some way. And you know for maybe educators, such as yourself and myself, you know we have students in the class and we're like "Oh, why don't people ask for help" and I'm here to help them, but if they've had this kind of K through 12 experience, where it's all been about self-teaching and everything that you've kind of achieved you've done because you had to go out of your way to do it. It makes sense, why they don't then ask for help, or seek out mentorship or advice that we're so ready to give but that's how they've learned and that's how they've adapted right to to be able to succeed in school.

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Danielle Slakoff (she/her)

[22:00] Absolutely you brought up with your finding so many things that I personally relate to as someone whose parents did not get bachelor's degrees, as well as somebody with a mixed race family Latina mom and a white dad and what that looks like not having faculty that reflected all the parts of me, and that was something as I read this chapter, I definitely picked up on was this idea of having yourself reflected in the classroom and how important that can really be to have for the students to have and I just love this project I think it's so cool that you were able to get this published with three undergraduate students. One of which I read is now gone on

to law school and I'm sure all three will be doing amazing things in the long run, we are close to the end of the time, but I did want to ask one final question, which is what is the best part of being a professor at Sac State in your mind.

Kristina Flores Victor (she, hers)

[23:04] Oh, Oh, my goodness, I don't know if I can say one thing.

Danielle Slakoff (she/her)

[23:08] You don't have to say one!

Kristina Flores Victor (she, hers)

[23:11] I, I mean again I know it sounds kind of corny to say, but you know when I was an undergrad and I, I came to the transferred to Sac State and I had these professors, you know who would take a time to tell me that my writing was good, and you know that I belong there I just I felt like my dream was so clear that I wanted to be that person--sorry it's me it's making me emotional, I wanted to be that person for someone else.

[23:44] Absolutely, and so you know coming back here was like you know when you realize your dream so every day, when you go to work, you know, even if you're overworked have a lot of stuff going on, it feels like How can this be real life, you know this is exactly how I dreamed it would be you know whether it's the chapter or mentoring or teaching in class and it's like I don't know if there's anything that's more just the whole experience for me is I love all of it right, and I do reserve the right to complain about things. But I mean everything is I love the student body. I love the diversity of experiences that my students have they make me a better instructor I think they challenged the way I think about the world all the time. I feel like I constantly have to be at the top of my game in terms of teaching so that I can like provide to them that experience that might change their life, the way my life has changed so hopefully that answers it.

Danielle Slakoff (she/her)

[24:49] Absolutely no, I think that was so uplifting and so important to show the high-quality teaching and mentorship that you're bringing to the students and I hope that whoever listens to this really gets a clear understanding of how passionate you really are about Sacramento state the students and the mission, so thank you so much for your time, Dr Flores Victor it was so wonderful talking with you today.

Kristina Flores Victor

[25:16] Thank you for having me I really had a great time.

Musical Outro Lyrics

No more penalties and no more wars. Based on the actions. Now, time for "Building Justice,"
"Building Justice." Time for building justice, justice.