

## BUILDING JUSTICE PODCAST



### CRISJ Building Justice Podcast

Season 2, Episode 25: **Matching Diversity of the Educated to the Educator**

**Moderator: Mai Lam**

**Guests: Justin Hurst, Laura De la Garza Garcia**

**Please note:** This transcript may be imperfect. Please contact **Mai Lam** directly should you have questions.

#### **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.

**Mai:** Welcome to Building justice, a podcast by Sacramento State Center on race, immigration, and social justice, we explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world. And today, I'll be your host. My name is Mai Lam, and I'm a third-year political science student here at Sac State. And today I have the honor of speaking with ASI Executive Vice President and ASI graduate director, Laura, and Justin. Today, we will be discussing the crucial need to reflect the student diversity amongst the faculty diversity, and how the lack thereof can impact a student's success and progression in the education system. And when we don't have that diversity and how it can impact negatively on

particularly students from marginalized communities. Laura, and Justin it's been great to work alongside you both this semester. And I think we're going to have a good conversation today. So, I think this is coming at a crucial time when we're seeing almost the regression of diversity inclusion within the education system. In some states, we are seeing almost the wanting to eliminate that. The Florida HB 999 is aiming to eliminate a lot of programs and courses relating to diversity inclusion, like teaching different ethnic histories. And so, that is going to have an impact on the diversity of the faculty. And so, I want to talk to you guys today about your personal experience with diversity or lack thereof within our education system, and how that personally has impacted you guys. So in a very broad question, what has your experience been like as a student, when it came to feeling represented both within the K through 12 system and higher education? And I think Laura, you can go ahead and start us off.

**Laura:** Yeah no, thank you so much for having us. Thank you to everybody that's listening. So, my experience, listen, I have had a very broad, not broad, a very, like, diverse experience, I'd like to say in regard to growing up in a non-diverse community as opposed to a diverse community. So let me just elaborate a little bit for context. So I went to school in Mexico, all of it up to third grade. And after third grade, I moved to Michigan, near Michigan State University in East Lansing in a small town called Grand Ledge. There I was, I went to school from third grade, because I actually got held back because of a language barrier, third grade all the way until the end of my sophomore year of high school. And then I moved to California. So just for context, I've lived and grew up throughout the K through 12. I guess my K through 12 academic experience, I grew up in very different environments. So, to address your question, I'll start by saying that in, in Michigan, in the school that I was in unfortunately, there was not a lot, it was a wonderful school, there was not that many people of color. Not many teachers of color, not many students of color. If there was it was maybe very few. I do recall that for me, I was the only Mexican in my classes. There was never anybody that it could be like, "Oh, they're Mexican, too, or they're Hispanic or Latino." It was always just me. I did get the very, like, you know, mock, "Oh, I'm an eighth Spanish or I'm an eighth Mexican." And that was I was like, well, no not really, you know, you don't identify, that's not the very first group you identify yourself with. I don't think it's right to call you, you know, to say that you're from that group. It was very tough growing up, mainly because again, I didn't have anybody let alone to have the same skin color as me. And then on top of that, there was always a small little language barrier to me and my teachers, specifically in elementary school. Once I got to high school, you know, high school, you're a freshman, you feel like you're on cloud nine that you own the world. Sophomore year, a little more humbled and you know, you find your group of friends and those who accept you for who you are, regardless of your skin color or social status or whatever. But elementary school was tough. It was tough because I do remember that. You know, I got mocked because of my accent. In middle school, which was for me, it was sixth through eighth grade, over in Michigan. I did have an instance that I vividly remember, and I think it shaped me to who I am today and why I do the advocating and I speak out for my community specifically. It was an instance where I was sitting maybe like in the I was in the back of the classroom, and I don't even remember what classroom it was, I think it might have been a history class or like a, like a social studies or something. And I remember the topic we were discussing was the KKK. And we were talking about, you know, what groups, the KKK

normally targets, you know, very introductory middle school level. So, you know, everybody's paying attention, it got to the point to where the teacher chose to single me out in front of the whole sixth grade classroom telling everybody that the people that for example, the people who the KKK would target are people like Laura, and, you know, it was really daunting to just, you know. On top of being a sixth grader and being like, super like, that weird like developmental stage like socially awkward. Having a teacher single you out in front of your classmates and for your classmates' eyes to all turn on you. I was left absolutely speechless. I was like, Oh, my God, what am I supposed to do? Naturally, after class was over, I cried, because I was just more embarrassed, as opposed to I guess, I didn't know how serious that instance that she did was. I was embarrassed that I was stared at, and I was singled out. But I didn't know like, in depth, why. I called my mom. I told her. My mom, of course, was livid. But then the problem though, another problem, I guess, that we encountered is that my mom also did not speak a spoon of English. So, although she was very, you know, Mama Bear, very upset. She didn't know how to communicate those frustration efficiently to the superintendent, the principal, the teacher, you know. In the end, I, you know, as a sixth grader, I don't know what happened, I never got a formal apology from that teacher. I don't-that teacher was still employed with the middle school at the time. I'm not sure if she's there now. But it was just something so impactful, that, looking back at it now that I'm older, and I'm more aware, and I live in a more diverse community. I'm like, holy crap, like, that was a serious issue. And I wish I would have had the knowledge that I do now, to have advocated for myself and for, you know, a change or a consequence, in that regard. So, K through 12, it was challenging, and one specific time that I can remember where I was not represented, and I never felt, you know, most horrible about who I was, was that time in sixth grade.

**Mai:** Well, I honestly don't know what to say. Because that can impact us, especially a young student at the time, and how that like, that carries with you, especially the power imbalance right there with you being so young and having a teacher that does not represent you. And as almost in a way, that you can't feel the need to like, or you feel comfortable talking to, especially after what happened. And I think with the language barrier, it's yeah, I agree. It's very hard when you're young, and you don't come from a native English speaking background. It's hard to even get A, good representation and B, to do anything when you feel as if you've been mistreated. So that is horrible. And thank you for sharing that. And, Justin, do you want to take the floor with this question?

**Justin:** Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for having us on this podcast. And thank you to our listeners for caring about these issues. And also, thank you, Laura, for sharing on story like that, that was really, like, impactful. And I'm sorry that you had to go through that. I very much, I think represent the flip side, where I am, I'm white, and I'm very visibly so and I grew up in a white suburb with, you know, a significant but minority South Asian community. And growing up, I never really had to worry about experiencing that sort of thing because all my teachers looked like me. So, like I never questioned you know whether or not I could be like a school teacher or I could excel on the subject or approach and relate to the people that were teaching me. And honestly, that wasn't even the lens that I had until I was an adult. But looking back, even though I did mention, there was a large South Asian community in Folsom. Specifically,

there were a lot of people from India. There, I don't think I've had a single teacher that has been South Asian, except maybe on like an elective in high school. So I can only imagine what the different communities in my own hometown were thinking. Whereas like, I just took it for granted, because I never had to worry about being in a space that I didn't feel like I could relate to the people that were instructing me.

**Mai:** Thank you for sharing. And I think it's very important that we acknowledge that the teaching atmosphere and how there's an overwhelming representation of the white population, but there is a very, very limited population that represents other students. And so, thank you for sharing that experience. And my next question is a little bit piggybacking on the first question is - has the education system been able to actually teach you about your culture, or ethnic background in contrast with teaching about Eurocentric history? Justin, do you want to go ahead?

**Justin:** Sure. Yeah, I mean, I'm, like I mentioned I'm, I'm very – I descend from European. So, I did learn a little, perhaps too much about my own culture. I've always been someone who like, for example, in my undergrad, I studied international relations, I want to learn more about other parts of the world. But I always felt like that was lacking in their curriculum. Even in high school, I remember taking AP World History. And it just felt like AP European History at that point, like, sure, there was the token mentions of like other regions, like Egypt and China, but usually more in the ancient sense. No, sort of like real contemporary study, or understanding or deep dive into the cultures there. So, I do think like, even from my perspective, where I felt like I learned a lot about my own culture, there was definitely a lack of comprehensiveness about it.

**Mai:** I think definitely. Definitely through the K through 12 system, learning about European history was very the main focus. And as you said, even AP World History its very European focus. It was very little about you know, Africa, or Asia. And those topics didn't really come up until I mean, it was for me until I got to my undergrad. And, Laura, you said that you didn't feel as if your culture ethnic background was properly represented in the education system. And so what do you think needs to change about that moving forward?

**Laura:** You know, it's the unfortunate thing is that you get taught in- Honestly, for me, I'll speak for myself from K through 12, we get taught that Hispanics are only Mexicans, they're not, you know, I don't know, I feel like, okay, I'm very, very passionate about the Latino and Hispanic community. And the reason why I always throw those out there is because Hispanic is one thing, and Latino is another one. And I think that's one of the most common misconceptions. Something that doesn't get taught or doesn't get elaborated on enough in the K through 12, or just, you know, sometimes maybe even call it like, you're beginning classes, they're not going to like in depth address, and unless you have an emphasis or a focus on those community or those minority groups. So, I mean, let me see what your question was. I just don't think it represents it enough, you know, because then people generalize, generalize that, okay. Everybody who speaks Spanish is Mexican. Everybody who speaks Spanish is from Spain, like shoot. Even in my, when I was in high school, over Michigan, again, I tested out of my foreign

language. And the high school didn't allow me to get the full credits for that, because they're like, no, like, you have to take a foreign language. And I'm like, Okay, well, I speak a foreign language, this should be, you know, this should suffice. They made me take a class with all seniors in high school Spanish class, the most advanced class they had, it wasn't an AP class, because they didn't offer that. And it was so funny, because a white lady was teaching it, you know, and it was one individual who I respect very much, but I just didn't agree with her teachings. I mean, she was saying that the way that I was speaking was incorrect. And I'm like, no, it's a different way. It does not mean it's incorrect, just because her curriculum was teaching Spanish from Spain, you know, it's very different. There's different dialects and you know, her constantly marking up my work, marking up my exercises or even correcting me in front of the class like no, that's incorrect, like, no, actually, it's not it's how they speak in Mexico, which is also Spanish. So, I think that it needs to be diversified if it's going to be taught because there's not only one right way, there's not only one right, you know, way to speak Spanish, given that in the world, in the Latino and in the Hispanic community, there's different dialects. So that is, that's my little take on that one.

**Mai:** No, definitely. And I see your stance on that. And so, I kind of want to ask you a follow up question. Do you think that the personal qualifications of a professor matter just as much as the academic qualifications?

**Laura:** 100% Like I said, I had a white lady teach the Spanish class. And although that was great, and I'm sure she was, you know, she was teaching it for a reason. I don't think that it's represented enough, like, how to speak that language or how to, like fully be 100%. To master or understand the language, does that make sense? So, I think that if somebody's going to teach a specific minority, you know, a focus on a specific minority group, that person should be of that minority group for the sake of cultural competency. I don't think it should be, you know, a Caucasian woman or man teaching a minority studies class, if that makes any sense?

**Mai:** No, definitely. I noticed that disconnect when I - because last semester, all of my classes revolved around a different culture, or a different country that wasn't European. And it was being all taught by somebody who wasn't from that background. And so they have the academic qualification but that personal connection, personal insight, was just lacking. And I definitely agree, it's just as important to have that personal qualification alongside with the academic requirements. And so, I think all three of us here who you have this passion for advocacy, we have this passion to represent for those who are not represented as well. And so working in organizations, such as ASI and studying in the humanities field and going on to represent more than just our campus but to represent our community or city or state, etc. Do you guys feel even more that there's such a amplify need, a more crucial need to elevate the fight to ensure that there is diversity within the faculty as well as students? Because there's always a conversation about getting more students of color into school, getting them more educated, giving them more resources. But there is not that big of a conversation about ensuring diversity amongst professors, do you feel that there is a more crucial need because of what we do to ensure that that happens in the future? And I'll give that to Justin.

**Justin:** I would say yes, absolutely. In much the same way, that being a white man, I need to use my voice to be an ally to help others in the conversation. Being representatives holding those roles where we have access to administration on campus where it's easier to talk to faculty, especially in faculty senate meetings. I think that gives us a lot of privilege that we need to use to help to elevate student voices and advance those causes. I can just say anecdotally, in my program, I belong to the Master's in Public Policy and Administration program here at Sac State. We have like as a student group, not ASI, but just the students in my program, we've been really pushing for years now, for more of an equity-based focus in diversity among faculty, because coming into the program, a lot of people noticed that there wasn't a lot of faculty diversity. So, I would say that, even though there have been strides, and recent hires have been from a more diverse population, and actually do equity-based research, which is great. It's been very much student led effort. And I think using our voices collectively, especially when you're coming from like a formal organization, such as ASI, is crucial to be able to advance those causes to put pressure on administration and faculty to diversify who's teaching us.

**Mai:** Yeah, thank you so much for giving us insight on you program. And yeah, it's definitely more of a student led push, then I noticed than coming from within the faculty. And so, I think that's just kind of saying something is that students like we see it, we see the need for it, and that we want it, and we fight for it. And so hopefully, you know, by the time that our kids go to college, there will be more professors who can represent them accurately. And do you have any thoughts on this Laura?

**Laura:** Within ASI, you know, we, I would consider, I would consider us to be very diverse and in multiple, you know multiple cases. So, I know that commonly, there are certain, for example, one thing that I can think of on top of my head, we have scholarships just offered throughout Sac State that sometimes are not offered to all minority groups. And that includes, you know, maybe if you're undocumented, or if you're under DACA, you might not have as many financial opportunities as another regular student would, you know, or a non-undocumented student or those who are not on their DACA. ASI offers that. So, I think that is one step that ASI is doing and contributing into making sure that we are diversifying not only our representation for the students, but also making sure that all the students had an equitable experience here at Sac State. And then, for faculty diversity, and then the ASI role, I know that, you know, we call to action, we call to action what the university promises. And that's, you know, I can't date back too many years, so other than the years that I've been with the ASI. But I know that, for example, if we see that a department needs a little bit more representation, I know that our ASI President is very much in the conversations that pertain to representation, whether it's on faculty or you know, any other role that might be vacant here on campus. That's just something that at the forefront, I can tell you that Salma Pacheco and myself, when we were running for the presidential ticket, we wanted to put forth we wanted to make sure that students not only feel safe and welcome on this campus, but that they are represented, whether that's through faculty, through advisors through positions at higher up here on campus, like we just want to make sure that that we are voicing that for the 31,000 students who are on campus as student leaders. Does that answer the question?

**Mai:** Yeah definitely, I think that ensuring diversity and that all students are represented within the campus. It's very important. You guys are doing great work with that in ASI. And I want to ask you guys, do you think your education journey, whether it be K through 12, or undergrad, postgrad, do you think it would have been different if there had been more diversity amongst faculty population?

**Laura:** Sorry, just a clarification. Are you talking just at a college level? Are you talking like just overall academic from like, the minute you go to school up until now?

**Mai:** Overall.

**Laura:** Okay, Justin, do you want to take the lead on this one?

**Justin:** Yeah, I'm happy to. Even though I mentioned I felt very represented, if over represented in my own educational journey. Even I feel like I would have had a difference. If there was greater representation, one, because I think you get more of a diversity of perspective, especially I think, Laura's example, was very pertinent in terms of, oh, there's only one proper way to speak Spanish. I took a few Spanish courses in my high school experience. And, you know, I guess I was fortunate in that they were actually taught by native speakers and people who identify as Hispanic. But even then, the curricula, had them be teaching in much the same way as Laura was taught where it's like, oh, no, there's only one proper way to speak Spanish and its Spain, Spanish. So, I think that that diversity of representation can trickle up through the curriculum, and represent more of a diversity of perspectives when it comes to just education of foreign languages, foreign cultures, and all of that. So, I think, even for someone like me, that would have been a benefit.

**Mai:** Yeah, I definitely think it's important, as you said, to have different perspectives and different outlooks on the way history is taught on the way different cultures are taught. So, thank you for that. And Laura, do you want to add anything to that?

**Laura:** Yeah, no, I 100% agree. I mean, we've been circling around the same here representation, diversity and diversifying those who students essentially look up to. Whether it's students in between the K through 12 system or even in college. I do think that my education or excuse me, my education journey would have been a lot different if I had had a teacher that look like me through the K through 12, you know, like timeframe. And the reason for that, I think it's because even now we'll be, I'll be very transparent, you start building this imposter syndrome, that, you know, it's really hard to overcome. It's really hard to work through because, you know, you are so accustomed to growing up and, you know, not speaking Spanish anywhere else other than in the house, because, you know, my mother and my dad, were afraid that I was going to get, you know, bullied, or I was going to get singled out, which I mean, it happened anyway. But you know, you're just accustomed to doing these things and be restricted of who you truly are. And when you truly come from, that you start, you know, adapting yourself to how everybody is here in the United States, or I guess I'll say how, how the typical, you know, Caucasian American is. And it shouldn't be like that, you

know, it shouldn't be like that, there's, there shouldn't be a reason for somebody to feel ashamed because of how they, they speak because of the accent they have, because of how they dress because of, you know, maybe even what they bring for lunch. I mean, you see it in on social media, you see reports of bullying happening to those of minority communities more often than it's happening to those who do not fall in their minority communities. And that's unfortunate. And you, you start to think to yourself, like, you know, why is nobody standing up for these people, you know, and then you look at, for example, again, I'll use my example, I can't, I can't come up with any other any other example or any other school at the time. But in the school board, there was not one person that was not, you know, white. And that sucks, because the very few whether it was African American slash Black, Asian, or Mexicans that were a part of that school district did not have the proper representation, and were not able to understand why certain customs of us minorities are what they are, you know, because they, they're, they don't come from a diverse background, they come from their own background, which is, again, I respect it. But I think that if I would have had somebody that looked like me, or at least was able to facilitate my transition from, you know, only being a Spanish speaker to being a bilingual, you know, Spanish and English speaker, that would have made my life so much easier. I look back at it now. And I'm like, you know, what, I am very thankful for those experiences, because I think it really shaped who I am today, and it shaped the route that I want to take after school, you know, after excuse me after I graduate Sac State. So, I do wish that there had been more diverse population of educators. But I'm also very thankful that there wasn't because I don't think I would be where I am today if I hadn't gone through that.

**Mai:** Again, thank you both for your experience and your telling of those experiences and sharing your opinions and thoughts. I think it's a very important and crucial conversation to have. It's that student diversity, while yes is so important, we cannot get that far, if that doesn't reflect in our educators, especially at a young age, when the impact is just felt so much more. And so again, thank you both and hopefully, in the future that can change, and we are student leaders and to go on to advocate in our future careers, I am confident that it will be our generation that can make a change. And so, I thank you both for being here today and sharing everything once again. It was very good conversation that we had. And so, thank you all for listening. We hope our ongoing conversations spark understandings, empathy, and motivation to join the struggle for a better future for all. You just listen to the building justice podcast information contained in this podcast represents the views and opinions of the hosts and guests and does not necessarily represent the views or opinions of Sacramento State or CRISJ.

### **Outro Music Lyrics**

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



