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1-2018

Sharing Stories and Recommendations

Neomi DeAnda

University of Dayton, ndeanda1@udayton.edu

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DeAnda, Neomi, "Sharing Stories and Recommendations" (2018). *Proceedings: Global Voices on the University of Dayton Campus*. 31.
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I. Sharing Stories and Recommendations

Neomi DeAnda, Assistant Professor, Department of Religious Studies

I found preparing for this panel quite difficult because of our charge to compare growing up where we grew up and life here at the University of Dayton and then offering suggestions of how we can make UD a more inclusive environment. This request *per se* entreats a level of vulnerability about ourselves and our own experiences for which I am not sure people from historically dominant cultures are asked.

But, here I go to give it a try. I was born in El Paso, Texas on the border with Juarez, Mexico. I understand these cities as one community divided by two nations. I was taught never to ask anyone of their documentation status whether in El Paso or Juarez. When I was five-years-old, my parents and I moved to Corpus Christi, Texas, so my dad could begin a job as an electrical engineer and as a civil servant of the U.S. Army. I grew up between the ocean and the desert because I would spend summers in El Paso with my grandparents and large extended family.

I love open-toed shoes and wear them as soon as the thermostat hits 55 degrees Fahrenheit with some sun. I own and wear cowboy boots (I'd be wearing them today if it weren't for the snow). I love listening to live symphonies play classical music from Germany and Italy. I can cook some serious enchiladas while listening to both Shakira and Shawn Mendes. But, please do not play Enrique Iglesias's English version of "Bailando" because it does not compare to the original Descemer Bueno Spanish version. My first language is Spanglish. English and Spanish became separate languages for me only through the formal education system of the USA in kindergarten.

Some other big differences: In El Paso, Corpus, and San Antonio most people look like me. I went to college at UD's sister school St. Mary's University, also a Marianist University. The majority of the undergraduate student body at St. Mary's University is female and Mexican-American in ethnic background. I went to college with people who mostly looked like me. I eventually moved to areas where not too many people look like me. I was shocked at the age of 29 when some of my peers told me that Our Lady of Guadalupe, one of the Mexican Marys and Patroness of the Americas, was submissive. Then I realized that they did not understand that the image should be hung up high because she is considered very close to God and looking down

with care to her children. She is not looking down in submission from God. Through this interaction, I began to learn much more about the struggles of being from a historically minoritized background.

Highlighting another big difference: As stated earlier, I was raised to not ask people of their documentation and legal status in the country. I also knew that it is my responsibility to show proof of my citizenship when asked. Here at UD, people want to know what people's documentation status is, who is a dreamer, who may not have documents recognized by the USA. And I think this desire to know is out of care and concern. But I struggle with this difference, especially as immigrants are being attacked by the current presidential administration.

What can be implemented to make UD a more inclusive environment? Uma Narayan in *Dislocating Cultures* presents three critiques of mainstream cultures dealing with other cultures. I am taking her critiques and spinning them to suggest what can be done here at UD.

Emissary Position

With the Emissary Position, people are asked to be virtual encyclopedias of everything from their own background and/or broader area of study. This position does not need to be someone from within that culture but studies that culture.

How do we make things more inclusive? We read people from different backgrounds. We scour our syllabi on the first day of class and ask which are the diverse perspectives. We challenge the belief that there are definitive perspectives and only certain individuals are allowed to hold these definitive perspectives. We are a University. We are always learning and exploring new things. Furthermore, we are a Catholic and Marianist University, so we do not expect easy, quick, and clean solutions when engaging one another and living toward the common good.

The Mirror

The Mirror is understood as those from mainstream dominant culture having an ability to engage other cultures without looking in the mirror to deeply understand what systems have provided privileges to those from the mainstream dominant culture. Those who are mirrors are not from within the culture being engaged or studied.

How do we make things more inclusive at UD? We educate everyone to interrogate at the systemic level the historical, social, and epistemological causes from our culture/country/community/government/economic system that has allowed for this imbalance to exist. We offer

courses and opportunities for all to reflect upon their experiences traveling to Oakwood and West Dayton, the Mexico/USA border and Appalachia. I know some great programs already exist for such immersions, but I am not sure the majority of our community has had the opportunity to participate in these particular programs.

Authentic Insider

The Authentic Insider is one who speaks for their culture but is allowed to be critical.

Much of what I do professionally often leads people to ask me to play this role. Example international radio show – asked for me to speak about Latinoas in the USA in regard to the election of the new pope – for the position Francis now holds. When I was on the radio, I was the only person from the USA and the only woman on the show. The show host kept asking me to tell everyone listening what Latin Americans thought about the possibility of a Pope from Latin America. Of course, neither I nor anyone else knows what ALL Latin Americans thought about this possibility. No proper sociological data existed either about the topic at the time.

How do we make things more inclusive? We hire more faculty from diverse backgrounds whose research is in these areas. The plurality of perspectives is something valued for those from the dominant culture. We need plurality of perspectives to be valued for everyone. We also need to challenge the myth that a lack of faculty from different backgrounds exists. When we keep believing this myth, then we also believe that creating pipelines of diverse faculty are unnecessary. And, I have a number of friends who are underemployed faculty members. Yes, that is the reality of the academy in general. But, if a dearth of faculty from diverse backgrounds really exists, then the five faculty members who come to mind from historically minoritized backgrounds who are underemployed should all have full-time jobs.

In summary, I suggest three broad umbrellas:

1. Diversify our educational tools to include a plurality of cultural perspectives — ALWAYS.
2. Teach and learn to interrogate systems not just for our career development but for our human development.
3. Hire more faculty from historically minoritized backgrounds.

Thank you.