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Episode 26: Virginia Vasquez

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Transcript

Christina Torres

Hi everyone and welcome to Futures in Languages, a podcast showcasing stories from UCF's Modern Languages and Literatures Department alumni. I'm your host, Christina Torres, and today we'll be talking with Virginia Vasquez, who graduated from an English major with the Creative Writing concentration in the Honors College, and had study abroad service learning in Mexico and Nicaragua during her time at UCF. She graduated from her undergrad in fall of 2017 and is currently an MA TESOL student in our department. Thank you so much for joining us today, Virginia.

Virginia Vasquez

Thank you so much. It's great to be joining you today.

Christina Torres

Now we did meet a little bit briefly at the beginning of this semester when you're joining the MA TESOL and I'm excited to have you be a guest to share your story with the folks who are listening to this podcast. Let's go ahead and start us off with our first question, which is can you tell us a little bit about yourself, maybe where you're from?

Virginia Vasquez

So I am, I'll say I'm from Jacksonville, but I do have a lot of family in Orlando and my family is Colombian. Both of my parents are Colombian, and my dad comes from a really big family, so most of them are here. So growing up, we had a lot of trips between Jacksonville and Orlando and I was really excited to go to UCF and I ended up loving Orlando because UCF has so much to do and Orlando has so much to do as well, and there was a big moment of exploring more of my own identity as a Latina because in at UCF and in Orlando and you can really feel the presence of people from many different Latin American countries. And so I initially had an interest in International and Global studies, but switched over to English and the creative writing track. And as you mentioned, I did some service learning opportunities in both Nicaragua and then Mexico and I had a minor in religious and cultural studies too, so that interest in cultures has kind of remained so, yeah.

Christina Torres

Thank you for sharing that bit about your story. I agree with you and what you said about exploring the Latinidades that exist here in Orlando, and that's been something that I can connect to with parents from Puerto Rico and growing up here. So that resonates with me as well. You graduated in 2017. I know you've been up to a couple of really cool things, including a Fulbright ETA-ship in Brazil, can you tell our listeners a little bit more about that?

Virginia Vasquez

Yes, and I did actually want to mention a year prior to actually leaving for the Fulbright I had actually done some classes in at UCF in languages with particularly with French, though I spoke English, just to rewind a little bit, I learned Spanish from my family and spoke French from studying it in high school and at UCF, and then I got my first job after finishing my undergrad working in the International Admissions

Department at Full Sail University, which is a private university in Winter Park, so that involved speaking with people from many different countries and being able to utilize both the Spanish and the French. Which was really cool. But, by the time I completed my undergrad, I had submitted my Fulbright application and I definitely knew that I wanted to go abroad, live abroad and I had actually originally picked Panama, which had a smaller number of ETA's that were accepted, I want to say it was around 12, so I was trying to play the numbers game and say hopefully this will work out. But I was an alternate for Panama. So later in the year, what would have been 2018, Fulbright let me know that they had more spaces available in Brazil, and if I had an interest. So I said yes and but it didn't initially know much about Brazil, and I'll say that for anyone wanting to go about it is an act of bravery, particularly once you go to a country you'll hopefully you'll love it. So Brazil was again, this moment of I don't really I don't exactly know what I'm getting myself into, but I'm going into it with this positive attitude, and then it was a little difficult because I spoke Spanish and in this particularly in that year there were more opportunities available in Brazil, and they expanded the eligibility to where you could either speak Portuguese or Spanish and they were going to have classes there to teach you Portuguese. Once you got there, so yeah.

Christina Torres

How nice. It's great that they had that language training. Can you tell our listeners a little bit more about that language training, how that experience was for you.

Virginia Vasquez

Yes, with the Fulbright, a lot of people were really helpful as far as the Fulbright Commission itself as well as the other Fulbrighters, so we kind of stuck together in the beginning, helping each other navigate the bus system, getting to our host cities and things like that. And then what was great about our university, we worked primarily with the Brazilian University, they have some students who are studying Letras, which was essentially linguistics and languages and, a lot of them wanted to be English teachers themselves, so they were also a really nice guidance point as far as helping us out specifically with housing. So some of the Brazilian students helped us find our housing, so we each went to two separate apartments because it was myself and one other ETA in our particular city. And as far as the language training that the university provided, it was a Portuguese for Foreigners class, which was nice because we got to make contact with the other foreigners who were there. However, it was slow as far as, I think our level that we were starting at because my co-ETA knew some Portuguese and I think I could pick up languages quickly. So we were like we want the practical stuff like we want our conversational skills to really increase. So we did that for the about the first half of the program and then that teacher, he was able to connect us. He was also a university student. He connected us with. A private tutor. So she was a Masters student who it was just her and the two of us in the lesson. And that was more towards the end and she really helped us as far as pronunciation and learning some of the nuances, specifically with Portuguese questions as far as pronunciation goes and how to say certain things.

Christina Torres

And I would expect that your background speaking Spanish is something that is both helpful and something you need to think about changing certain aspects when you're in pronunciation for Portuguese. Would that be correct?

Virginia Vasquez

Because while there are some similarities as far as vocabulary, producing it is a different story. Yeah, yeah.

Christina Torres

Well, can you tell us a little bit more about your main takeaways, maybe like a favorite story from your time as a Fulbright ETA?

Virginia Vasquez

Favorite story? Honestly, I would summarize it as traveling for the connections with the program that is hosting you, and in my case, the other ETAs, but also the Brazilian students that we got to meet, not only at our university, but in some of the traveling that we did. Because the responsibility was to do about 20 hours of work per week at the university, and as long as that responsibility was met we were able to travel and we did travel quite a bit and it was awesome. It's really nice when you arrive to a new place and you are able to find those people who will be your guides and explain things to you as far as the customs and how to go about accomplishing certain things, but also the political situation which is so complex in each place so.

Christina Torres

I mean, our own American political situation is complex for those of us who grew up around it, I can imagine what it's like, again, stepping into a new situation where you do want to know what's going on so you know how to orient yourself if that makes any sense.

Virginia Vasquez

And it's multiple conversations that will let you see things from different angles. It's like uncovering a bit of the puzzle each time.

Christina Torres

For sure. I like what you said about finding the local cultural connections. I often talk about the difference between living abroad for an amount of time and just travelling as a tourist and how like when you're living somewhere, you can definitely do some touristy travelling while you're in country, but it's just a very different experience in going somewhere for like a week, and you know, seeing the sights and eating the delicious food and then leaving. But it's a lot more. It's a deeper connection, I think with the people, just because you have that time to check out the language, to foster those relationships. And I know from my side when I again lived abroad, I still have my contacts in Bangladesh that I check in with occasionally and that's something that is important to me because I didn't want to just be there and then like ghost on anyone after I was gone. So is there anything you'd like to elaborate on that?

Virginia Vasquez

As far as Fulbright, I would say you learn a lot about yourself too when you travel abroad to the new country, which is super helpful as far as figuring things out with what direction you want to take afterwards. And maybe one other thing that I'll mention is, for me personally, one of my hobbies or

special interests is dance. And so it's interesting to see how that gets translated across the different cultures that you encounter, but it's good to kind of have those outlets that can make you curious and you know, you'll discover interesting things along the way, whether that how you know, in this case, dance or whatever the hobby might be is realized in the other country, like their specific styles of dance that they do. And I think in a lot of places too specific to dance it is very cultural where if there is a particular party or a particular tradition, dance will probably play a factor into that.

Christina Torres

We know that Brazil is a really large country. Could you share with our listeners what region you were placed in for your ETA-ship?

Virginia Vasquez

So I was in Sao Paulo state in the countryside, so it was Sao Paulo, the capital is closer to the coast. So our city, you could get there by taking a bus 4 hours inland.

Christina Torres

OK, so I'm sure that that was a very transformative experience over in, in Brazil for your ETA-ship. How did the programs or the service learning that you did during your time in undergrad prepare you for your life now?

Virginia Vasquez

I actually hadn't thought about this, but first I'll say that definitely through the, just to speak about the ETA experience a little bit, that has definitely opened doors for me that wouldn't have been opened otherwise, but the same could be said for those two service learning experiences in undergrad because the Fulbright probably wouldn't have been possible for me without them, so that was like my first foray into, particularly with Nicaragua. I remember learning about the political situation as the place that you're entering as well as being able to speak to local people there to kind of get their take on things because one thing that you might think about, but maybe not too frequently, is that traveling is a privilege, you know, so that speaking to the locals, there is the outside world coming to them where they might not get the opportunity. And one of the connections in particular that UCF had was with a husband and wife couple who, who ran a bed and breakfast I would say, but also, they were very into like the agriculture and doing things in more of a natural way. One of the things, the projects that we did was like in either, they're hydroponics or aquaponics or something like that. Something to do with raising fish in like a more eco-friendly way. And as that is how we got what helped, but for each of us in the the class, there were eight students who went. We kind of formed our little pairs or groups to do our own projects. So the particular project that I did was helping one of the other students, who is a a dental, she was going to be going to go to a dentistry school. We created a little book and a lesson plan for very young students in Nicaragua, so they were like pre-K, kindergartner, age and in Mexico was where we got more of the actual teaching English because we worked more with middle schoolers. So they were able to voice some of their opinions.

Christina Torres

OK. So then if I understand you correctly, your time doing service learning in Nicaragua was more about sustainability, but your real introduction to TEFL, as it were, teaching English as a foreign language would be your study abroad in Mexico.

Virginia Vasquez

Yes.

Christina Torres

And again, Mexico is a pretty big place. Where in Mexico did you go for your study abroad or your service learning?

Virginia Vasquez

So we were in Chiapas, which is South, closer to the border with Guatemala, I believe. And we were in a place called San Cristobal de Las Casas. So we worked with Mexican University students who, similar to the situation in Brazil, they also had an interest in potentially being English teachers or teachers of a different language and then once we were together, we would travel by bus to a rural community where they speak their own indigenous language as a first language, and then they learn Spanish as their second language. So English was their third language, actually.

Christina Torres

Did you design lessons for that service learning project in Mexico?

Virginia Vasquez

We were assigned our own class room and we did. Yes, it's hard to remember the specifics now, but once we knew the class that we were going to be working with, I think we worked in collaboration with the Mexican University students.

Christina Torres

OK, great. You mentioned that you worked in these service learning projects with some of our faculty from the Modern Languages department. Could you share some of what those faculty names would be if you don't mind?

Virginia Vasquez

So from the Nicaragua trip that was with Ali Korosy, who's incredible, and Anne Prucha. They really helped us grow and like I said, there were a lot of conversations about how the service learning trip could play into future opportunities or paths that we would explore. So they were really helpful with that as well as helping us with our Spanish and helping us just really get the most out of that experience. And for the Mexico trip, that the year that I went was the first year that that particular program existed, and one of the faculty who went was the Dean at the time of the Honors College Dr. Wang. And then there was another partner who worked with she wins Mexico, which is a soccer nonprofit and her name was Cecilia. And she was really cool. Santana, so Professor MC Santana is the other faculty who went.

Christina Torres

MC Santana. Yeah, she's great. Awesome. Thank you for sharing that with our listeners. It sounds like you had quite a great foundation for what brought you to your current day plan, which is the MA TESOL program here at UCF. And this is your first semester in the MA TESOL program. What advice would you offer someone who is interested in studying TESOL?

Virginia Vasquez

So one piece of advice is related to more of my feelings at the right before the start of the program compared to now, which was being intimidated by not having the TEFL backgrounds that some undergrad students do get by the time they finish their undergrad, so that was definitely in effect, but that at least I want to say that my experience will go away after the first semester just because the faculty as well as the other older MA TESOL students will help you as far as breaking down the classwork, talking about the the flow of growth, and the types of jobs you can get later on, and something that I liked as well, was that conversation around the jobs that are to come or having that mindset already started as early as the first semester. So the faculty are a great resource for that.

Christina Torres

Yeah. So you're hearing it from Virginia, listeners. You're not hearing it from me. She's saying make sure to talk to your faculty and ask for support. That's been a common theme in the episodes here with our alumni as folks saying reach out to your faculty, make sure to talk to them if you have curiosities. And I want to inspire folks who are listening to our podcast to please do so because asking is a component of your learning that's included with your tuition. So use those office hours. Ask your questions. There's a really lovely time in everyone's life when they're a student, when people expect you to ask questions, when everyone is understanding that you have questions to ask and so it's not a surprise. Take advantage listeners out there. You heard it from Virginia. You heard it from me. And do you have any additional final thoughts that you'd like to share about your journey into TESOL, and maybe something that you're looking forward to in the next steps in your career?

Virginia Vasquez

One other thing to think about is whether the MA TESOL might be right for you or not, is the, I guess 2 components, 1 being your curiosity and wanting to have a connection to other cultures. MA TESOL will be a great place to continue to do that and develop that more, even just with the students who are in our program now, there is uh there is a few people who. Already have a lot of experience as English teachers. I only have a little bit, so that will vary, but there is one student from Brazil which is really cool, as well as through Fulbright people from other countries can come to the US to study and we do have two of those students. One is from Myanmar, Burma and the other one is from Indonesia, and the other piece to think about is if you want to be an educator, which I'm really excited about as for as having that role for other people with a bit of mentorship, I've really enjoyed and been thankful for the mentorship that I've gotten and I'm eager to kind of pay that forward.

Christina Torres

Thanks for sharing that about the paying it forward, which is something that I think it inspires a lot of us and we always remember the folks who came and mentored us when we were starting out and we want to be able to turn around and do the same for others. So once again, thanks so much for joining us

today, Virginia, it was great to have you on our podcast and we look forward to hearing what cool things you go into next.

Virginia Vasquez

Yes, thank you so much for having me.

Christina Torres

Thank you for listening to this episode of Futures in Languages. I'd like to give a shout out to Da Video Guy for our intro and outro music downloaded from freesound.org. I'm Christina Torres and our feature yesterday was Virginia Vasquez to the next time to hear more alumni stories from modern languages. For more information about the MA TESOL and other language programs in the Modern Languages department, please visit our website at cah.ucf.edu/languages.