
INTERVIEW WITH MARIA LUISA ZAMUDIO-MAINOU, CLASS OF 2004 AND 2016

Rexton Jones 00:00

So this is Rexton Jones here with Dr. Maria Luisa Zamudio on July 10, 2023. Dr. Zamudio currently serves as the Executive Director of the National Center for Urban Education. Dr. Zamudio, thank you for taking the time to meet with me today.

Maria Luisa Zamudio-Mainou 00:12

Thank you. And I just have to say something - until last, the week before - well, the 30th of June, I'm no longer the director because the center, you know, transition, but I'm still in the College of Education and I think [unclear] my full title later, it's - I mean, I've been here for 20 years, so we can talk about that, do that, the interview.

Rexton Jones 00:36

Absolutely. So before we get there, would you mind talking a little bit about your early life, you know, where you're from, your family and your school before college?

Maria Luisa Zamudio-Mainou 00:44

Yeah, so, well, I was born and raised in Mexico. My hometown is named Tampico, which is northeast by the Gulf of Mexico. The state actually is border state with Texas. So five hours, you know, to McAllen, Texas and Brownsville and South Padre Island, so I'm in that area. Before I came here - so I was born there, I went to school there. My undergrad, I mean school, and then undergrad and grad and [unclear] grad here. In Tampico, there was a time actually, when I was nine years old, where actually I came to the U.S. My dad was moved for the oil company that he used to work [for] in Mexico, to work in Texas, in Houston, and he moved the family, then we stay here for a year and then I went back home and did all the school there. So grade school and everything, all the way until my undergrad I did there. And all my family is still there. I have a brother who lives in Texas and another one in Mexico City, and so on. Before I came here, which was 23 years ago, I lived in Mexico City for four years. I was a banker. My undergrad is in business administration, and then I totally changed my career to education since 2000, yeah, when I came to learn English, and I'm still here, so.

Rexton Jones 02:28

Awesome. And where did you say you pursued your undergraduate education?

Maria Luisa Zamudio-Mainou 02:33

It was in Tampico, in Mexico.

Rexton Jones 02:34

In Tampico? Okay.

Maria Luisa Zamudio-Mainou 02:35

Yeah.

Rexton Jones 02:36

Awesome. And then when you were in college, were you involved in any activities or student jobs?

Maria Luisa Zamudio-Mainou 02:41

In Mexico?

Rexton Jones 02:42

Yeah.

Maria Luisa Zamudio-Mainou 02:43

Well, not really, because it's very different, you know, the university was smaller. And I went to this private university where it was very, very small. I mean, we're talking about population in Mexico is very small and this university was smaller. And classes were at different times, so there was like no room, there's not a lot of what we have here, student workers and, you know, this is mostly what we do here, maybe other universities in Mexico, but that one in particular, classes, I had classes early in the morning and then mid in the morning, mid-morning, and then in the afternoon. And so it was all - I spent most of the day - but there was like such a, I'm working for one hour or two and then I went to my class and then I come back, so. It was mostly, you go to the library, you do your homework, and then just continue your classes, so. Many involvement, yes, sports and some organizations, but not many as you have in the US.

Rexton Jones 03:45

For sure. And then what drove you to pursue a graduate degree?

Maria Luisa Zamudio-Mainou 03:50

Oh, well, that's - okay, so when I came here in 2000, in June of 2000, basically, I came here because I want to learn English and just leave the banking career. So when I came here I did one year of English and then there was an opportunity to work in the College of Education in the bilingual program, education program, and they needed someone who spoke Spanish. So I came and I said, yes, I can apply, but in the meantime, between my English classes, and then I met some people here at the university who were from other countries, and they mentioned something about this language environment, they have the master's degree in literature and culture, and I'm like, oh, that sounds super interesting. So I went, I applied, and I got accepted. And in between, I found, you know, that this job, because of my advisor at that time in the English institute, say hey, we need someone who speaks Spanish, that might be you. If you're learning English that can combine, that can be a good combination. So anyway, I came and applied and then I got this job in the college, in the department at the time, Curriculum and Instruction, working with maybe 250 teachers, you know, from different places in Latin America. And at that time I was maybe one of the only ones who spoke Spanish in this college. So I was kind of working with a grant, it was a federal funded grant. And this is how I started to get more interested in education. And of course, you know, pursuing my grad program, learning about culture in Latin America and how that relates with this country, and so on. So that's why I got interested in the grad degree, in the master's. And then as I learn more about the university and how the university work and how my background as a banker was good

for what I was doing at that time, which was working with federal grants. I kind of translate that into education and grants and money and I was like, oh, this is so familiar to me, because this is money, and I can, I feel comfortable doing this, working with a lot of the community, Latinx community, that was another, of course, big factor. And then, you know, working here in the program brought me to work full-time, they asked me if I want to stay because they needed someone bilingual who knew about the programs. And yeah, and then from there I thought, I think I need to go to the next level. And I got into the Ph.D. program here in the college, in administration, which is mostly my area. And then I pursued, you know, the Ph.D., and years later, nine years later, I graduated. And I was working full-time and mostly I wanted to do that because I, for what I learned in my time, the world need some more voices for the community, Latinx community, in education, so I really got very passionate about it. So I don't know if that answered the question.

Rexton Jones 07:13

No, that was perfect. You mentioned you came originally to study English? What was it like for you to transition to a new country where the predominantly spoken language was English?

Maria Luisa Zamudio-Mainou 07:24

Okay, so I took English classes all my life, you know. For me, in Mexico, at my time, there were like more, one or two hours of English per day, but that was really like very low level of English, meaning English 101 or something very - there's no conversation or grammar. You need more time for that, more exposure. So I took - and then as an adult, when I graduated from my undergrad, I took classes, like every day would - two or three hours in an institute, which you have a lot of that foundation, but then I wanted to just, you know, and the banking, and then I asked - your question, going to your question. It was interesting, because I was already someone working full-time as professional and then I came here to learn English. Well, first of all, you know, different language, a lot of adaptation, coming from a place where it's mostly always warm, and here was cold, and then culturally, super different, come from a big city, and you're coming from this town. So there was a lot of that, how people work, how people - yeah, I knew some English, but it's different when you live in a country that is not your country and the language is different. So that was a lot of the cultural stuff that I needed to learn in order to - it's not just about the language, but combining that with the culture. So there was a lot of learning when it comes to, okay, people do this because it's not just about language, but it's cultural. So I need to learn how the cultural works. So that was pretty interesting, you know, and of course the culture of the university as well. So that was a transition, I should say. For example, as a banker I feel very comfortable going to a bank in Mexico, but here was like, I need to learn the language of a bank, right? Just to open my own account, checking account, what are their rules, what I need to do and how to talk to people and what are the things that, you know, the paperwork that I need to bring. So all those little things become a big things for people like me, moving from one place to the other, because you come to visit, you don't come to live, and how do you get your contract for your, all the electricity or the water or the gas? I mean, all the bills you have to pay and how that works. It's a transition, but it was fine. I always had people helping me around.

Rexton Jones 10:20

Speaking of people helping you, were there anyone who was super influential in your graduate studies or at your time at ISU?

Maria Luisa Zamudio-Mainou 10:29

Yes, there's one person. I mean, many people actually, but I don't know if I have time to mention everyone, as you said. When I first started my job here in ISU, well, I mean as a grad student, it was a Mr. George Torres. George, who was the director of the program for ESL bilingual education, which, you know, that was the program where I worked, for, I don't know how many years, I mean, different things, doing groundwork and travel to Chicago, different programs, and so on. But he was the one who hired me and he was very supportive since day one and he was always rooting for me, and "you can do this" and helping me around about my job, about supporting me in grad school, about supporting me going to Ph.D., and all that kind of stuff. So he was one of the most influential people. Another professor, for example, Dr. [unclear], she was my advisor in grad programs in the Ph.D., she was extremely helpful. And she's a good friend now. And of course, you know, all the professors that I have so much admiration for, they're no longer here. They're retired already. But there was always someone, but I can maybe talk about those two, or maybe - I mean, there are more people, but they were the ones who helped me the most in grad school and my job here.

Rexton Jones 12:18

Yeah, that's super awesome that you had those people in your corner. Especially - were there any, like, significant challenges or obstacles that you had that they were significantly helpful in overcoming?

Maria Luisa Zamudio-Mainou 12:33

Well, yeah, of course. I mean, and that comes with other people to my mind. Challenges? Of course, language. I mean, you going for grad school, and yeah, you can go for one year to English classes, and - but man, to write in English is a different thing. And it was always a second guessing: I don't know if I'm doing the right thing, I'm not saying the right way and I don't know if my grammar is okay. So you never want your language to be in the middle of anything, because you don't want people to think that you're not as smart, you know? How can - because that's what people tend to write - oh, he or she has an accent and oh, well, I don't know if this person is smart, because, you know, there's maybe some grammar mistakes that we all make, right? [To] speak in two languages or even be more formal is hard. And I mean, until now I've made mistakes, but I'm okay now. I'm [hisses] - whatever! People can ask me. Not everyone, if you're not - it's not your native language, you are 100% always, you know, right? So it's fine, even native speakers sometimes make mistakes, so it's okay. So that was, I think, the biggest challenge. And of course very far away from my family. I think one of the bigger challenges, my family is in Mexico, and from here is - I was not able to go all the way there because you have to take one flight and another one, then another one, or take the bus to go to Chicago and then - so it's always something, but, you know, at the same time, I mean, there's so many great things, so.

Rexton Jones 14:12

Yeah, absolutely. Well, I'm glad you were able to overcome them and you're in the position you are today. You already discussed a little bit about how you got started with your different roles at ISU, but would you mind going into a little more detail on what those were and how they kind of developed in the position you're in today?

Maria Luisa Zamudio-Mainou 14:28

Okay, so I started as a grad student. I was working with the director of the grant programs, these federal grants from the Department of Education since 2001 till 2004, that was my master's. 2004, I was hired a [unclear] thing. I was hired as a coordinator of the bilingual program. The director left and then I became the coordinator just to end that grant. Then after that the university hired me, well, it was kind of a continuing, you know, with different programming. Then he, my mentor, my boss at the time, now friend, George, he left and then he came back, as someone just working on other programs, supporting the university and working part-time. And we submitted another grant and then I became the director of that grant, the principal investigator for two grants. So that was from 2007 to 2011. That was when [unclear], when I worked something in between, and I was working on my Ph.D. as well. But mostly, most of the time I did work here in the college or department. Then after that, from 2007 to 2012, I directed two grants, yes, from the U.S. Department of Ed. And then, after that - 12, okay, now we're in '12, '11, then I worked in... I'm thinking, maybe there was 2012, '13, maybe '13 or so, that was another program that I became the director as well. And then I worked coordinating, you know, a program in - man, I'm just, I mean, all the days are just kind of all over the place here - working in coordination programs in the School of Teaching and Learning in 2018. That's, I think, in 2018, I became, I applied for the position, the exec director for the National Center for Urban Ed, and I became the director in 2018 till last June 30.

(17:14) So the jobs or the positions that I had before in ISU and the college brought me to this program, being under the College of Ed, working with different faculty and students from across campus. Very diverse, urban students coming, you know, from the Chicago area, working with five communities in Chicago, mostly very diverse communities, mostly two Latinx communities, two African American, and another one with different people from different places in the world, around the world. South, north, east and west, from Chicago. And then, you know, the center had to transition to some of the programming to the coalition. Now, I am mostly working in as specialist in recruitment, retention and support for the students and starting a new grant for the college as well as some other initiatives in the Chicago area. So it has been a little bit of everything. Sorry, if - you let me know if you have more questions, because it's a lot of different things here and there. I taught classes as well. I've been teaching here and there, not much, because mostly I work in admin. One of the classes that I taught a couple of times was Multicultural Education for Future Teachers and that's a class that I really, really enjoy because that relates a lot of my experience. Well, first, as a student, when I was a kid here in the U.S., and then as someone who worked with a lot of underrepresented students. So, you know, teaching here and there once in a while, not every semester, but maybe every other year I teach a class. I have done a lot of study abroad programming as well. I started programming 2011, we took our first group in May 2014, and that was a study abroad in Spain, in Madrid. I did that for maybe three or four years, that program still exists. I did study abroad with the students, I mean, coordinated that with students too when I started in the bilingual program in Mexico. So it has been a lot of different things that related with the programming that we do. The programs that I tend to work in are very broad, like interdisciplinary, I have to do work with, you know, across campus from people here at the university and the students from different areas, so, yeah, so mostly that's what I have been doing in ISU. I mean, one way or the other - and advising students, you know, for the student orientations.

Rexton Jones 20:13

You mentioned you did some educating along with your administrative work. How would you compare the two fields and what your - and your responsibilities and your enjoyment just overall, the feel of doing education compared to administration?

Maria Luisa Zamudio-Mainou 20:26

[Unclear]

Rexton Jones 20:27

No, teaching classes, sorry.

Maria Luisa Zamudio-Mainou 20:30

Oh, okay. So I've told administration here and teaching class here. Oh, my God, it's a good combination, I should say. When I started this - well, my last role which was, you know, urban ed, I was very into admin, because that was a, I had people under my supervision, and it takes more of your time, had maybe like 10 staff or whatever, many, and I don't remember exactly. I mean, because people left at different times so that's why I don't remember exactly how many at what time and when. And this is a program that was already in place. So I have a director and co-director in Peoria, have the same director and co-director in Decatur, and then I have people - 1, 2, 3, 4, like five people in Chicago, right? So - and then some extra people, you know, extra help and stuff like that. So that was a lot of traveling, going mostly to Chicago, because that was a program that started way before my time, in 2004. So that was a lot of traveling and admin work, and not really in touch with students. Whereas in the past, even if I wasn't teaching I was doing advising, I was an advisor for this organization with bilingual ed, or I was bringing students to Spain or to Mexico. So that for me is super important because students keep you grounded and remind you why you're here for. It is about them, it's not about you and your preference of doing this, or the teaching or the salaries or the politics or that. I think that is something that will happen anywhere, no matter if you're an institution of higher education, or you are in a business or a corporation, that is always the case. But it's always good to be around students, because it's just, I mean, that's why we're doing what we should be doing here: teaching, in one way or the other. Not everyone is in the classroom teaching, but we're here to support them in one way or the other. So my support in the past was doing advising, but then teaching in the classroom is like the real thing. I have them every week, we do homework, we do read, I get to see them, how they think, how they grow, and learn from them. Of course, it's not just they learn - it's not just the students learning from me, but I'm learning from them and what is out there, what the students need now. My learning was so different, so I really enjoy that because I feel - the [unclear] of working in a university is that it's always a new semester or a new school year. And always younger students, and you always learn what's new out there and what they need. And they keep you busy, grounded, and you learn from them. So you kind of keep young, kind of thing. And it's always fun, because I always want to do new things and - but I like administration a lot, so I think it's a good combination. I wish I could have maybe one class per semester, but, you know, sometimes it's not possible. I'm looking for one, so hopefully that happens.

Rexton Jones 24:03

Hopefully. And then what are some of the - sorry - accomplishments during your career at ISU that have made you the most proud?

Maria Luisa Zamudio-Mainou 24:11

Ah, gosh, I think, you know, I see accomplishments maybe different from some people. Yeah, maybe you receive an award or would you apply for this, or someone - I don't know, someone decides to put your name in this award or the other. But I think my, one of the biggest accomplishments for me has been see students' graduation. I have worked with a lot of underrepresented students who are not traditional students, and, for example, seeing the - a mother - we had a program, one of the grants that we run was a grant programming where we were transitioning paraprofessionals, who are teachers, who are not - they're teachers, but they're not certified, but they have a lot of experience. So they are supporters of teachers, but they have sometimes even [unclear] on teachers. So that program was transitioning those paraprofessionals, mostly adults, into teachers, and paying their tuition, help them with books and with kind of coaching and doing that. So that - my accomplishing, one of my biggest accomplishments, I think, has been working with those teachers or students, no matter what age, either even undocumented or documented, in bringing more teachers of color to the classroom, which is so needed. What we have is not reflecting off the population in the classroom and we need more of that. I mean, even myself here, as a grad student, there were no Latinos, no Latinas, nobody who looked like me and actually knew anything about my community. Even though I'm from Mexico, the community is different from, you know, you're going across the border, oh, you become Latina instead of Mexican because you are part of Latin America. So okay, I'm Latina, but I'm Mexican, right? So for my biggest accomplishments I think is just to see people graduating and going further, go on to a Ph.D. I mean, I have people who have graduated, and they, then all the sudden, they just, you know, call you or text you or send you an email, can you help me with grad school? I want to go for the next step. And then my kids, they want to do, someone wants to go to become teachers, like, wow, I mean, there you go. Two generations. Those are the accomplishes that I feel like I enjoy the most. Accomplishments can be, yes, I finished my Ph.D. For me, that was a big accomplishment. But it's something that you pick. I mean, it's - many people do that, right? I mean, it's - but it's a personal thing. But I feel proud, yes, but I feel prouder of being someone who can support a group of people.

Rexton Jones 27:38

I think that's a very lovely perspective. And you touched on this a little bit, but during your time, both as an employee and as a student at ISU, have you felt represented and supported in your identity?

Maria Luisa Zamudio-Mainou 27:49

In some ways. I think it's a - I look [at] numbers very closely, I am a numbers person, and I feel more comfortable with numbers. But of course, you know, numbers are not always everything. But for example, every year we receive - what is it? What is the - what is, how the university looks like, what is the picture the university, right? How many faculty of color, how many, you know, in the schools and where are the students coming from? What are the area? Mostly, maybe, north, right? Chicago, or the suburbs, stuff like that. I just don't see enough representation when it comes to faculty and staff in the university. Yes, I don't see - in my time, when I was a grad, yes, when I went to grad school and my master's, of course there wasn't representation. Now, as much as I will expect because this is, it was a language and it was Spanish, even though I was, I am Mexican, I didn't know a lot of things like linguistics and, you know, a lot of the things that are part of the learning more about the language, not language, but learning about the language and the culture for the other countries as well. But the representation was minimum. When I came to the College of Ed and I did my degree, my Ph.D., there was one Latina, so a woman, and she

lasted one year here. So let's jump in. I think I had like three advisors at the end, but it's not about that, I mean, everyone was super nice, but if you want to, in grad school, if you want to do your research in an area in, where you see the need, you see the numbers, and no one is a Latino/Latina to serve the students, this is where I had a problem. At the end of the day, you know, I found my good friend and - Dr. [unclear], she's, I mean, she's a white woman, she's not longer at the university, but she's just an amazing professor, advisor, and she understands and knows a lot about the Latinx community, so she was super helpful. But yeah, I think that, I mean, I think the university is doing more, definitely, but we need more representation because the Latinx students, the number of Latinx students that we have at ISU is growing faster than others and we don't have the same representation for sure. And I think it's, this is part of, you know, and the same goes with maybe administration, right, and other things. So I feel like I represent myself and of course, I, with the support of other colleagues, which, in that way, definitely, this is growing, but we need more. There's not enough. Yeah. All the places where there's like, no one. So, anyway.

Rexton Jones 31:06

Of course. And then I've only got one question left for you, but piggybacking off that a little bit, how important is it that your background and heritage kind of play a role in your position, especially working with such a diverse range of people?

Maria Luisa Zamudio-Mainou 31:21

Okay, how important is my diverse background, right?

Rexton Jones 31:29

How important is your background to you in your role?

Maria Luisa Zamudio-Mainou 31:33

Well, very important, because this is a group of people that I want to - not only, of course, because I can work well with [people] no matter what color, I definitely embrace diversity, for sure, but I think, given a voice to my community, or Latinx community, I understand the culture, I speak Spanish, I know how to do it, where to go. So for me it's important, because if I can, for example, if I can talk to a mother who wants - and Latinx community is hard, I mean, it's happening more and more, but there is always that cultural piece of, I don't know if I want to send my daughter away from home, so they talk to you and then you talk to them and say it's fine, you know, I'm here, not that I'm going to take care of everyone, every single student, but it's always some comfort for the parents, of course. I understand why culturally, we - we're just different, right? Whereas more American way is, you know, that you're going to have your students going to college one way or the other, or they decide not to, but it's kind of a given, out to the dorms and this and that. So, for me, it's important, my culture, and it's important to work with the students who are underrepresented if I can, because - and of course I love to work with all students. I love to bring students who don't speak a second language to study abroad, for example, I think it's important because they're going to be better teachers anyway, and better citizens, just by learning what's going on the rest of the world. So for me it's important, even if I don't work with my own community, to bring that to other students who also might, I don't know, benefit from that.

Rexton Jones 33:45

Yeah. Well, I want to thank you once again for coming to talk to me. Like I said, that was my last question. I thought it was very insightful some of the things you had to say. And yeah, I know you're busy, ladies, I will let you get on out of here. But thank you once again for the talk today.

Maria Luisa Zamudio-Mainou 34:00

Okay, thanks so much. Have a good one.

Rexton Jones 34:02

Yeah, you too.

Maria Luisa Zamudio-Mainou 34:03

Okay. Thanks. Bye-bye.

Rexton Jones 34:05

Bye-bye.