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Reflections on a Fellowship and Time as a DEI Coordinator with Oscar Fernandez

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Oscar Fernandez

Welcome to PDXPLORES, a Portland State Research podcast featuring scholarship innovations and discoveries, pushing the boundaries of knowledge practice and what is possible for the benefit of our communities and the world.

Hi, my name is Dr. Oscar Fernandez, Portland State University, University Studies, Senior Instructor I. My academic discipline centers on representation of disease in Latin American literature. Originally I focused a great deal on HIV/AIDS, in the time of the nine late 1980s and 1990s and more currently I'm looking at how COVID 19 has impacted the lives of contingent faculty. And a third piece of my research is describing QTBIPOC students' experience in academia. QTBIPOC stands for queer trans black indigenous peoples of colors.

As part of my diversity, equity, and inclusion coordinator work in university studies at year three of that DEI work, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion work, I had the opportunity to apply for a fellowship at UC Irvine, and to my surprise, that was accepted. So fall 2020, I had the opportunity to be a fellow among faculty in the UC system. I was the only non UC professor at this fellowship at UC. The purpose of that fellowship was to gather together various faculty of color from across the UC system to talk about how we experience diversity, quote unquote diversity in our various disciplines and, and also how universities discipline diversity as a performance of diversity or maybe they're doing in depth work around racial justice, social justice, diversity, equity within academia. And to my surprise, it was the first time in about 20 years of my life as an academic that I was in a room just with people of color. And that is something that I take to this day, for the first time in 20 years, that all faculty members in a room discussing matters of teaching, matters of philosophy were all people of color.

During this fall 2020 fellowship, I kept a journal. I was very curious about the experiences that were surfacing for me Fall 2020 after my diversity, equity, and inclusion coordinator role came to an end in university studies. So that fall 2020, one of the things that I had in my mind is what can I do with these three years experience as a DEI coordinator in academia. And I started, you know, reflecting, thinking and writing in a journal about those three years. And the culminating piece of that reflection was writing an article on my diversity, equity, and inclusion coordinator experiences for those three years

At the tail end of that fall 2020 fellowship at UC Irvine, I started writing a self-reflection manuscript currently entitled, *Queering A Coordinator's Diversity, Equity and Illusion DEI Work in Academia: Disappointments, Self*

Deceits, and Hopes Disclosed. And the purpose of that essay was really to capture what I experienced those three years as coordinator and as faculty member, so I was both teaching my, my, my, my regular classes and I was also having this, uh, coordinator role around diversity. And so I wanted to really capture those experiences for those three years.

One of my hopes with the manuscript is to let other folks know what is the experience on the ground being a coordinator, given that so much of the scholarship and literature is on sort of high level diversity conversations in academe, you know what Officers of diversity do at universities. My purpose on the other hand, was really to capture what lowly people like myself do one-on-one with faculty, one-on-one with students. It was really how to capture a lived experience of that. My DEI coordinator work here at PSU.

This manuscript has been submitted to Foundry, which is a peer reviewed online journal managed by UC Irvine, University of California, Irvine, and the majority of the fellowship. Participants are co-writing their manuscripts and submitting them this summer, 2022. And so it'll be available online through Irvine's Humanities Center, UC.

When writing this DEI manuscript, I really focused my attention on my bilingual background, my immigrant background, and I really played with three words that in Spanish signify illusion and hope. Spanish I think complicates the terms a little bit more around illusion. So in the manuscript, if you have a chance to read it, you'll see three words in Spanish. *haunted* means haunt, those moments in time when you are haunted by an experience, a hallucination would be a good translation of

So in the manuscript I described those moments where I was haunted by what I experienced as a facilitator in diversity workshops where I was leading workshops on diversity and one of the haunting images, this what I called

One of these haunting memories is just how managing workshops with mostly white faculty stays, stayed with me throughout the day and sometimes throughout the week. It was really hard to shake off those experiences. Whether the faculty member was being inclusive and “woke” to use that word, or whether the faculty member was defending their sexism, their transphobia. So that was kind of a, I wanted to represent that experience of being haunted by the work after hours.

The other word that I've used in that manuscript was desilusion. Disillusionment. I think it would be the word in English. When you lose hope

and you know there were moments in those three years that I lost hope. I thought this is a performance, This role is a performance of diversity. What does it really do substantially to benefit our students of color? Or is this work just benefiting the performance of diversity in higher ed? So I wanted to capture that second word that is also centered around illusion. So that word was Desilusión the final that I used in my manuscript was ilusion. Again, display with the words of illusion and mirage. But ilusion, like in English means illusion, but ilusion in Spanish also means hope to have hope.

So I wanted to also articulate in my manuscript that although I was experiencing hauntings as a diversity coordinator, and although I was experiencing a loss of hope, I. This third part of me that was hope, that I was always hopeful to, that the work as coordinator was impacting, uh, faculty. It was also might impact positively, uh, students.

And hope is always there combined with , hauntings and dis and disappointments. In the manuscript. I also was reflecting on what advice should I have received when I was starting being a DE coordinator, but also as a faculty member. So if you read the manuscript, you will see a flyer that I created with some prompts from another prominent scholar.

10 or 12 questions that I wish I had before I said yes to being a diversity, equity and inclusion coordinator. And I'll just give you one of the, one of the takeaways in that pamphlet and that ask if there is a discrete budget for doing the work. I received zero dollars for DEI coordinator work, and that should have been a sign for me from the heavens, from Wonder Woman, that maybe the institution is not taking this coordinator role seriously.

So my advice, and I encourage you to read the manuscript for the other tidbits is, ask, what is the budget for the work? And the budget should not be from faculty members writing grants. The budget should be discreet and you should have complete control over your budget. And having a budget that also, let me use some math here.

I'm a PhD in comparative literature, not math, but the budget should be three times whatever your base salary is. That should be, that should give you an indication that the administration, the university is taking the work seriously. And one way that that is concretized is with dollars.

Dr. Oscar Fernandez. With this work, I hope more DEI officers do not feel alone in their work. And finally, with this manuscript, I really wanted to honor so

many diversity, equity, and inclusion coordinators and officers for the work that they do for faculty and our staff and our students.