

UF Inklusivity in the Classroom

Teaching Beyond the Podium Podcast

Alexandra

Hello, My name is Alexandra Bitton-Bailey, and welcome to the teaching Beyond the Podium Podcast series. This podcast is hosted by the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Florida, and our guests share their best tips, strategies, innovations and stories about teaching. Today. Our guest is Sindia Rivera-Jiménez, who's a lecturer in the Department of Chemical Engineering and Engineering Education. Sindia came to the University of Florida in 2016 after an interesting and lengthy journey.

Sindia Rivera- Jiménez

I started my journey as a faculty in 2011. I was an assistant professor in food science and technology at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez. So I came here, to the states because my husband got an appointment. And so I had the opportunity to kind of negotiate being hired at U F as a spouse hire. But at that point in my life, I didn't have any role models. I was actually scared to be judged or be - you know, there was no model for me that I knew of people that were successful as a spouse hire I was really afraid to be hired like that. So I talked with my husband. I said, You know what? I'm gonna get another job, and I was able to get a job at Santa Fe College. So I became a chemistry teacher there. So in 2016 I joined UF. Finally, it's been a long journey to be the assistant director of a capstone design program, which is called, IPPD and there I transferred to becoming a lecturer. So there I was, more in an admin position, but I was missing my classroom. So , I decided to also to apply for this lecturing position.

Alexandra

Sindia never thought about diversity and inclusion before she came to the United States. In part, it was because she never really felt like an outsider before she got here. One classroom experience in particular helped her to better understand some of the cultural undercurrents and become an inclusivity champion.

Sindia Rivera-Jiménez

Diversity, inclusion and equity was a very weird concept for me because it wasn't until I arrived to the United States that I actually felt like a minority. So in Puerto Rico, where we're all pretty much the same, we have people of different colors and we do have racism and we do have things

about economic status and all that. But I didn't feel that I was - that I didn't belong right? That people will recognize me. Oh, you're a woman, you're Latino. You're all of those classifications that you have when you get here to the United States. So that was one of the biggest shocks for me to try to understand the jargon about diversity, inclusion and equity. In the classroom though, how I connect that, was that first I had a student that he - he was very mean in my classroom. I tried to provide feedback in one of my capstone design teams about how he should conduct himself in the meetings. We meet with them - I meet with his team every week, and I remember he got so mad at me that he called me very purposely, Ms. Rivera, and you may say that's silly right? Why she will be mad being called Miss Rivera? So I'm I'm very clear for my students to tell them. Hey, I do have some expectations on the way you should address myself. So this is my name: Sindhia Maria Rivera-Jiménez . Have four names. Pick Rivera, which is the one that I like to use. And you should always refer to me as professor and as doctor, right, which is my title. And the students used the miss as a way to minimize the, uh it was just disrespectful in front of his teammates. This was a team composed of all males, so I mean, that was a negative experience. That for me, was what did I did wrong in my classroom. Right? So this student actually responded to me in this way. Try to use my that I'm a female, right? I always ask myself, Did he will tell this to a male professor? He will say Mr. Rivera, Or he will just always address his faculty as doctor or professor. So it's not that it was bad experience. I think it was an experience for me to learn. What are the constraints that I have as a female professor in engineering and how to better explain my students? Where are the appropriate ways to conduct our meetings.

Alexandra

With this first experience in inclusivity fresh in her mind, Sindhia walked into another classroom situation that inspired her to take steps to make her classrooms inclusive for all.

Sindhia Rivera-Jiménez

The second experience that I think it was positive and it was really hard for me. Is that I met with teams, once again. This are one on one meetings that I have every week, so I know them very well. So I have one student that I didn't know exactly what was her gender. So it wasn't clear for me. So her name in the roster was a female name, but she will dress up in a way that it was not clear for me how to address to her. So at that point in life, right - in my career, I didn't know about pronouns. And you know how to be inclusive and make sure that the students feel welcome to tell me how how they want to be addressed to. And I mean, it was so hard for me. I read so much how to ask this student how she wanted to be addressed. He took me three weeks. I was so anxious, I was reading blogs. I was reading so many things until one day I just said, Hey, I want to ask you this to ask you this. I've been struggling to ask you this. What pronoun do you prefer? And she just started crying and she hugged me because it was the first time somebody asked her that and she was a she. Okay, But it taught my heart that I am struggling, but they are also struggling. So for me, you know, it was hard situation, a struggle. But I learned from it. And and I think that's why I feel so passionate about it.

Alexandra

Now Sindia's teaching and mentoring of other teachers, centers entirely around putting forth the best effort to meet students where they are.

Sindia Rivera-Jiménez

I have heard professors saying Ah, but it's so hard for me to remember the gender and I've been, I have told them. Imagine that person that is passing through all of this, that she or he has to actually tell you and correct you on the way this person wants to be referred as. So just try. Just try because it's a burden. It's more than a burden to be telling people how do you feel like if that person told you once, just try your best. It's okay. We make mistakes. I mean, I do make mistakes sometimes because I speak Spanish and for me conjugating the pronoun, sometimes it's hard, so if it's they or them. I mean, and I tell them that I tell them it's sometimes hard, but I'm gonna try my best to make it, to do it, so.

Alexandra

So what steps has Sindia taken to ensure and promote inclusivity, diversity and equity for all? In broad terms, she worked to become aware and educated in all of these topics.

Sindia Rivera-Jiménez

So I started recently to maybe ah have a voice in this conversation. So part of having a voice is actually reading a lot. I tried to read as much as I can because, I mean, we're professors, right? So if we wanna cover a topic, we want to make sure that we understand a little bit of the jargon. So I'm an engineer, so social sciences is a very challenging topic and understanding how data is collected how people are gathering statistics on humans and behavior. So that's the first part, right trying to understand a little bit better the jargon of diversity, inclusion and equity. So that strategy is about my awareness is a person right? What are my biases were things I may need to learn more what communities I'm not exposed to. So if you're starting as a faculty and you're trying to understand these type of issues. Looking at yourself, I think, is the first step to actually ah, move forward in this direction.

Alexandra

Sindia also used her wealth of experience, in course, reviews with quality matters to guide her work and effort in her own courses.

Sindia Rivera-Jiménez

In terms of teaching strategies. I mean life has moved me around so many times that when I was at Santa Fe, I was trying to get expertise on designing course - instructional design. So there I was actually trained as a reviewer for quality matters. So basically, in quality matters, you learn how to do recommendations and suggestions and evaluate courses to help the professor see the course from the students' perspective, right, how the information is being communicated to the students and if the students actually understanding the expectations of the student on the course. So that experience for me was really good because it actually pushed me to see courses outside my discipline. I was able to see courses in English, and you cannot imagine many courses that I never thought that, wow, I can learn from this, things as simple as wait, we can have every assignment should have a grading policy, every assignment should have clear instructions and steps to accomplish. If you're submitting a report, giving examples and rubric so they could know the criteria of evaluation. So those tiny details helped me to understand that I'm teaching and I have to make sure that I don't hide my curriculum and make it very explicit to my students to actually understand where are my expectations.

Alexandra

Finally, she tries to make sure that her classes remain student-centered and that she is available for her students at all times. This involves a lot of self-reflection and review of her own teaching and classes.

Sindia Rivera-Jiménez

The third strategy that I have used actually serving my students. So I mean, when you teach a class it's a prototype. So your class, I mean, in my opinion, my class will never be the best as it could be, especially in the early stages. When I'm teaching it. So I'm getting there in such a way that I can get as - collect as much data from my students to actually improve my class. So I do like to reflect at the end of the semester, so I created surveys to try to understand from my students what are their perspectives. Questions like "Please provide feedback for your instructor on our weekly interaction and what can I help you to better succeed in your team?" So these are questions that are not in GatorEvals, right? You can not get that from the evaluation from the the university. But these are specific questions about my interaction with them and that I want to know. I also have questions about- for example, "After having this experience with the project, what would you have wished that you knew before the course?" And I provide examples like team communication, team dynamics, chemical engineering, technical content, any other, and it's impressive to see things that I never thought about, like they really want to learn better how to get or grasp a specific concept in the class. And I thought I was teaching that, but maybe I wasn't explicit about it. So it's a way for me to reflect on how inclusive I am, but at the same way, I think it makes my course very well-designed right? But design takes time, it's not like you're going to design a course the first time and it's gonna be the best at the beginning, so.

Alexandra

Sindia suggests that inclusivity, diversity and equity as classroom practices are not something that can be mastered in one fell swoop. Instead, as instructors, we can start small or with training.

Sindia Rivera-Jiménez

There's different types of training that you can get. I get trained from my, uh, professional organization on how this topic applies to the industry where my students are gonna be hired. So I'm looking at this topic from the future perspective of my students. I-I got involving my professional organization because the thing is that I can talk about diversity inclusion and equity, but if I don't use the case studies and example of my community, I will not be able to move people like I need to talk about the statistics off STEM, statistics of engineers, statistics of students that we're losing along the university. You know, I need to actually provide that information because if not, I will be only preaching to the choir and I will not be able to make somebody struggle. And I said, when people struggle with this topic it's the opportunity for them to become aware, to have that own- that bad sensation that oh, I'm bad I'm a bad person. No, you're not a bad person. We just need to become aware. You know, having biases do not really relay on goodness or badness. It's just a process for us to become aware and change those habits and maybe become ah better. So I would suggest just to reach out to your professional organization and get this training.

Alexandra

One way to overcome the challenges of teaching inclusively is to join a learning community.

Sindia Rivera-Jiménez

I also tried to get trained here on campus for some of the learning communities that we're creating here on campus on part of one of those. So I actually tried to get exposed to these type of topics. Even that I'm not maybe the best person to talk about it, but I just want to hear and learn from other people what they're doing read, get exposed to the conversation and understand your role, I think one of the things that you as a Professor needs to understand your role, and your role is to actually try to be ready to receive students that have multiple experiences, multiple backgrounds, multiple skills, like there's so many diversity in our students that provide richness it's not a disadvantage, it's human capital that we have there and they have so much potential. So I may look things from a very empathetic way, like, I do believe in my students. Some of them may need more help than others, but I believe that they all can reach their success right in the classroom.

Alexandra

You can start small by making little changes in the course, syllabus or materials, or even the activities that give all students a voice and make them feel heard.

Sindia Rivera-Jiménez

If you're gonna start with something, just start with your syllabus. Your syllabus can have maybe an inclusive ah statement where you can tell the students that you do receive, like, you know, just an inclusive ah statement. I can give you references in the future if you want to. And there's also training here, so if you want to come to our trainings, you're more than welcome. The other thing that you can do is that when you pass your roster for the first time, that first day of the class and if you want to be very inclusive, use last names because sometimes the roster do not reflect the preferred name of the student. So if you want to start with the last names like that, you're able to pass your roster, but at the same time, you're respecting those people that do not identify that gender and that is described in the admissions. I want to say that the admissions at UF do not allow you to provide any other gender only female and male. I'm passing through the process because I'm taking classes, so it's not that because it's not because the students didn't report it is that they're limited by two binary options. So you have to- that's just an advice, right that you're aware that it's not, they can not actually choose anything else besides female and male at this point. So that will be one of the quickest ways to maybe start, a syllabus statement on diversity, inclusion and equity and get trained in instructional design. Any teaching practice like active learning, clickers, anything that you can use to include the voices of your student will be the second step, and that will depend on the class. I'm not gonna get into the details.

Alexandra

Sindia's long term investments and effort in classroom inclusivity may make these classroom changes sound easy, but she's very frank and explains that her greatest struggle in and out of the class is fear.

Sindia Rivera-Jiménez

I think my biggest challenges fear, fear, to stand up and say explicitly that I believe in diversity, inclusivity and equity. It's a fear to have a voice because these topics may not fit into the engineering curriculum is fear to be -the students confuse my compassion with weakness. So and those things are not even related to my class it's about me as a person about my awareness about who I am. What is my voice into this conversation? So that's my biggest challenge. And I mean, when I feel when I'm struggling, I just try to study and read and hear stories and get involved with the community that may speak the same language as the one that I'm trying to understand and getting involved honestly is the only way that I have learned how to actually pass

that fear. But I still feel afraid every semester, I have like I feel oh my God, how am I gonna do this? This semester I started doing, um, Team Dynamics and Team Charter, and it was just 50 minutes of my class, and I was so afraid to implement that intervention in my classroom because I thought that it wasn't engineering enough for my class. However, I have received so much good feedback from my students about that topic. They have been able to manage the team dynamics better. I had less problems than previous semesters. So is a challenge but at the same time, opportunities right?

Alexandra

Sindia has found that not everyone is supportive of the strategies and changes she's implemented. In fact, over the years she's encountered quite a bit of pushback.

Sindia Rivera-Jiménez

I think this is like the fear that every professor has, uh, I have received a little bit of pushback sometimes. Not everybody understands why I'm talking about this topic in the classroom, particularly our students. Not everyone think that it's important to talk about social relationships, and the other thing is that my class happened at the last year of the senior year, so there's nothing I'm actually teaching them it's- what I'm teaching them is how to apply the concepts to projects, so it's a capstone class. So I think-I think that's one of the things that I -it's been it's been interesting, right? Because in the classroom, some people receive it very well, some people are very thankful that I'm doing this conversation, but there are other students that are struggling, and those students are struggling are the ones that I probably will talk more about and understand and hear. Active hearing, right? Why do you think it's uncomfortable? Why do you think it doesn't apply when you go to the industry? Or maybe your PhD? Why you think this is not important and having difficult conversation is a whole skill right? That we are not trained as a faculty necessarily to have, and they don't know either -how to do it right? If I don't know, they don't know. Like we're all learning to have these difficult conversations.

Alexandra

As teachers, many of us have very specific turning points or moments that are so marking that they change us as educators.

Sindia Rivera-Jiménez

My biggest moment was, when I was trying to explain to my student that are from Santa Fe and they're from diverse backgrounds, different experiences, old students, young students, people from dual enrollment, and I tried to explain the concept, which is the basic concept of chemistry,

which is the Mole, and I went to the class very excited and I was gonna go and explain it, and I realized nobody understood what I was saying. I went to my office and I crashed. Like what happened? This is so simple. So for, me it was an Aha moment, because instead of saying the students didn't get it, my question was what can I do to make them get it? Why do I get it and why they don't? So it was my first opportunity to go to the literature to get strategies of things that have worked. I put together that in one night an activity, an active learning activity, and it was so active everybody was working on Ah, like a handout that I provided. I gave one student a bag of barley -or it was lentils, I think, and I ask him please start counting what you have here while I start doing activity on the board. And suddenly, when he finished, we finished the calculations, and the number was pretty much the same. So it was a beautiful moment. The students enjoyed it. I enjoyed it and I learned that if you want to become a good teacher, you need to learn about how to teach. So that's the moment that I said, You know what? Engineering education, Right now that I'm in the engineering school, it's something that I want to pursue because it's not about me, it's about them.

Alexandra

You can absolutely tell that Sindia is a passionate instructor who loves teaching.

Sindia Rivera-Jiménez

Just I think, the mentoring component of teaching, like I think, that I had really good mentors and teachers that believe in me more than I actually believe in myself. So I remember faculty telling me you have failed in this, but it doesn't mean that you are not smart, that you cannot do it. That opportunity that I had of having that kind of teacher make me feel that I should be the same and pay it forward for other people.

Alexandra

One of the best things about teaching, I have always thought, is getting to see the amazing things that our students accomplish. We get to see their stories unfold.

Sindia Rivera-Jiménez

When they email me back saying Professor Rivera, I thought your class was really hard. But now I realize that I learned a lot and I'm using this in my company and using this, you know, when they come back to me and keep me posted right? I always end out the semester saying, "Please! if you're famous or you're not famous, remember to come back and email me to tell me how you are." and they do. They actually email me and tell me "Yeah, we're here. I'm almost finishing my PhD." Some of them I continue to mentor. There's a couple of them. They're going to do their

PhDs. I continue to mentor. So I think that's one of the things I love the most, not now, but in the future, how they come back and tell me how much, I don't know, they're succeeding.

Alexandra

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