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Who We Are

Focus On... Student Identity

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Who We Are



By Yarina Aguilar Becerra, Cecilia Diojuan, Jasmine Walker, Neera Malhotra, David Peterson del Mar, and Vicki L. Reitenauer



Yarina Aguilar Becerra (Yarina. aguilar13@gmail.com), the daughter of Mexican immigrants, achieved her dream of graduating with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice in 2020 from Portland State University. She has extensive experience mentoring Latinx youth and is pursuing a career working with and for adjudicated youth. She is also a devoted madre, hija, hermana, tia, y prima (mother, daughter, sister, auntie, and cousin).



Cecilia Diojuan is a Mexican American dreamer waking up to her dreams on a daily basis to make them a goal and honored to be working with people that are true examples of resilience, hard work, and dedication, despite the misfortune of their pasts. One day not too far away, as an accomplished immigration attorney, Ceci will look back at this article and know that she did it: for her people, for her brother, and for herself.

Jasmine Walker is the pseudonym of a senior at Portland State University (PSU) majoring in English. She is a leader in the Pan-African Commons and was active in Disarm PSU. For several years she has been mentoring and advocating for youth who have been marginalized in their schools and communities and codirected a mentoring program at Reynolds High School.



Dr. David Peterson del Mar (delmard@pdx.edu) is a Professor at Portland State University who teaches year-long Freshman Inquiry classes for University Studies. He is the author of seven books on U.S. social and cultural history and the President of Yo Ghana!, a nonprofit that facilitates letter exchanges between youth in West Africa and the Pacific Northwest.



Dr. Neera Malhotra (neeram@pdx.edu) is a Senior Instructor within the University Studies program at Portland State University (PSU). Her current scholarship includes implications of interpersonal neurobiology and contemplative practices in higher education. Outside PSU, she teaches meditation and works with youth groups on cocreating compassionate social justice practices.



Vicki L. Reitenauer (vicr@pdx.edu) serves on the faculty of the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies department at Portland State University, developing and teaching both discipline-specific and general-education courses, including community-based learning experiences; employing critical pedagogies and reflective practice for integrative, transformative, liberatory learning; building and sustaining community partnerships; facilitating relational faculty support processes; and co-creating faculty-led assessment

In Short

- Increasingly, professionals in higher education are acknowledging the short- and long-term impacts on individuals and communities of institutional failures to create welcoming, inclusive, and caring environments for traditionally underrepresented students.
- Student voices, reflecting on their lived and felt experiences in college, have been less frequently present in the discussions about inclusion in higher education.
- Listening to students from underrepresented groups has the potential to redefine and renew how we understand education and ourselves, offering a template and a foundation for the dense network of relationships that a student-focused institution of higher education ought to aspire to and build on.

“**O**ur stories,” writes Jasmine Walker, “make us who we are.” As several authors in last May/June’s issue of *Change* pointed out, more and more students are coming to college with stories that need to be heard but are not being heard—stories of loss, survival, marginalization, resilience, oppression, persistence, trauma, and determined, stubborn love. They enter an environment that is so often defined and celebrated as a sort of prolonged adolescence, an intellectual and developmental

cocoon set aside spatially and emotionally from the demands of family and community, a life of the mind in which the self is presumed to develop unfettered and unencumbered. In this setting, what are we to make of the growing numbers of students, often dark-skinned and silent, who arrive in our classrooms (including virtual ones) with lives weighted heavy by suffering and responsibility?

The six of us began a collaboration in the fall of 2019 at Portland State University around this amorphous but compelling question. Vicki, Neera, and David had been talking about the widening gap

between the experiences and expectations of most faculty and students at our urban and increasingly diverse university. We convened a series of meetings with several undergraduate students around this general topic, an invitation that Jasmine, Yarina, and Ceci responded to and persisted with despite, or perhaps because of, their many responsibilities and challenges at home and at school.

Through several interchanges, oral and written, about our roads to and experiences at Portland State, the three students focused on what they wished students, faculty, and administrators knew about them. They then drafted the letters excerpted below to a real or imagined member of the university community about “who we are,” inspired by the arguments made by several authors in *Change’s* May/June 2020 issue.

Who are these students? They are extraordinary human beings who lead rich and often invisible lives. Walker and Aguilar Becerra write compellingly of feeling alien and out of place at Portland State. Some of what sets them apart is their commitment to their communities of origin, the time-consuming responsibilities that would seem to disqualify them from being able to have what academics and popular culture widely posit to be a normal college experience. Yet, as Diojuan richly testifies, it is this very familial embeddedness that so often inspires such students to excel beyond their more privileged and sheltered peers—particularly if they are given sufficient encouragement and support. And it is precisely this intense sociality, this belief in and practice of education, of living, as a shared enterprise that holds so much potential for transforming academia in ways that will profoundly benefit us all. Both the white Right and the white Left, noted Ana M. Martínez Alemán (2020), posit a “false separation of the individuals from their community” (p. 96). It is difficult to imagine a more hyper-individualistic community than academia, including public, urban research universities such as Portland State that enroll so many students of color.

As you read the stories that follow, we invite you to take a moment to pause and notice who and what comes to your mind. Perhaps you will remember the student who sat in the front row and started the semester strong but then missed too many sessions to pass. Perhaps you will glimpse yourself in the mirror they hold up to your own lived experiences. Perhaps you have not seen or heard

these kinds of stories before—and you begin to wonder why. These voices simultaneously challenge and negotiate with faculty and administrators to hear them so that *every* student may be successful in actualizing their and their families’ and communities’ dreams. These narratives invite higher education professionals to restore/revise/revive classrooms of every sort to make space for every student. To take in these narratives means to get comfortable with discomfort, to accept an unsettling of the seemingly resolved single story, such that others in their wholeness may be fully invited to a higher education bounty for all.

JASMINE WALKER: DEAR PROFESSOR

I want to begin by introducing myself. My name, for the purposes of this essay, is Jasmine Walker. My parents are refugees from Barawa, Somalia. I am a first-generation student. I grew up the youngest of 11 children, watching as each sibling attended college, then somehow managed to balance the responsibilities of supporting their own families while being tied to larger familial obligations. I come from an extremely modest background and upbringing, and my family was different than most due to our culture, language, and traditional values that seemed to clash with Western practices and beliefs. I watched peers live in the dorms, essentially free from the duties of home life and outside responsibilities, but that wasn’t an option for me and my family or families similar to mine.

In my time at Portland State, I have found it to be difficult to bear truth on my experience and the experiences that so many of my peers have faced. As I unfold bits of these stories, there is real weight, real trauma, real bodily knowledge that speaks to the experiences and battles that many nontraditional students endure in their classrooms, personal life, and individual selves. Four years ago, I entered the university without knowing how to navigate it—Portland State University, dressed in its green, white, and black and decorated with professionalism, respectability, and diversity. What does it mean when we say we are students of this university, and how does that impact how we carry ourselves and how we embody these words?

In my first year as a student my father was between hospitals, and my sister and I were the only two who were able to translate in my native language due to lack of translator options. I missed a

major portion of our course workload and felt unable to communicate this to you, my professor. At the time, I was struggling to be there emotionally and physically for my family, but I felt as though I needed to also succeed in my courses and that, if I communicated my situation to you, I would be unfairly judged.

I found it extremely difficult to find support or assistance due to lack of advocacy and resources for students with experiences like mine and the presence of systemic barriers, including the lack of representation of individuals like me in professional positions at the university. The vast majority of my peers in my home community are East African immigrants and refugees, and of those families, 90 percent are Somali refugees, the majority of whom are Muslim. Many of our community members have fled intense political turmoil in their home countries, in many cases spending years in refugee camps, and they relocate to the United States with little to no understanding of how to navigate systems.

Most experience a compounding of oppressions and face barriers to equal education—health, employment, and housing—and are disproportionately impacted by obstacles to equal justice, resulting in high rates of disciplinary actions in schools, as well as arrests and incarceration. Our community members also deal with posttraumatic stress disorder at alarmingly higher rates than the general population and increasingly have to deal with the mental health impacts of anti-immigrant, anti-Black, and anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies.

I aim to educate on the real experiences of students like myself. I ask that we empathize with each other more often, as our experiences cannot compare, but may heal us through sharing them with each other. Although our stories make us different, they make us who we are.

Silence and secrets were often passed down in my family, but I think it has to stop somewhere. We have to reflect on our histories and remember. These are the keys for moving forward: building empathy and continuing to sustain it, embody it, and allow it to shape and evolve our communities.

CECILIA DIOJUAN: THE JOURNEY

Like most students, I have a past. This is my story, one that deserves to be heard.

I was once a runaway teenage girl who, at the age of 13, met the wrong people, followed the wrong

path, and rode in a car next to a cop with hands cuffed.

But my journey began long before that. In 2000, I was born in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, the youngest in my family, the only girl with four brothers. I lived there to the age of two. Since then, I have lived in Oregon, in a small city called Hillsboro. I come from a humble family that has instilled in me the values of hard work, good moral character, and resilience.

I grew up with two Hispanic parents who hardly understood English. They would communicate, read, and write through me. For as long as I can recall, I have been their support. I remember making my father buy me a small chalkboard because I wanted to become his English teacher. As an adult, I look back and realize how sad it is for a six-year-old girl to try to teach her father English so that he can defend himself from it. It was hard to see my father work multiple jobs on only five to six hours of sleep, hard to see my mother work in nurseries rain or shine, in cold weather or hot, to give me all I ever received.

I grew up seeing my third eldest brother in and out of jail for drug abuse and trafficking. My parents blamed him for influencing me. At the age of 14 he stood in jail accused of a serious crime. I knew it was impossible, because I was present the night of the alleged incident. I had no way to prove it. My word had no worth.

My brother lost his resident status when he got transferred to the Tacoma Northwest Detention Center. Despite working multiple jobs, my father did not have the necessary income to provide an immigration lawyer for an appeal. Before we knew it, we had lost his case, and he was already stepping into the unknown—his *native* country, Mexico. I could not wrap my mind around the fact that my family's financial situation was the reason Ricardo was deported without due process. As a result of this injustice, I promised myself that I was going to prepare to fight injustice, no matter what.

As I grew older, I took my mother out of work and became my father's right hand emotionally and financially. My senior year of high school I worked a full-time job, as I was also trying to make it into college, to help be the one to provide for my family. After not receiving sufficient financial aid at my first-choice university, I considered not going to college but knew that was not a good option. I applied at Portland State and one week later

received my acceptance letter. I was offered four scholarships, including the Four Years Free guarantee, to pursue my goals. I felt accomplished. I knew that my dream of becoming an attorney was finally being put into action.

Today, I am a first-generation high-school honors graduate and a second-year college student involved in the prelaw program, making my way toward a bachelor's degree in criminal justice. I plan to attend law school to pursue immigration law. My mission is to change lives, to give without expecting to be given back, and to keep families united. My mission is to be that lawyer my brother did not have. I owe it to him, to my parents, and to myself.

I have not been alone on this journey. My university has opened its doors for many students like me who desire and have the determination to persevere and become someone in life, and I have been honored to encounter a teacher who has been a humble, empathetic, vulnerable, and supporting person in my life, someone that guides me to be successful. His class is a diverse family that welcomes, accepts, respects, and understands others, regardless of physical appearances, religious beliefs, and cultural backgrounds.

I know that one day, not far off from today, I will look back with a law degree in hand and say it is time, time to fight for my people, because justice and liberty are priceless. Your life, your goals, and your success are priceless too.

This is my story.

YARINA AGUILAR BECERRA: DEAR MS. B

I somehow passed your class. I don't know how.

A lot of my classmates knew me, but not the Portland State students. I didn't know any of them. It was the "other" students, the ones in detention at the youth correctional facility where our course took place. I used to visit a friend of mine there. I couldn't be happier to be studying alongside these friends of my friend. If anyone could understand what I was going through, what I'd been through, the struggle . . . it was them.

The friend we had in common was in Tacoma, about to be deported. I'd drive there every weekend. He was there for a minimum-sentencing case against him when he was 16. He'd pled guilty, because who would believe a brown, gang-affiliated

male youth? The incarcerated students knew this, and they would ask how he was doing, and how I was doing, too. They'd tell me to remember to keep our heads up. I knew they knew exactly how we were feeling. I never felt this with the Portland State students. There were familiar faces that I'd seen on campus, but I didn't actually know any of them. They were nice, but I didn't feel like I could relate to them.

I related more with the incarcerated students. Life hadn't been easy for them, but here they were, still trying. They had hope in what seemed like a hopeless place. They were taking advantage of the resources provided to them. It sucks that it wasn't until they got there that they got those resources. I know what it's like to have to figure it out on my own.

My journey to Portland State wasn't easy. I'm the first in my family to attend college, a brown, gang-affiliated youth who found her way here, alone. *You can't spell scholar without "chola,"* I used to repeat to myself. It gave me hope that I could attend college, even with my past.

I'd changed for the better after a close call with law enforcement. The only reason I didn't end up with a criminal record was because they swept everything under the rug. I was going down for something I didn't do, and they knew that. I'd been more than willing to take the fall, too. I felt like I had nothing to lose. After that close call, I really began to reflect. Things came apart, and other things came together. I graduated high school with a 1.4 Grade Point Average (GPA). I transferred to the university from community college with honors and a 3.7 GPA. I had gotten married and had a baby girl.

In class we were learning about hope, and God knows I needed that more than anything. I announced during one of our check-ins how I was officially divorced, and the class just roared in joy with me.

I was happy about my divorce. But it was now up to me to figure it all out for my daughter and me. I didn't have a job, a car, or my own place. I felt I had failed at my marriage. I was failing as a student. I was failing as a mom. I wondered if my daughter would be better off with her dad. I didn't feel like I could care for her anymore. I couldn't give her up, though. I wouldn't. I finally understood why mom left me and my brother years before. I couldn't do the same to my daughter. It had hurt me and left a scar. I wouldn't do that to her.

I had to keep going to school because I was almost done. I was overwhelmed but giving up was not an option. I would keep pushing through. It's not like I had anyone to take over for me.

I trusted this was temporary, and I couldn't lose hope.

I can't tell you how much this class did for me. It gave me that hope. It gave me a sense of belonging. It gave me support. I knew every time I walked through that gate, I belonged there. I was the happiest I could be when I was in that class. Even though I'm not sure how I passed, I'm grateful for that support, that sense of belonging, that hope.

Now What?

This is my story, one that deserves to be heard.

I know what it's like to have to figure it out on my own.

I aim to educate on the real experiences of students like myself.

Most academic settings in America diminish underrepresented students' lived experiences and

erase their worldview, replacing it with a glorified ideology deeply rooted in bias. As suggested in "An Unpaid Debt: The Case for Racial Equity in Higher Education" (Paris, 2020), students' sense of belonging and connection with faculty and fellow students—and the lack of these factors—deeply impact their learning and their lives. The preceding narratives present the lived experiences of students who enter college, and then leave, having succeeded or not, while remaining unknown, hidden, and misrepresented—if not overrepresented and tokenized for being who they are.

Listening to, seeing, and fully welcoming students from communities that have been marginalized is not just an essential part of building equitable curricula, evaluative tools, and institutional structures. Listening to students who have been overlooked has the potential to redefine and renew how we understand education and ourselves. They offer a foundation and a template for the dense network of relationships that a student-focused public university ought to aspire to and build on. They can change who we all are, individually and collectively; how we might learn from and with each other; and who we might dare to become. ☐

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