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Critical Junctures along the Chicanx/Latinx Educational Pipeline: Interdisciplinary and Intersectional

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## **Interview With Dr. Julie Lopez Figueroa: A Journey of a First-Generation Faculty and Mentoring Across the Educational Pipeline**

**Pedro E. Nava**

*Santa Clara University*

*pnav2@scu.edu*

In preparing this special issue on Latinx experiences across the educational pipeline, we sought to include contributions from authors addressing innovative approaches. As a teaching tool, the educational pipeline highlights the importance of developing a critical understanding of entry, transition, and exit points in the aggregate. The articles featured in this special issue all point toward the significance of individual educators and mentors who played important roles in supporting students to navigate at various stages of the pipeline. In this conversational interview, we highlight the significant contributions of Dr. Julie Lopez Figueroa, a full professor at California State University Sacramento and a first-generation scholar with extensive experience navigating and also mentoring students across the educational pipeline. In what follows, we provide a brief overview of Dr. Lopez Figueroa's upbringing and then proceed with an interview on what led her to become an educator, and her approach to teaching, mentoring, and being mentored.

Dr. Julie Lopez Figueroa was born and raised in San Jose, California—on the East Side. Her parents were farmworkers who eventually transitioned to working in the canneries in the area at the time. She grew up in a context of de facto residential segregation in a predominantly Latino and Black neighborhood, yet most educators in her schools were white. Despite being materially poor, her parents, Maria and Macedonio, with an elementary education, were pivotal to her success and played an essential role in nurturing her dreams and aspirations. Julie recalls her parents telling her and her siblings, “We can’t afford to live anywhere else, but we don’t want you to think that your dreams are encapsulated as far as the property boundaries go.” Maria and Macedonio would ask colleagues at work about all the free places where they could take their children to provide enriching activities, including parks and other places. Julie also

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credits teachers like Ms. O'Connor and Ms. Musumeci in her early years with seeing and believing in her potential as a student. These teachers, her parents, and other educators she references in the interview supported her across the educational pipeline and subsequently informed her approach to teaching and mentoring.

I met Dr. Julie Lopez Figueroa through my participation as a faculty fellow for the American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education (AAHHE), where she served as my faculty mentor. Through our conversations, I found we shared similar upbringings as children of immigrant agricultural workers, part of the first-generation in our families to go to the university and graduate, the first to attain a doctoral degree to become faculty, and we both enjoy teaching and mentoring. In 2017, she reached another milestone when she earned the rank of Professor and became one of 197 Latinas out of 2,129 women full professors in the entire CSU system, or about 9% (Figueroa, 2019).

Dr. Lopez Figueroa has been a strong advocate and mentor for many scholars of color in helping them navigate the tenure-track process. Her mentoring approach provides great clarity around the tenure and promotion process and serves as an important reminder to prioritize those aspects of teaching, research, and service that most align with the personal and professional interests of pre-tenure faculty. Dr. Lopez Figueroa's lived experience as a first-generation student and academic, scholarly focus on the experiences of minoritized students in higher education, award-winning teaching, and mentoring, along with her positionality as a Woman of Color raised in the East Side of San Jose provides her with a unique vantage point to offer key insights as an interviewee about the educational pipeline.

On September 25, 2022, Dr. Pedro E Nava conducted a conversational interview via Zoom with Dr. Julie Lopez Figueroa. The edited transcript of that conversation is below<sup>i</sup>.

### **The Interview<sup>ii</sup>**

**Dr. Pedro E. Nava (PEN):** *Dr. Lopez Figueroa, can you share about what led you to become an educator?*

**Dr. Julie L. Figueroa (JLF):** Actually, I was going to be an architect. I was accepted into architecture school at CSU San Luis Obispo and was dead set on it because I had taken about two years of architecture [in high school]. I had done competitions and I was pretty good at it. My high school teacher, Mr. Leong, said, "Hey, I think you're really good at this. You should put an application together and send it to San Luis Obispo." And I thought to myself,

when I think about my exposure to educators as a young child and as a middle schooler, as a high schooler, I decided, “Nope, don’t want to do that.”

I’ll tell you why because I was a very shy person, and I kept thinking [becoming an architect] is a lot of work with lots of moving parts. You got all these people you’re responsible for, so that [role] didn’t enter my mind. Once I realized where San Luis Obispo was on the map, this was way back when maps were paper, I noticed how much [familial] income we had and what was available. If my parents came to see me, we would have to rent a hotel, “*Nunca va a pasar eso*”. So I let that dream go and wound up going undeclared at UC Davis. Between my sophomore and junior year, my high school teacher, Macario Ortiz, invited me to return as a high school alum. That was the first time I was in front of people in a formal sense.

The idea was that I would go and say, “Here is what I did. Well, that is what sent me [to college].” And by that time, I was the third person in my family to go to college. My parents never had the opportunity to receive any formal education. I think my mom went up to the second grade. My dad never had the opportunity to go to school. And so, I didn’t see the school as necessarily responsible for my success – I saw my parents. But I used the opportunity [to return to my high school] to say, “You know, here are ways you could be more inclusive. I shouldn’t be the exception. There should be more people on a panel there. It’s not just me.” They didn’t like that too much. There was only one faculty member that really taught me, a teacher named Anna Musumeci, who had gotten me out of special education. Even though I was tested and put into special education, she found a way to get me out of special education, and that’s a story for another time, but that’s when I realized, “Wait, so how do people use their teaching as an advocate?” I didn’t have any of those words at that point.

I tell you this story because when I realized it’s a combination of Ms. Musumeci and what you can do — that part of it led me to open myself up to be an educator. The idea of being in front of people takes change and knowledge where it could shift or expand our thinking. That was really appealing to me. But it was my parents who taught me to really think about it. Everybody has a purpose in life, everybody. Income doesn’t define that, and, you know, we are all— in their ways of teaching me —spiritual beings that have a calling. You know, the way my dad would teach us is like, it’s not about religion, it’s really about recognizing you as being born for a reason. He always said to us, “*Si no vives para servir, no sirves para vivir.*”

The educator part is very broad. It's not just formal schooling but really, "How do we educate?" in general. But I think about this particular question and all the people along the way who had me reframe what it meant to be an educator. So when you think about faculty culture, it's very individual and can be a very isolating journey. And the way I was raised is in community, in living in community, recognizing strengths versus competing with each other and offering supportive feedback versus criticism. It was just a small pivot, so I would say, my parents, Ms. Musumeci, and my Chicano studies professors at UC Davis [led me to become an educator]. I had the privilege of being educated by Dr. Linda Facio. I had the privilege of being educated by Dr. Beatriz Pesquera and Dr. Vicki Ruiz. People who saw potential! Like here's what you do, and here's what you *can* do. They were laying this foundation for me about how you become a professor. How can you be a professor and look like me? I could see [in them] someone that looks like me.

**PEN:** Could you expand on your experiences through higher education? What led you to end up as a university professor?

**JLF:** I was a student at the time at UC Berkeley and had Pedro Noguera in the social-cultural studies program. He was my advisor. Pedro was the person who taught high school and was a university professor. He was very much about the community. He kept expanding on what I imagined a university professor could be. I could be part of the community, I don't have to be just [at the university]. Pedro Noguera realized that I was interested in higher education. He was my shared advisor and before he left to a different university, he had me transition to Eugene (Gene) Garcia. Gene at the time had the Latino Eligibility Study, and long story short, that's how I got entryway. But just as I had two years to go, Gene said, "Julie I can't let you graduate without having teaching experience," and I was like, "Oh, I'm sunk!" Because I could research, like, nobody! We could go to the library stack, leave me there all day long, I'll get you your answer. And Gene said, "You're gonna have to be in front of the class," and I broke out in a sweat! I remember that day so clearly, and I said, "Okay okay okay okay." So I taught an intro class to Chicano Studies at Berkeley in Ethnic Studies... I mean here's the thing, I got my degree in education in social cultural studies, and I never even knew how to write a syllabus, let alone a lesson plan. I could do conference presentations, but I didn't know how to translate the presenting to [teaching].

Thankfully, I had a couple of friends who were teachers before and who I could reach out to and ask, what do I do? And then Gene said, “Here’s some syllabi, look at what they have to do. Go ahead and call the folks over in ethnic studies and ask them if they can share the previous syllabus with you.” My friend Anne Marie said, “Okay, here’s what you do. Here’s some code. They call it a lesson plan.” I was like, okay, so week by week, I kept meeting with her but just being there. I didn’t know what to do with myself standing in front of all these people. And you’re responsible for not just that, but for building the energy it takes to get from 8:00 to 9:50, or 8:00 to 8:50. It was horrifying.

But you know what? I thought after the first day, I could do this! I wasn’t thrilled about being in front of the class, but I was thrilled about [what I] was learning from [students] and how they thought about the reading. And more importantly, [having students] think about where critical thinking comes from, where they came from, and how that background now [interfaces with] what we’re reading about. The critical analysis begins not outside yourself but within yourself as a lens to think about and discuss what will happen with this material. So the learning part was exciting, and I’ll never forget it. Gene observed my class a couple of times and gave me his own evaluation. He said “I think you can do this. I think you’re actually really good at this.” I said, “I am?” I’ll never forget his advice. He said, “You know, when I first started teaching, I got my teaching evaluation, and one of the evaluations said something like ‘if this was the last day on earth, I would love to be in this class,’ and I was like, ‘I got it. You know this is awesome. What a compliment.’” And then Gene saw a little arrow, and he turned the page over, and the comment read, “‘Because every day feels like forever.’” [Laughter] We’re all going to have days like that, boy. But if you continue being a learner, guess what, you’ll just get better and better and better. Once I could release that I realized I can keep engaging students in a way where we can start with a place of strength and build from there. I think because I was in special education early in my life, it was very confusing to me, and I also loved learning, but I hated school. And I just thought to myself, all these different experiences, if I could provide different experiences for students in that first time I taught, then maybe I think this is what I want to do. When I applied [to become a university professor], there was one job in Northern California that year. I said, “Ooh, this is it, I’m a gambler, in a sense like [the adage] ‘Nothing ventured, nothing gained.’” I can only go from here. I was shocked when they said, “We have a job offer.” I was like, really? Okay, I’m going. But I knew I wanted to have that combination, I have always

had a foot in ethnic studies and another in educational policy. That's why being there in ethnic studies at Sacramento State University was a perfect fit for me. I still get to do both.

**PEN:** *Can you talk about your work as a researcher and as a scholar as it pertains to the broader landscape of your scholarship?*

**JLF:** It is funny because I didn't know I had a scholarship [laughs]. I mean, you define your areas of expertise when you're a doctoral student. Mine were first-generation students and academic success, higher education, teaching and learning was another one, teaching in a cultural context, and qualitative methods. I honestly didn't even know what it meant to develop a scholarship. And so the American Association of Hispanic Higher Education (AAHHE)—before it became AAHHE, it was the American Association in Higher Education—they had a Latino caucus. And it was in that experience [within the organization] that I realized these aren't just areas of expertise but trajectories. At the time, my dissertation was on Latino men in Higher Education, and being on the Latino Eligibility Study that I talked about earlier, my job was to look at data. At the time, Dr. Aida Hurtado was the research director for that project. It brought all these folks together across the University of California to look at this data. I noticed there was a discrepancy in graduation rates and retention rates for Latino men. And nobody was talking about that at the time in the literature. A lot of the literature was still looking at the underachievement of Latinas. That was my starting point, too, just understanding Latinos in higher education and what was going on. What I didn't realize is that it was a theme Gene believed in, Aida believed in, but nobody else did.

After being a graduate fellow [with AAHHE], I became a faculty fellow and stayed in touch with Victor Saenz. I met him, Leticia Oseguera, and Stella Flores; we were all in the same Faculty Fellows cohort. Victor was very kind and gracious because he's the one who let me know, because again a lot of the [academic]work that we do is in isolation, and while our intent is to have a lot of people read what we write, we don't know our reach. It wasn't until Victor [Saenz] invited me to College Board. The College Board at the time was interested in having a Boy and Male of Color Initiative, and they invited me out to present, and Victor was gracious enough to say, here is one of the founding scholars who started this body of work. I heard and turned around and was like, are they talking about me? (Laughs) I had no idea! I remember being at a talk that Aida Hurtado gave, and she said, "I just want to let everyone know that one of the founding people who started this body of knowledge is right here, Dr. Julie Lopez

Figueroa.” And I was like, “Oh my God, it’s a thing.” That’s where my research has gone, but I’ve also been very interested in academic success and also issues of retention. We talk about retention at an institutional level, but where do we talk about retention in the classroom? And what is our role as faculty? And then, most recently, as part of that excavation, I’ve been thinking about my sabbatical project on critical mentoring, a term that came out in 2015, and it’s not rocket science. It asks faculty what happens if you prioritize learning something about your students? It’s not advising but mentoring. What forms of investment can we make in our students, especially when we think about Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs)? When we think about HSIs, we have the money, as Marcela Cuellar and others discuss, but the university infrastructure remains the same. So what are some practices that you yourself, myself, and other folks of color who have the privilege of teaching the students [implement]? What kind of mentoring do we do that we don’t even realize makes a huge impact? And how is the mentoring that we’ve received? I can think about amazing conversations that I’ve had with Michael Omi, who was part of my dissertation committee. It’s about understanding they paid it forward by making sure that I knew things, and so I’m interested in interviewing them [for my critical mentoring study]. They would then select junior faculty that they mentor and have a dialogue around what are the things that we can learn about mentoring first gen-students. That is a simple practice for anyone that is working at an HSI.

**PEN:** *Speaking about your award-winning teaching, what are pedagogical tools you use when you teach? What does Professor Julie’s classroom look like?*

**JLF:** I learned this from Gloria [Rodriguez] who does educational leadership—expectations are everything. I had to learn and think about how I set my students up and ourselves. I remember three things — communication is really important. I came from a generation where at some point at night, there was nothing on TV. And the cell phones did not exist. That helps me acknowledge that my students will generally be the same age, but I’m getting older. The second thing is understanding that no amount of degrees are going to get you the respect of people. You must have common decency to *saludar*, welcome people, and be authentic; that didn’t come from my training. That is who I am in this space because what is teaching and learning if not building relationships?

The third thing is creating learning expectations or learning agreements. We co-construct those so that students have a sense of what we are doing. Most importantly, I always tell my students



I want to be able to write them a letter of recommendation. You may not need one from me, but wouldn't it be awesome if you could say, you know what, I got my third person or, I got my fourth person. So I show them a slide from co-constructing the learning agreements and the different things I have to address in a letter [of recommendation]. Ironically, what is in the letter is not something you are graded on. So, I need to figure out how to position [the student] to speak, to give me evidence while performing the assignment. So before we closed down [due] to COVID, I saw this for the first time when Marcos Pizarro had people perform a reading. I thought to myself, "That's an interesting [performance assignment], right?" So you are creating the skit, you are looking at your lines, you are being reflective, you are thinking about the reading, and you are creating a dialogue here. What is the thing that you are gonna explain and you are going to perform, so that helps you [as a professor] write the letter [of recommendation]? Or sometimes, people look at me like I'm crazy because I'll say, "I'm ready to start when you are ready to learn." I'm always conscious about smiling, not because I am crazy but because I want them to understand there is a sense of humanity. I say thank you so much for coming. I'm so grateful we can gather today. It is a privilege to have this time together, and I am deliberate about saying stuff like that—And I will wait for students. If we are in a physical classroom, I'll say, "Okay, you can sit wherever you want. But remember, what is our learning agreement? You want to make this a welcoming space, so if you keep gravitating towards that corner, how will people on the other side of the room get to know you?" So sometimes I'll just wait. So there is a lot of accountability built in.

When students have not done their reading and still come to class, which is a travesty when I know they have paid their fees, it's my job to figure out what happened. Could you access the reading? This is why, for instance, I have nothing but online readings for the first three weeks. So financial aid is not an issue. I do not have money to buy my books is not an issue. I got three weeks covered. So I tell them you don't have to worry about it. It is right here, so being mindful of finances. Being mindful of getting all the training that are involved. Whether it is Dreamers Resource Ally training, whether it is Pride-centered training. Can I be mindful of how I am talking to students? So instead of saying, "Hey, you guys," [It is,] "Hey everyone, it's great that we could gather," you know, things like that. Thanking people— "Thank you so much for volunteering." Or, "Can I invite you to do this" or, you know, "Can you come to the board and show me can you draw what you're saying? Because I think what you're saying is really

important.” And even Michael Omi taught me this. I mean, how many times has this man read *Racial Formation*? He wrote it right. But in his seminar, he would also tell me, “You know, Julie, I was rereading this thing and thinking about some of the work you do. I’m curious like, how are you making sense of this?” And I’m like “Oh my god. He’s interested in what I think. What?” Though sometimes it is mindfully saying, you know, “I want to come back to something Jessica said last week, which I thought was really important. And that I want to acknowledge the fact that it builds with what Esteban said the week before that.” And to really creating an inclusive space where I am not the only figure in the room. One thing I’ve learned, and some people might say this is handholding, but I’m in the camp with Laura Rendon. When she wrote her book *Sentipensante*, you are not handholding; you are validating.

You are guiding first-generation students to be able to do what they need to do, which is to learn. So I will send a reminder, “Hey looking forward to next week,” “Just as a reminder here’s what we’re gonna do” and then when we finish the week, “Thank you so much for coming.” I don’t know what it takes for you to be here, but I know that I want to thank you and your family and your community for showing up. And it is those little things. Those are the ligaments that become intertwined and a cable that strengthens my connection to them so that when I ask them something, they’re willing to leap off or extend themselves beyond a boundary of learning that they’re unfamiliar with because they trust me. And they know I’m not setting them up to be like “Wrong, nice try, good attempt but like okay. Okay, okay.” Instead, it is more of “That’s a great starting point. So now, let’s take that further.” And still being honest and holding them accountable because that is the one thing we do not do. There is a reason they’ve developed that practice of coming [to class] and saying I am still gonna be fine if I did or did not do the homework and it is because we don’t say to them, (or I’ll use my I statement). I do not remember learning until I started teaching that students need to be reminded. We are partners, and we are going to be partners for 15 weeks, and your success is my success.

I will say to them, “There’s nothing much more powerful and violent than silence. And the fact that you all are compelled to be silent. Sometimes I don’t blame you. It came from somewhere, but I want to let you know that I don’t want you to internalize that because I know you have something important to say.” They don’t even think about it. They just think that it’s respectful, not to say anything. And in reality in college, we want dialogue, dialogue, get into groups, do this, do that, but we didn’t heal them from this habit they developed. Herminda [Garcia], I

remember a long time ago, would teach me, "You know, you have to have wait time." And I'm like, "Wait time, what is that?" And I started instituting it in my classes, so you'll see me doing wait time, I'll throw a question out and students will just sit. And I'll say, "You know, I believe in wait time. Here's what wait time is and we all process things differently and so it's okay." And so I will stand there or be on Zoom and make sure I'm conscious of what my face looks like because sometimes as faculty we're not conscious and we look at our students like, "I'm excited to be here" [with emotionless face]. When I am waiting for a response, I'm usually like this. You know, as calm as open as I can reflect on screen or in person, to remind and send that message. Learning is about vulnerability. Mastery comes through vulnerability and a grade is not just a grade, that what we're doing is bigger than the grade. What we're doing is securing who you are to know who you are. And so I think those are some of the practices I've learned along the way...You're a sophomore, or junior, or senior super senior, and in reality, who's gonna tell them that? Unless it's somebody who understands that journey...you don't have to be from the same background, but you have to be mindful, right? This is the whole critical mentoring part of it.

To understand that, you know, sometimes if something is wrong at home, [our students are] not gonna be in the classroom. So when they return to the classroom, the first thing they say is "Well did I miss anything important?" To which I always tell them from day one "Please don't say that." [laughter] Instead, I would want you to develop a habit of saying, "I was taking care of that" and I always tell this to students or anyone who has met me: If you're absent, I assume you're being responsible somewhere else. What can we do to make sure that you're where you need to be? And sometimes I'll make up extra assignments because sometimes the most difficult thing is to go back to make up an assignment. So I created an assignment. I said, okay. In the next two weeks, here's what you're gonna do, right? And they'll do it.

Part of it is it's just multi-layered. I'm still learning. I mean, yes, I'm honored and humbled that I got that [teaching] award, it just lets me know in a small way, that I'm going in the right direction. But here's my bigger compass. If I can have somebody like you, Rebeca (Burciaga), Frances [Contreras], Gloria [Rodriguez], remain connected to other people that I have mentored, if I can have all of you in my life, I must be doing something right.

**PEN:** *Julie, you've been an incredible mentor to countless people, and so along those lines, I see you as having a wealth of knowledge and a wealth of experiences. I know that you deeply value*

*mentoring and working with students and faculty. Can you share your approach to mentoring and mentorship?*

**JLF:** I think, generally, it's always humbling to be considered a mentor. Half the time I ask myself, "Do I know what I'm doing?" Not because it's a lack of confidence, but because you want to understand it's not a cookie-cutter approach, but a responsive one. And so you're doing a lot of listening and also sharing some lessons learned at the same time but still balancing out for one's respect for the other person. Making sure that folks aren't stuck in something they don't need to be stuck in. If somebody did something to them, said something about their work, I'm like, "Okay? Let me decode that for you. They're crazy." [laughter]. I always tell students, you want to do a research talk on that? Nobody's thought of it. Why? There are so few of us, so keep doing that. When I think about AAHHE and what they've done, I really have tried to follow their model. As a graduate fellow myself, I realized that it's important to have a structure of abundance. To have a way in which you are instrumentally and intentionally wanting to make a difference...My dad has this saying, "*El sol es para todos.*" So I kind of operate that way, like, "You have a dream? Great. I'll be cheering on that dream because somebody did that for me." And I know it has made a huge difference. So when you and I had the opportunity to meet, I'm always nervous when I meet my new mentees. Partly because I'm a shy person. And so of course I want us to get along and I always enter with a strong sense of optimism and positivity and I also know what not being mentored in a kind way looks like. I always told myself, if I ever had the opportunity to mentor, I'm not gonna do that. So you'll never hear me say "Well that's short-sighted." [Laughter] Or What kind of thinking did you do to get to that? Never going to happen, because here is the other thing that I know is we all are gifted with different talents, and you have to respect what people bring. My goal is always to make sure you get tenure, or you go to the next thing you need to do. We can have a space where there's vulnerability on both ends because the truth is, honestly, Pedro, I need you all as much as you need me. Being a full professor's a very lonely experience, and there aren't that many of us nationally. But even as a junior professor, I was the only Chicana in my whole college as a faculty member. And so there are lots of moments of isolation for a variety of reasons. For me, mentoring is a way to revive the spirit and to understand that your success is something that gives my life meaning. Some people might call that selfish. I think of it as creating community and saying I'm invested, because if you fly like you've been flying then you're gonna soar, and if

you soar, then I know down the road generations, some child is going to be better off for what you've done. It may be a teacher, another parent, or a friend. It's the things that we know will be coming that I may or may not ever get to see, but I know that it's gonna make a difference.

**PEN:** *Along those lines Julie, who are some of your mentors? And how did they influence you on how to mentor?*

**JLF:** I would say I have mentors inside and outside of the institution. I think about my parents, for sure. They have been my best mentors, especially when we think about making sure that what's always apparent is a sense of humanity and a sense of welcome and encouragement. I think about how when it comes to pushing the boundaries of driving for excellence, keep doing what you're doing, I think about Aida Hurtado, who I think now is, maybe one of the highest-ranked Latina faculty in the UCs. I think she's now a distinguished professor, step 12 or something like that. You don't get to that level by doing nothing. And even with all that, even when I talk to her, she still wants to hear from me, I say that only because it's a humbling thing. You and I have met people, who get to a certain stature and they're like, I'm sorry, I got too busy, I'm not gonna... So I think about her sense of humility. I think about Laura Rendon, who I had the privilege to meet when I was a grad student. She taught me that it's okay, not to diminish, but rather build this purposeful, intentional, spiritual way of being in connection with your students. Don't be apologetic for it. When you thank students, when you encourage students, when you build students, I think about Laura a lot. And then with Gene [Garcia], he was our dean, and he also taught. I remember he had convened a meeting and there were a lot of people in the room, but some of the people were from Ivy League Schools on the East Coast. After we were done with the meeting, we looked around the table, and those folks had left trash behind. As a grad student, I remember you're like let me help clean the room. All of a sudden I see Dr. Garcia loosen up his tie, take off his coat, roll up his sleeves, and help us clean up the trash. I mean he's the dean Gene Garcia and he was saying, "You can't get so much in your mind that you forget that you're also a human being. And you know, you're watching me do this, but I want you to understand that I know the staff is going to be coming here to do this, to clean the room, I get that. But that's not who I am. I pitch in." That changed me.

I remember Gene had a second conversation with me, [where he said] "When you become a scholar and you are discussing your work, whether it in the classroom or a conference or

whatever, some people might feel entitled to borrow your work and call it theirs, or they might not acknowledge the fact that they got that idea from you.” I remember him telling us – his grad students – to let that go. Don’t get caught up in anger, keep producing the work because they only have the shell. You have the heart of the work. Because you are putting in the time to build it, and I was like okay. That was really helpful because it released me. Then also being generous, I remember when I got this job, people would always tell me when I was in grad school, “Oh, if you could just write the way you talk, your work would be so much clearer.” Then I started understanding what did it actually mean to have a faculty position? And I realized tenure required me to write. And I remember, I was like, you know, my mom tells me to believe in *La Virgen*. And I said “*Virgencita por favor cubreme con tu manto, por favor, Abreme los caminos.*” I want to publish, but I don’t know how to do this. I want to keep my job. Because as a farm-working kid, you’re like “Stability? What? I don’t want to throw the job away.” Within that week, guess who called me? Gene [Garcia]. “Now listen, Julie, how are you doing?” And I said “Fine.” We had a little check-in, and he said to me, “I got a call, I have to write this chapter for a book. I don’t have time, but I knew you could do it, but they need me to still be listed. I’ll be listed as a second author, and you’ll be first because I don’t need this, but I still need to be present and you’re going to take the lead. Here’s our timeline. I’m still traveling but I gotta do this.” So, I had to work around his schedule to check in, so I did it, and he was generous. I learned generosity and in that experience, I also learned humility because what I didn’t realize is that one of the two editors for that book was Derald Wing Sue. He read my chapter and just the way he talked to me, he said, “Tell me a little bit about yourself,” and just made the space because I thought, okay, you know, we’re going to talk about work. So I told him really quickly who I was. And he goes, “I read this particular section. Can you pull it up?” and I said “Okay.” “Just when you talk about this, this, and this, might I suggest, perhaps if you’re open to it, I want to send you a couple of citations I’d like to share.” And I said, “Oh, okay. Okay” and he goes, “It’s this term called microaggression. It might be helpful for your work. So go ahead and read it.” And when I started reading, I was like, “Oh my god.” But he was extending me the grace. And it was only a 10-15 minute interaction, but it was so defining for me. I didn’t know who he was. Obviously, right now, microaggressions is a thing. And then there is Danny Solorzano; I don’t even know where to begin. Had I not gone to Berkeley, I was going to go to UCLA and Danny was going to be my mentor, my advisor. But

he had called me, and he told me upfront, “Look Julie, I’m having a dry spell. I’m not getting any grants right now, and I should probably have something, maybe next year.” Fast forward. He was part of the Latino Eligibility Advisory Council. I remember I had to set it up, and I said to Danny, “Dr. Solorzano, I don’t know if there’s a possibility of actually meeting you, but I would like to meet you to just thank you so much for just not making me feel guilty for choosing Berkeley.” Sure enough, he met me. I couldn’t believe it. From that day, all the way up to my becoming a full professor, he’s always been there. And he was like, “I believe in your work, I believe in what you’re doing. I believe in you.” That was his message to me all the time. “I believe it, I believe it. I believe it.” So much so that I started believing it. It is these different ways of modeling, right? Even Laura Rendon modeled. Aida Hurtado continues to model. There are so many people, but I think the most consistent ones are those folks. And then, of course, I have other folks who are not academics that teach me about humility. The truth is Pedro, and I mean you caught me in my writing day, so I didn’t get all gussied up for this. It’s my writing day; this is what I do. And sometimes I wear things, I’m wearing my Cal shirt to get in a mindset: this is what I’m going to do. But only you know, I’m a professor. The double consciousness that everybody talks about is real. I walk every day, and I remember years back, I was walking, and they had closed the main section where people would typically drive, so now they had to come into the neighborhood where I walked. And I happened to be walking and somebody yelled out of the car. “Hey, don’t forget your Pine-Sol when you go clean those houses.”

I knew they were talking to me cause everybody else who was around was white. But what they don’t know is I’m from Eastside (San Jose). I could just let that thing come off me. But it reminds you that, I don’t look like what other people expect me to look like, so you have to develop your inner person to work through those moments. You have to work on your inner person to work through tenure, you have to work on your inner person to know how to show up to be a mentor, to make space, and to know that this exchange is sacred. So when you call me, when Patricia calls me, or when Rebeca calls me, it’s on. I’m not doing anything else. I’m not thinking about anything else; I am right here because it is that important to me because other people have done that for me, too.

## Selected Publications

### Books

- Baker, B, Figueroa, J.L., Mosupyoe, B., & Mark, G. (2022). Introduction to Ethnic Studies. (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.
- Saenz, V., Ponjuan, L., & Figueroa, J. L. (2016). Ensuring the Success of Latino Males in Higher Education: A New National Imperative. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing.
- Berta-Avila, M., Revilla, A. T., & Figueroa, J. L. (2011). Marching students: Chicana/o identity and the politics of education 1968 and the present. Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press. Recipient of the Book National Book Award in 2011 from the American Educational Studies Association.

### Other Publications

- Figueroa, J. L. (2019). Becoming a Full Professor: A journey best walked together. In P. Perez (Ed.), *The Tenure-Track Process for Chicana and Latina Faculty: Experiences of Resisting and Persisting in the Academy* (pp. 56-72). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Figueroa, J. L. (2016). Deciding to examine the educational experiences of Latino males in higher. *Ensuring the Success of Latino Males in Higher Education: A National Imperative*.
- Figueroa, J. L. (2016). The Geography of Academic Support: A framework to understand the Latino perception and practice in higher education. In V. B. Saenz, L. Ponjuán, & J.L. Figueroa (Eds.), *Ensuring the Success of Latino Males in Higher Education: A New National Imperative* (pp.4359). Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing.
- Figueroa, J.L. & Rodriguez, G. M. (2015). Latina Faculty Perspectives: Critical mentoring practices to support diverse students in higher education. *New Directions in Higher Education*, 171,23-32. <https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20139>

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<sup>i</sup> The full unedited interview can be found at <https://youtu.be/ImJI0sZKPcA>

<sup>ii</sup> The author would like to thank Emily Ramos and Dr. Alfredo Huante for editorial support of the interview.