

Interviewee: Maria Del Mar Aponte Rodriguez

Interviewer: Brissa Campos

Date: November 23, 2021

Location (Interviewee): St. Mary's University

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Transcriber: Lily Crigler

Abstract: Maria Del Mar Aponte Rodriguez is a new director for the Center of International Programs at St. Mary's University. Interviewed by Brissa Campos Toscano, they discuss Maria's academic and professional background and how it led her to St. Mary's University. They also converse about how COVID-19 impacted the experiences of international students at St. Mary's, and Maria gives insight into the future goals of the Center for International Programs following the pandemic.

Brissa Campos Toscano 00:00

The following interview was conducted with Maria Del Mar Aponte Rodriguez for the international students oral history project. It took place on November 23, 2021 at St. Mary's University, and the interviewer's Brissa Campos. So, thank you so much Miss Aponte to be here. Can you please tell me a little bit more about yourself?

Maria Del Mar Aponte Rodriguez 00:21

Yes, so my name is Maria Del Mar Aponte. I grew up in San Juan, Puerto Rico. I did my bachelor's at the University of Dayton, and I have two Master's in International and Comparative Politics and English as a second language. And then, I'm currently a PhD student in the Cultural, Cultural Foundations of Education Program at Syracuse University, which is where I was before moving down to San Antonio, Texas to work at St. Mary's University. I've studied abroad a few times and traveled extensively, but I've mainly lived in Cairo, Egypt, to learn Arabic, and I've lived in the Emirates and travelled throughout France and Spain.

Brissa Campos Toscano 01:18

So, tell me about how do you get to know about St. Mary's and the position that you have right now?

Maria Del Mar Aponte Rodriguez 01:24

Yeah, so I kind of always knew about St. Mary's because I went to the University of Dayton, which is a sister school of St. Mary's, so we always kind of heard people, you know, traveling there for different businesses with regards to the Marianists, and I was looking for a new challenge and a new position within higher education. And I heard about this position that was being posted. And I've always wanted to be in a center that does study abroad, International Student Services, and an English program since I have a background in all of them. And so, I wanted to kind of grow and move forward within my opportunities in higher education and decided to apply.

Brissa Campos Toscano 01:49

And how was all the process to get here? Because I know that you were in Syracuse, which is, like more than eight hours away from here, so how was all that process of moving towards San Antonio?

Maria Del Mar Aponte Rodriguez 02:29

Yeah, so I think that moving is probably one of the most life-changing things that people go through, even if you're moving within the same country like I was, but obviously, the United States is quite large, so the travel time to San Antonio was approximately 34 hours. And so, I basically packed up my life in about two weeks, and I began the journey to move down south from upstate New York. And so, it was challenging at times and difficult and certainly stressful. But, I think that even though I've only been here for a short period of time, the time I have spent here has been quite rewarding with meeting new students and making new relationships throughout the University. So, it took about 34 hours; I drove 20 hours the first day, or 22, and then 12 the next day to make it to St. Mary's University.

Brissa Campos Toscano 03:37

Wow. That's impressive. I didn't know that. And so far, I know you've been only like, what, five months as a new director for the Center of International Programs? But can you describe your experience with the office so far? Have you been like, maintaining everything, getting used to the new work environment, etc?

Maria Del Mar Aponte Rodriguez 03:58

Yeah, so I think that when you move to a new opportunity, a new job, it takes about a year to really settle and kind of understand everything because you really have to try to gain an understanding for what was being done before. How were students being served or not served, and then kind of find ways to improve student opportunities in the future. So, I think that's been very helpful in the past few months. It's not been without challenges, obviously, as you're trying to learn a new office, trying to work with new people, supervising others, and really kind of getting a grasp of where we are, where we were and where we need to go. So, I think that I wouldn't say by any means I'm perfect or have we haven't learned everything. I'm still learning, and so, I think by next fall, we should be in like, a more solid place with a already established routine that we can follow to serve our students better.

Brissa Campos Toscano 05:10

Yeah. And how do you think COVID-19 has impacted the status or like the environment of the CIP office?

Maria Del Mar Aponte Rodriguez 05:18

Yeah. So, you know, I think like COVID-19 has had an impact, not just on St. Mary's and the office, but just some higher education study abroad, international students in general. So, by and large, a lot of institutions have struggled with, you know, making sure that the students are feeling at home because perhaps they couldn't go home for a while due to COVID or finding ways to still build a community while they're here. And I think that the way that COVID impacted our office was that a lot of things were put on hold. So, perhaps study abroad was not really addressed as head on as it could have been. And then, the main focus was international students, but also people were out of the office; there was high turnover, so I think that we're working really hard to kind of build that community for students and that sense of stability, that perhaps has not been here in the past couple of months, almost an entire year. So, I think it's really been the lack of stability that we've been struggling with, but I've been here almost three months. And so, hopefully, we're getting to a more stable place where students know where to go, and then, we're able to kind of help them in a more efficient manner.

Brissa Campos Toscano 06:44

And could you tell me, what short term goals do you have for next semester? What are your things that you're planning to do or maybe like goals do you want to set for the office?

Maria Del Mar Aponte Rodriguez 06:55

Yeah, so I think one of the major goals that I have for next semester is to really engage our international students more, whether that be activities off campus, even activities within campus, or things that we can do to really encourage them to be a part of the St. Mary's and San Antonio community. So finding ways that they can still get some culture of being in San Antonio because even though San Antonio is pretty big, it still has a lot of like small town feels in different parts of the city. So, as I'm getting to know San Antonio, I would like the students to get to know it with me. And so, I'm really looking forward to building some activities, whether it be themed around certain holidays, or certain, you know, celebrations like Women's History Month, and things like that, so I'm really just looking to engage more with the international student community. And just really reiterating the support that they do have here, even though this past year has been a tumultuous one for them. And I think also just looking more into the study abroad opportunities that we can provide our students so that they can also gain that other perspective of going overseas. So, I think those are kind of the short term goals that I have and just really facilitating things for students. I think in the past, things have been just really tedious with a lot of unnecessary paperwork. So, I think streamlining our process and making everything clearer to students, whether that be through, you know, sending reminder emails, or, or finding other ways to engage with them, I think those are the short term goals that I have for students.

Brissa Campos Toscano 08:45

Yeah. Well, thank you so much. That's all question I have for now, and thank you so much for your time, and all the questions have been really clearly answered.

Maria Del Mar Aponte Rodriguez 08:53

Thank you. Let me know if you need any clarification.

Brissa Campos Toscano 08:55

Thank you.