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## UC Riverside Previously Published Works

### Title

" Future Academics of Color in Dialogue A Candid Q&A on Adjusting to the Cultural, Social, and Professional Rigor of Academia" in Beginning a Career in Academia : A Guide for Graduate Students of ColorDwayne Edtied by A. Mack, Elwood Watson, and...

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8wz5g572>

### ISBN

9781138783645

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### Publication Date

2014-12-04

Peer reviewed

# Future Academics of Color in Dialogue

A Candid Q&A on Adjusting to the Cultural, Social, and Professional Rigor of Academia

*Miroslava Chávez-García, Mayra Avitia,  
and Jorge N. Leal*

Recently, graduate students of color and a professor of color came together to tackle pressing issues facing budding academics of color. The session came about from the students' initiative and interest in acquiring the necessary tools for surviving and thriving in academia. A daunting task. As an outsider to the graduate students' home institution, the professor had the ability to speak candidly about sensitive matters that the students' own advisors could not or would not address because of personal and professional relations at their local university. In many ways, the nature of the session provided an open and relaxed atmosphere, allowing for a frank and lively exchange.

The "question and answer" forum that follows reflects that exchange. The leading issues that emerge focus on navigating the early years of a tenure track job, balancing community activism with the rigors of academia, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, and finding ways to cultivate a safe and secure family life along with a vigorous and prosperous career. As the forum makes clear, institutions of higher education have yet to implement spaces and cultivate a culture in which scholars of color have access to resources that enable them to succeed. Indeed, Caroline S.V. Turner's extensive research on the status of academics of color has found that "the recruitment and retention of faculty of color remains one of the most difficult challenges facing American higher education" (Turner, 2003). Until we see significant change in academia, scholars of color must find the tools and develop the strategies to negotiate what is often an unwelcoming and foreign environment. With resources and networks at your disposal that can, as one graduate student stated, "have your back," we can overcome the hurdles that often derail our quest to nurture a profession that works for a more just and equitable society (Baez, 2000; Few, Piercy, & Stremmel, 2007).

## GRADUATE STUDENTS QUERY THE PROFESSOR

Q: *If you could “replay” your career as an assistant professor, what would you do differently?*

A: If I could replay that experience, I would seek out the advice of senior professors and ask for mentorship in all areas of negotiating academic life, as it is the key to academic success (Brown, II, Davis, & McClendon, 1999; Dixon-Reeves, 2003; Justice & Barker, 2007; Noy & Ray, 2012; Peters, 1997; Savage, Karp, & Logue, 2004). I would ask my mentors about the physical, psychological, financial, and personal sacrifices they made as junior faculty and how much was expected in their research, teaching, and service. Finding experienced colleagues who can offer you strategies on how to balance academic pressures with social, personal, and family demands or who can provide tips on how to prepare a dissertation for publication brings much relief in knowing that you have many years of experience working for you. When seeking out such advice, do not limit yourself to your own department. Expand your network with colleagues from different units across the campus. Finally, I would urge junior (as well as seasoned) scholars to consult the growing body of literature on how to navigate academia as a scholar of color. These writings are replete with insight on research, teaching, service, mentoring, strategies for tenure and promotion, structural racism and sexism, identity, collegiality, and resistance (Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011; Dsajima, 2009; Donoghue, 2008; Stanley 2006a, 2006b; Turner, 2002, 2003; Turner & Myers, 2000). The research also pays special attention to the unique experiences of women of color, who are more likely than men of color as well as white men or women to face discrimination in academia (Castañeda & Isgro, 2013; Chávez-García, 2009; Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Kyungwon, 2008; Pittman, 2010; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001; Turner, 2002).

A second thing I would have done differently is to focus on my writing. In graduate school, we often get little instruction on how to develop an engaging style. Plus, many of us (myself included) come from immigrant, Spanish-speaking, low-income, working class families, an experience that only adds to our unfamiliarity with academic writing. I started graduate school with relatively weak writing skills, though I did not realize it. Fortunately, a professor suggested I take a basic course at a community college, a suggestion that alerted me to the gravity of the situation. I was even more fortunate, nevertheless, in my third year in graduate school when my new advisor—my former advisor moved to another institution—took me under his wing and taught me nearly everything I needed to know about writing. It was a painful process but writing well enough to be understood by a general audience was (and remains) a priceless gift. As an assistant professor, I improved my writing by strengthening the mechanics of the process, enabling me to publish a first book. It was not, however, until I was an associate professor working on a

second book that I developed a style that allowed me to engage a wider audience. I actually enjoyed the process, even though it was difficult, but, before I began writing, I made up my mind that I wanted “regular” people—not just academics—to read my book. To learn new writing techniques, I read many books by authors I sought to emulate as well as books and journals on the process of scholarly and popular writing. I even joined *Writer’s Digest*. Through that process, I produced a study that I know has been read by more people than the first. I hope to make my new project—a family memoir—even more widely accessible.

I continue to polish my writing by attending writing workshops, circulating preliminary work to colleagues, and submitting articles to journals for publication. Rejection notices, while painful, provide a useful opportunity to expand your lexicon and style. I also recommend organizing or participating in peer-based writing groups, which I have not done since graduate school, but know they are invaluable in keeping you motivated in the lengthy process of publishing the dissertation (Friend & González, 2009; Turner & Edwards, 2006).

Q: *As first-generation scholars and scholars of color, we are often torn between community activism and academic work. We are often reminded of the “publish or perish” axiom. How do you advise junior colleagues to negotiate these two seemingly incompatible goals?*

A: I commend you for tackling what might be one of the difficult issues we—as progressive academics and academics of color—face throughout our early careers. How do we accomplish what we originally set out to do? That is, how do we “give back” to our communities when we are stuck in the archives or chained to our desks in our offices? We ask ourselves, how does completing a dissertation or writing a book improve the material lives of family and community members? It may bring some comfort to know that even well-known scholars such as Cornel West, a leading theologian and African American studies scholar at Union Theological Seminary, have taken up this question. I recall that, many years ago in graduate school, I heard Professor West speaking on his latest book, *Race Matters*. In discussing this same question, negotiating activism and academia, he asked the audience point blank: “How do you think Toni Morrison finished her next book?” “By running off to the next march or next protest? No,” he said emphatically, “she continued her work.” “We need a division of labor,” he said, “we need people on all fronts,” working for social justice in our communities. His words made me understand that, indeed, to reach our larger goals, we need to be in a variety of fields to advance our causes. Whether it is leading a union or writing a book about the injustices of the criminal justice system, we need talented, committed, and passionate people everywhere.

We *can* find ways to integrate our research with our activism, but when the work is on “esoteric” topics that seem to have less contemporary relevance, it is difficult to find ways to make our research meaningful to our respective communities. As junior faculty, the task is often more difficult

because the priority, as we all know, is to secure tenure, which involves sustained research, writing, and publishing, as well as excellent teaching and an adequate level of service. As a senior professor, I may have the time and resources to offer consulting services (pro bono) to museums or local organizations, but for junior faculty of color this luxury is often beyond reach. New faculty members understand that time is precious and they have little to spare, especially when family commitments and other responsibilities are pulling them away.

Ultimately, you must decide your goals. Are you a committed activist who seeks to improve the material lives of the communities we represent? Or, are you a dedicated scholar who aspires to unearth and recount the untold stories of resistance, community building, and human dignity in the face of formidable odds? In my view, we can attempt to juggle these goals but not without sacrifice. Academic success entails uninterrupted periods of isolation to read, write, and re-write. I often ask students with an expressed interest in academia if they “like to be alone.” At this point in my career, I treasure the opportunity to be alone. But, as young people just starting out, we generally thrive being in community, and scholars cannot escape the isolation that is needed. As much as we loathe it and it often leaves us seeking therapy, it is essential to finishing and publishing your work. It is probably the reason why so many graduate students as well as assistant and associate professors never finish their dissertations or their first or subsequent books (Armbruster-Sandoval, 2005; Burnett, 2003; Few, Piercy, & Stremmel, 2007).

Q: *What were some of the challenges you faced when you edited your dissertation for publication?*

A: Fortunately, I had an advisor who was committed to seeing the transformation of my dissertation into a book. Even before I finished, he always reminded me that the dissertation was not meant to remain on a shelf. Rather, it should be published quickly. His advice—which I pass on to *all* graduate students and junior faculty of color—helped me develop a plan for finishing and revising the dissertation and publishing the book. (I suggest that you, in consultation with your advisor, members of your dissertation committee, or mentors, determine what is essential for the dissertation and what is best for the book, though the two are not necessarily that different.) Once finished with my dissertation, I reevaluated the work, noting the weaknesses and strengths, and figured out ways to “fill the holes” or recast what I said or how I said it. I eliminated, too, any thought of a chapter-long literature review, as few, if any, published books have such chapters. I also thought about the study’s scope and breadth. Most publishers prefer books that can capture the attention of a wide audience. This led me to add a chapter and expand the time frame, which meant considerably more work, but I did not mind the opportunity to return to the archives for I was certain that it would lead to an inviting and publishable study (Germano, 2005; Kamler & Thomson, 2008).

Unfortunately, I was not correct in all my assumptions. Initially, I sent the manuscript to a prestigious press, a process that ended with useful comments and a “no thank you.” As I look back, I am certain they thought it read too much like a dissertation: dry. That feedback, while disappointing, was useful in thinking more about what the study needed and, later, in helping me shape my next book. Undaunted, I revised the manuscript and took it to a respected press, one that published books in my area of study and did so somewhat quickly. (Many presses are known for taking months and even years to publish a book, especially if it is written by a junior scholar. Seek advice in approaching the best presses and editors for your work.) Fortunately, I received positive reviews and constructive criticism rather quickly—within four to six months—that allowed me to revise the manuscript and publish it as a study that made a significant contribution to the literature and captured the interests of readers. By the time of my fourth year in a tenure track position, I was well on my way to publishing the book. In the meantime, I worked on publishing research articles, writing book reviews, presenting my scholarship, and in other ways placing my work in a public forum.

Q: *What strategies have you developed to stay healthy throughout your career?*

A: Academia and healthy habits, as I have learned, are not always compatible, for both demand time and energy, especially for academics of color. In her research on faculty of color in higher education, Christine A. Stanley finds that faculty of color experience more on-the-job stress than their white counterparts (Stanley, 2006a, p. 704). Academia and health *can* work together, however. When I was in graduate school, I realized I needed an outlet from the confines of graduate life and a strategy to deal with the weight gain and general brooding that accompanies academia. This was especially true when the isolation of the writing process—along with all the insecurities about academia—set in. To battle my demons, I sought support groups that relieved stress and allowed a break from the identity as a graduate student. I found an on-campus psychological support services group for graduate students and a local running group in Santa Monica, California, that trained runners to complete the Los Angeles Marathon. While I found the support group somewhat useful—the professional who led the session rarely intervened or offered useful advice—I enjoyed the camaraderie of the running group and met a lot of inspiring people (including eighty-year-old runners, who, for instance, were ready to go at six in the morning, an experience that taught me a thing or two about age and attitude). Eventually, I went on to run four marathons in graduate school and two more as a professor, and have kept up with running ever since, even through the birth of two children and two books. The task involved in completing a marathon, I later realized, parallels the process of writing. To finish a marathon or a dissertation or a book, you must run or write often. You must find ways, too, to convince yourself and your mind and body that the pain will pass. It



does. The accomplishment of finishing a dissertation or publishing a book is not only an achievement that allows you advance through the ranks of academia but also a personal satisfaction that stays with you for a lifetime.

As a professor, I have found that maintaining relationships with trusted, loyal, and *real* girlfriends, or male friends, is equally important to one's physical and mental health. In graduate school, I took these friends for granted, failing to realize they would not always remain in close proximity. In the last ten to fourteen years, I have had too few opportunities to sit and have heart-to-heart talks with these dear friends. Many are professors at institutions far away, while others are busy with packed schedules and family responsibilities. I miss our exchanges dearly. They rejuvenate the mind, body, and soul. Treasure them.

Q: *Ethnic studies departments are often politically and racially charged environments. How might we, as junior faculty of color, survive and thrive in such surroundings?*

A: I certainly agree that being in an ethnic studies department, whether Chicana and Chicano Studies, Black Studies, or Native American Studies—referred to some scholars as the “promised land”—brings with it pressures and demands generally not expected in life or physical science departments (Assensoh, 2003). First, your presence in an ethnic studies unit will invite unwanted assumptions about your work in relation to the larger department. As we know, nearly every ethnic studies department across the country has emerged not by campus initiative but rather through struggle, protest, and resistance to the status quo, which has disenfranchised poor, racial, and ethnic working class people from institutions of higher education. The fight for legitimacy does not end with the institutionalization of ethnic studies departments as they were in the 1960s and 1970s. Instead, we must keep battling to maintain and enhance the few culturally specific resources at our disposal. Given this history of survival, I have found that many people across college and university campuses—administrators, staff, and faculty—often hold negative views of ethnic studies units, believing they are dysfunctional sanctuaries with incompetent faculty and mediocre students looking to stir up trouble. I have also learned that you cannot change peoples' perceptions but you *can* work to enhance the profile of the department. Newsletters, collaborative projects, and one-on-one exchanges in committee work with faculty members and administrators across the campus go a long way in communicating the exciting and innovative work of people in the department.

Second, as members of ethnic studies units, we have a responsibility to students, who will expect you to be “present” in their struggles, milestones, and achievements. This might involve writing letters or signing petitions, attending rallies or social events, or meeting them to hear their grievances and following up with mandates or decisions. Any way you slice it, you have an obligation to the students and you cannot remain absent from that commitment. Rest

assured that the students *will* let you know with their feet or their voices when you have shirked your duties.

In addition, you need find ways to support the larger mission of the department. Teaching and research about civil rights or women's rights are not always enough to appease your colleagues or constituents that you are an "active" member of the unit. Senior faculty members, who have carried out many of the battles for institutional legitimacy, will expect you to continue the work on behalf of the unit. While many understand the need to "protect" junior faculty from too much service at the expense of research, they also know the significance of having another "pair of hands" revising the curriculum, implementing assessment procedures, or carrying out peer review of colleagues' teaching performance. Draconian budget cuts of the recent past have taught us that faculty appointments are scarce and must be utilized in the most productive ways. In their eyes, you represent the future of the department and your future, for better or for worse, lies in their hands, as they have significant power in assuring that your tenure process is smooth. In short, your training begins on the day you step foot on the campus.

At the same time, senior colleagues can advise you where and when you should expend your energy and time on the larger campus. When I was a junior professor, a trusted colleague advised me to choose campus-wide committees with the most visibility and the least day-to-day workload. I took that recommendation and continue to follow it. Senior faculty can also teach you how to say "no" to unnecessarily taxing commitments or caution you in collaborating with faculty whose only purpose is to develop a "diverse" project or grant proposal. Do not confuse tokenism with genuine interest in your work. Solicit and listen to the advice of reliable senior colleagues, but ultimately you must make the final decisions.

A faculty position in an ethnic studies department is not for the faint of heart. Inform yourself of the expectations—beyond research, teaching, and service. If you are not willing to take on the commitments or fight the battles that need to be fought, think twice before accepting such an academic appointment.

## THE PROFESSOR QUERIES THE GRADUATE STUDENTS

*Q: What motivated you all to hold this forum? What did you all hope to gain?*

A: Luis Sánchez-López & Jorge

Every year graduate students from University of California, San Diego's (UCSD) History Department invite an off-campus scholar as a guest speaker to learn more about that individual's work and to build networks across the country. While the students in the department agreed on one individual, the graduate students of color elected independently to find an alternative speaker who





could connect with them—us—as racial and ethnic minorities in academia and who could reflect on similar research interests on race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. In this instance, we decided to seek out perspectives and ideas on how to “survive and thrive” in academia. While we worried about the details of the event, the planning developed organically and collectively and, soon, a determined, collaborative, and joyful spirit permeated the behind-the-scenes organizing leading up to the occasion. We conducted many of these efforts through the Raza Graduate Student Association, an on-campus organization of Chicano/Latino graduate students who work to guide graduate students of color along the doctoral process.

We invited Dr. Miroslava Chávez-García to speak to us about her experiences in academia, as she is one of a few Chicana/Latina historians in the University of California system. Initially, we envisioned Dr. Chávez-García, an accomplished scholar, delivering a lecture, but soon realized that we could also benefit from having a workshop with her on how to navigate the academic profession as scholars of color. We believed it was important for us to hear about the trials and tribulations she encountered and the ways in which she managed to shape her trajectory as a successful Chicana/Latina academic. We believed, too, that she would provide important insights into surviving in an environment where race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality are often marginalized and overlooked at best or maligned at worst as significant research topics. Fortunately, she readily agreed. In our eyes, her visit was a way for us to say to the university: “This is our university, and we are going to make it work for us.”

Q: *How did you all, either as individuals or a collective, benefit from the session?*

A: Jorge

The content of the conversation was elucidating and inspiring. It allowed us to reflect on our experiences as well as on our particular and shared challenges related to the ever-present need to balance the demands of academia with our community involvement and personal relationships. By sharing our concerns with Dr. Chávez-García and hearing about her experiences in navigating academia, we understood that it is possible to be a successful scholar of color who also is able to devote time to family. We also realized that we were not the first to encounter such challenges.

In the workshop, Dr. Chávez-García shared many strategies that she and other scholars of color have employed to navigate the academy. For instance, she mentioned the importance of establishing a daily, uninterrupted routine—with a fixed time and place—for productive writing to happen. Personally, the session infused me with a sense of empowerment and hope in our collective action as graduate students of color. As a result, I came away realizing that senior scholars already perceive us as colleagues, a realization I had not considered until that day.

Q: *For many academics of color, balancing activist and academic work is thorny and uniquely individualized. What are your own experiences with and how have you addressed this issue?*

A: Luis

Before coming to UCSD, I was organizing with the Oaxacan community in Los Angeles. I loved working with the community, even though I was paid infrequently. When I began the PhD program at UCSD in 2010, I had to leave Los Angeles and my activist work. For me, it was not a difficult move because of the family and community support that I was afforded in my decision to attend graduate school. As a first generation indigenous *Oaxaqueño* graduate student, I knew that my presence at the university was as important as empowering the community. My family had worked hard to give what little they could to see me advance through community college and UCLA where I completed my undergraduate degree. The decision to put my activist work aside was not difficult because I understood the importance of the division of labor and having different forms of resources to help the community. In the Oaxacan community, obtaining the best education possible for the children is a priority. If I neglected to prioritize my education, wouldn't I betray the community and their interests? A mentor in the organization best described my logic: "The movement will still be here when you finish your PhD."

A: Jorge

For me, and many scholars of color, entering academia is a form of activism. We use our presence, research, and teaching to create greater change at the university and the larger society. Yet, when we are in the throes of our graduate programs and early tenure-track careers, we are constantly confronted with the demands that our academic work requires. We often hear from our advisors that we should devote our attention exclusively to our studies to finish in normative time: "do the work and get out." The pressure to prioritize academic over activist work often dissuades us from much political and community involvement that can "distract" us from our main goal: becoming professional intellectuals. This dilemma is not easily resolved. I don't claim to have the answers yet, in my years as a junior scholar, I have attempted to find a balance by engaging with my peers in collaborative work that leads to tangible objectives: studying together, collaborating in mentoring undergraduates, and organizing professionalization workshops. Hopefully these collective-based forms of intellectual and educational practices can be sustained even as we transition into our roles as professors and professional scholars.

A: Laura D. Gutiérrez.

One of my biggest challenges in graduate school was realizing that I could no longer maintain the same level of involvement in activist work as I had as an undergraduate student. I simply lacked enough time. I had to prioritize required classes and reading lists, which was difficult because they felt completely disconnected from the sort of work I wanted or hoped to do. I found it

helpful, however, to focus my outreach efforts on particular projects and find similarly determined graduate students to join me in pursuing these efforts. Instead of getting bogged down in endless committee meetings, I determined my time commitment and organized my schedule accordingly. I also talked about my dilemma with my advisor who shared his experiences with balancing community outreach and academic productivity. Ultimately, I learned how and when to say “no” to demanding yet worthy projects, a lesson that has served me well and imagine it will do when I join the ranks of academia.

Response: Miroslava

I must say I find Laura, Jorge, and Luis’s insights quite sophisticated and valuable, particularly for junior scholars of color in tenure-track positions. The demands from students, colleagues, and administrators for service that take you away from your research and writing is unrelenting. As you will find, you nearly have to hide—or receive a coveted fellowship or accumulate sufficient sabbatical credit—to find the time to produce the kind of scholarship that will not only advance your career but also make a meaningful impact in the field and larger society. You must carve out the time for your work even while you attend rallies, deliver talks, and in other ways lend your support.

Q: *Do you think the profession is a welcoming or alienating place for young scholars of color?*

A: Alina Méndez and Crystal R. Pérez.

When we consider whether academia is a welcoming or alienating place, we must start by recognizing students of color (and faculty of color) are diverse. We are diverse as to our race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, age, and religion, factors which also ensure our experiences in academia will be diverse. We must also consider that academic departments vary as to their diversity. While some fields attract more white males, others attract more women of color. Increased student diversity, however, does not guarantee the units are necessarily welcoming spaces for students of color. Sometimes white graduate students, who are in departments with a diverse student profile, respond by pushing back against what a professor has called “diminished overrepresentation.” In general, we believe most departments have both welcoming and alienating spaces. Fortunately, more departments at universities across the country have created graduate student and faculty positions to cultivate welcoming spaces for graduate students of color. The Department of History, for example, created staff positions for a Faculty Diversity Officer and Graduate Diversity Officer. They communicate with prospective students, coordinate a graduate student workshop series where PhD candidates share a chapter of their dissertation every quarter, and offer workshops for teaching assistants on teaching diversity, equity, and inclusion to a diverse undergraduate student body. This type of departmental commitment to diversity requires little economic investment yet can make a significant difference in the recruitment and retention of graduate students of color.

A: Mayra

I, too, have found that academia is isolating. To be productive, we must often confine ourselves as we research, read, and write. It can be a welcoming social space, however, when you find colleagues who share similar interests and approaches to scholarship. I urge young scholars of color to find a core group of peers or colleagues—it can be as few as three—with whom you can discuss and debate issues, study, write, and socialize. They will have your back when you have issues with your project, when you doubt yourself, when you want to discuss a new idea, and when you want to have a drink and not think about academia. They will also see you through the process of preparing and passing qualifying exams, completing fellowship applications, drafting and writing your study, whether the book or dissertation. These people are necessary to survive and thrive in graduate school.

Response: Miroslava

Isolation is a necessary evil in this business. You need it to produce. But, it can certainly leave you feeling deflated, empty, and disconnected. As Mayra and Alina suggest, we must find the strategies that best work for each of us, given the diversity of our experiences and profiles. Yet, for most of us, simply hanging out with friends, attending social gatherings, or going out to dinner or a movie provides a much needed alternative to the often rigid and demanding spaces of academia. Find time to schedule or organize such events. They will sustain you.

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