

Adrienne Arguijo-Morgan: Building the Roads to Education

By Ixchel Vera Botello



“Well, I want to see a recognition that we need to do things differently in education and that starts by acknowledging that it’s been done wrong this whole time and we are not going to do it that way anymore.” This is the first step towards the change in education that Adrienne Arguijo-Morgan wants to see. A reasonable request yet has been unattainable after hundreds of years of maintaining the discriminatory foundation of the education system. Adrienne is dedicated to supporting the college success of Latinx and other marginalized students, through culturally relevant and sustaining academic practices. With a smile on her face and a contagiously optimistic attitude, she has been seeking educational reform throughout her various positions as a tutor, advisor, program coordinator, and program director.

The Struggle for Information

For many first-generation college-bound students, information is scarce. That was the experience for Adrienne, the youngest of five children, who grew up in La Puente, California. She always loved to read and in her early high school years, she got interested in creative writing. In her predominately Latinx high school, Adrienne started getting involved with the school newspaper and yearbook because she planned to pursue journalism. No one in her family had ever gone to college, so she had to rely on her high school counselor. Although they were helpful, they did not really tell her about all the different options. Her counselor told her to apply to the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), and other UCs, but not much else. Adrienne also knew about California State Universities because there was one close by. Not being aware of other possibilities

and pathways for higher education is something many students face. Contrary to what many students are told, there is not just one prescribed path in education.

Getting accepted to a college or university does not mean the struggle to obtain information ends. Once accepted to UCSB, Adrienne did not know how to navigate majors. UCSB does not have a journalism major, so she figured the closest thing was English. It ended up working out because she realized she could tailor her major to fit what she was most interested in. She started to go down the route of women of color writers. Here she started to see women of color who shared a common story or experience with her. This is where she decided to minor in women's studies. Not knowing then what she knows now, she wishes she took more classes on social movements that focused on women of color. Although she loved her experience in the Women Studies minor, it was very focused on the white women's history and perspective.

The Pathway to Education

Like most seniors, Adrienne was unsure about her path after graduation. She majored in English and did not really know what to do with that except teaching. And everyone around her said, "Cool, you can be an English teacher." Not knowing what else she could do, she started applying to teaching credential programs. She already had experience working with students because in her sophomore year she was hired as a tutor for California Student Opportunity and Access Program (CAL-SOAP). This was the first spark for her love for education.

Even though education quickly became her passion, Adrienne hesitated about pursuing teaching. As a tutor, she worked with a lot of teachers and talked to them about their experiences. She started to see the challenges teachers were facing and their frustration with the system of education they had to teach in. She thought becoming a teacher would box her into these specific aspects of education. Adrienne realized she wanted to put her focus on spaces where she can have a broader impact. Impact on conversations. Impact on

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decisions. Impact on changing the education narrative. Our current systems are structured in such a way that only certain people get to have a voice.

After graduation, Adrienne was hired to a full-time position at CAL-SOAP. However, her time at CAL-SOAP was going to be pretty short. After working there for three and a half years, the funding was either going to be drastically reduced or eliminated, which unfortunately happens to a lot of outreach programs. Adrienne knew she needed a backup plan, so she applied to the UCSB Pathways Program. Her longest job ever was as the Pathways Program Coordinator for eleven years.

Learning to Unlearn

The Pathways program was transitioning because its private grant was ending. The program needed to be rebranded and have a whole new structure. Adrienne was brought in to build the program from the ground up.

Adrienne is truly the wonder woman of education. During her time at Pathways, she coordinated with Isla Vista Elementary School, Goleta Valley Junior High School, and Dos Pueblos High School. She hired and trained tutors to work at these different sites with first-generation college-bound students. She set up clubs, after-school tutoring, and aid in the AVID classrooms. Even with all of these diverse students, Adrienne managed to attend her students' events and meet with them individually. She



Adrienne Arguijo-Morgan with Pathways Tutors and GVJH Student at Promotion

took the time to get to know her students' interests and find opportunities that will benefit them. Since many first-generation college-bound students have not seen different college campuses, she organized trips to multiple institutions in California. She made sure that her students were aware that there was not just one pathway to higher education and that they were prepared, a drastic change from the limited information and help she received when she was in high school. She did all of this with a smile on her face. Her motivation comes from knowing that her work is helping students succeed. Seeing students go on to do amazing things and seeing them lift as they climb makes her happy. This is what she believes is the idea of *la comunidad, la familia, la cultura*. To her this the *orgullo* of being part of the Latinx community or POC community.



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However, Adrienne admits that she first had a lot of unlearning to do. It was in Pathways where she really started to get some basic understanding about institutionalized racism, racial and social injustices surrounding education and higher education, and how it affects BIPOC communities. Like many students and educators, she found herself internalizing and thinking it was the student's fault for not doing well in school. It was because they were not trying hard enough, they were not motivated, and they simply did not care.

That is the deficit language that dominates discussions about education. Adrienne makes it clear that "these are essentially excuses that are created to protect the fact that there is institutionalized racism and there's an entire history that needs to be redone because these systems of oppression are here to keep our students down. And we are taught this and internalize it and experience it because that is a perpetuated form of institutionalized racism." These are the messages that she, and many of us, grew up with. Her perspective on education changed dramatically because she realized that the students are not doing anything wrong. The problem is with the system and the messages it sends. Our students will do better when we change that.

Burnt Out To Reemerge

In her last year and a half with UCSB Pathways, Adrienne started to learn more about federal grant work. She knew she wanted to pursue something larger and have a director's level position in a federally designated Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). Unfortunately, her opportunities at UCSB were slim and she started exploring other opportunities. The California Lutheran University's Collaborative for Hispanics in Higher Education and Student Success (CHESS) was her first shot at a director's level position.

Adrienne's experience as the Pathways Coordinator prepared her for her director's level position, but she was not prepared for the realities of the higher-level conversations. Although her time at CHESS was short, she learned a lot about the best and worst sides of education. She found that there were a lot of people involved in making *really* important life-altering decisions for first-generation students and students in the BIPOC communities who were neither part of those same communities nor had experience working with them. Being in this new position she started hearing things were unacceptable. Knowing what it is like to be a historically marginalized student and working with them for more than a decade, Adrienne immersed herself into her work and did a lot of research. She started signing up for every webinar, every workshop, every conference. She searched for books, articles, and videos. She looked for anything that was going to help her understand why this lack of investment in first-generation and BIPOC students was happening. In her year and a half at the program, she burnt out quickly. Adrienne realized she was passionate about working with students and HSIs, but not necessarily on that campus.

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Adrienne made the tough decision to leave her director's position at CHESS in order to coordinate the College for Working Adults program at Santa Barbara City College. She recognizes that part of career development is going where you are needed most, and “community college is where the bulk of our Latinx students are and where the bulk of Latinx students struggle. And I want to be there.” Just like her early days with Pathways, Adrienne was hired to College for Working Adults to build the program out.

With a slightly different population, Adrienne is working with post-traditional students. These students are working adults, parents, students who have never gone to college and coming as older adults or have gone to college a little bit and are coming back. As a five-year Title V HSI-funded program, the basic idea is to offer college classes and services for working adults in the evening. The challenge is getting the entire campus needs to be on board. That means changing the schedule of classes, finding faculty to

teach weekends and evenings, training faculty to work with these types of students, having campus services available, etc. For the next two years, Adrienne is focused on making education accessible to these often-overlooked students and making the institution see the need and significance of this program.

Lift As You Climb

“Well, I want to see a recognition that we need to do things differently in education and that starts by acknowledging that it’s been done wrong this whole time and we are not going to do it that way anymore.” Adrienne makes the first steps to educational reform clear. One of the biggest challenges of education is the consistent messaging to students that they are not good enough to aspire to bigger things. They are mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausting. It is easy when resources are scarce that people start to develop individualistic mindsets to do things for themselves at the expense of others. The challenge is finding ways to lift the community as we climb. Throughout her career, Adrienne has advocated for the need to share social and navigational capital. With her genuine love for education, Adrienne inspires all her students to find their own definition of educational success.