

Becoming a Mental Health Professional: Pasito a Pasito

By Gabriella Gaus



Although I was born in Milwaukee Wisconsin, my German-American father and my Ecuadorian mother moved to Ecuador before I turned a year old. I proceeded to live the next 14 years of my life in Quito, where my mother is from, until 2010, when my parents, siblings and I moved to Madison. Despite our financial stability, the move was hard on my family, and I struggled to connect with people at my high school. By my Freshman year at UW, I had learned from my homesickness in high school: I needed to find a Latinx community on campus. An upperclassman in one of my classes recommended I meet with Rachelle and go to a Chican@ Latin@ Studies Gathering. Since then the CLS program has been central to my academic and personal development. I'm currently a Junior double majoring in Psychology and Latin American, Caribbean, and Iberian Studies with a CLS Certificate. As of this year I have been working part-time for UNIDOS, a non-profit that advocates for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault in Latinx communities and I was also able to complete an internship at ALUBA, a hospital in Argentina that treats patients with eating disorders.

Sophomore year I developed an interest in Psychology after working with psychologists at a refugee camp for families displaced by the 2016 Ecuadorian earthquake. Ironically, the semester CLS began helping me the most was the semester I was also experiencing the worst self-doubt of my academic potential due to clinical levels of depression and anxiety. Not only did Rachelle personally hear me vent during her office hours but also connected me to outstanding mentors who have been supporting my goals since then. Through the PASOS program I was partnered with a wonderful mentor who checks in on me regularly, encouraging and helping me edit countless scholarship applications, cover letters, and resumes. My mentor also introduced me to a Counseling Psychology Doctoral student teaching the CLS Service-Learning Dimensions of Latinx Mental Health Services class, which I enrolled in the Spring semester of my Sophomore year.

With scholarships from the International Internship Program, World Wide Internship Program, and the LACIS department I was able to embark on a 10-week un-paid internship in Buenos Aires at ALUBA (Asociación de Lucha contra la Bulimia y la Anorexia). Modern psychotherapy reflects a Western hegemony of psychological treatments, embedding Western values and belief systems. ALUBA incorporates the participation of family and friends in its patients' multi-family group therapy. Their approach values making therapy and healing a communal experience and exemplifies theories I had been learning about in my CLS class. I was the first UW student formally being sent to this site and lacked information from previous students' experiences. My first few days I made many mistakes and had to take the initiative to ask therapists for suggestions. I also learned to apply my own ethics training from the CLS class to set boundaries on the help I was qualified to provide, especially since I was authorized to speak during group therapies. Eventually, in order to take on more responsibilities assisting in research I also had to ensure I was accurately collecting data from the patients due to minimal supervision from ALUBA's Medical Director. One of the most rewarding aspects of this experience was being able to learn more about the work schedule and daily responsibilities of clinical psychologists. I left the internship more confident than ever that I wanted not only to engage therapeutic interventions but also in research as part of my future career in psychology.



Additionally, it was through the same CLS class that I was introduced to a volunteering opportunity with UNIDOS. At the end of the service-learning class, UNIDOS' Executive Director encouraged me to apply to work part time as their Volunteer Coordinator. I was hired on May of 2017 and since then have been responsible for recruiting and assisting in the training of volunteers to cover shifts for LA RED, UNIDOS 24/7 Spanish language helpline that offers support to victims and survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault in Latinx and Immigrant communities. One of the most challenging aspects about this experience was that I received very little training in the beginning and that I worked remotely while completing my internship in Argentina. I had ideas about how to recruit volunteers coming into the position but I also learned to recognize when to ask for assistance to prevent issues.

Another challenging aspect was learning how to balance working 15-20 hours a week while being a full-time student. At the beginning of the semester I sat down with my supervisor to explain my school schedule to her. I was very honest about my concern of balancing my time well, explaining that I am really passionate about both my education and UNIDOS' values and goals and wouldn't want any of those areas jeopardized. Much of the confidence I gained to advocate for and assert myself in professional settings both at ALUBA and UNIDOS has been instilled in me not only by my mother but also both of my PASOS mentors.

Something that really bothered me about American culture when I moved here was how people here seem to brag about how busy they are and how much work they have to do. Ironically, this has become a part of my reality as a scholar and professional as I'm learning to balance multiple responsibilities. Earlier this semester I had the opportunity to speak with students from MATC's High School Equivalency Program both about the services UNIDOS provides but also to discuss some of the warning flags of domestic violence in our community. I remember vividly walking out of that presentation on a Thursday afternoon feeling exhausted but also blessed to be able to do such fulfilling work. Being tired never felt so good! I strive to make the most of the opportunities my parents worked very hard to expose me to, and if that means working in ways this culture demands me to then so be it. Members of my immediate family suffered from mental illnesses upon moving to this country and I have countless friends and family members back home in Ecuador who keep their struggles with mental illness a secret and don't know who to turn to for help. My long-term professional goals are to return to Ecuador, provide psychotherapeutic interventions, and engage in conversations in my community about mental health awareness.



As a scholar and professional I strive to be social justice oriented and the CLS program has not only introduced me to role models actively incorporating social justice in their work but also to schemas crucial to understanding my own experiences. On many occasions I have doubted my ability and sometimes even my motivations to engage in social justice. Oppression, as we know, is multifaceted. I find myself analyzing the intersectionality of my privilege as a white passing upper middle class US citizen and as Latina immigrant as a means to understand where I stand as an ally or as a member in many areas of my community. Finding a safe space in places like Rachele's office, CLS classes, or amongst my CLS peers to share my self-doubts and soul searching have helped prepare me to take on these experiences today.

My hope for other students of color in any field here at UW is that they successfully connect with like-minded peers, mentors, and faculty to provide them with the support I have been fortunate to have. Since becoming a CLS student, I have figured out my professional aspirations, embarked on an international internship, and found a rewarding job that lets me utilize my knowledge of culturally-relevant psychology to help Madison's Latinx community. With CLS, I have found a home on a campus of 43,000 students and thanks to that, I am doing what I can to serve the Latinx community here in Madison and abroad.