



Sarah: Welcome to vitamin Ph.D. I'm Sarah Hokinson and I'm the assistant provost for Professional Development and Postdoctoral Affairs at Boston University. Today we're continuing to navigate careers in higher education with Adela Penagos from Boston College. I know we have someone from Boston College here at BU but we're delighted to have Adela here and she wears two hats at Boston College that we'll talk about today. She is a visiting assistant professor of the practice in Hispanic studies and also coordinates their upper-level Spanish language program. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Adela: Thank you very much for having me, Sarah. I think it is a very important venture that you are undertaking to help students think of other options and not necessarily just the academic path.

Sarah: You have these two roles and I'm assuming that they are both distinct, but they also overlap. Tell me a little bit about what you're doing at Boston College.

Adela: I am going to talk about what I do at Boston College. I also run an organization that advises students to get into college. I will talk about those three things if that's okay.

Sarah: Of course, yes, we want to navigate the full pathway. We have a bonus one today.

Adela: I'm at Boston College as an assistant professor of the practice. I get to teach two Spanish courses every semester. Then as a coordinator, I am responsible for all the courses that are the upper-level Spanish courses. I have to make sure that I hire the appropriate faculty to teach those courses and also that I work very closely with them to develop exams, exercises, and everything. All that is necessary to develop in order for the students to be successful in the courses. The good thing about me teaching is that I know what the needs of the students are pretty clear and I hope that that helps me to design the courses for that particular level.

Sarah: It sounds like you're juggling your time pretty effectively if you can do these three different things. You have the coaching model, you have the administrative side, and then you have the actual hands-on teaching. How do you think about compartmentalizing your day or how do you wear all of those hats simultaneously?

Adela: I try to be very organized and at Boston College, I am there on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. And then on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I do the academic advising for the students who are applying to college. Sometimes those things will overlap depending on the needs of the day, but in general, I try to keep my life as organized as possible. I think that life is going to throw curve balls at you so you don't need to help life. And the more that you can keep things in a calendar, I think the better off you are.



Sarah: Tell me a little bit, how did you transition from being a Ph.D. graduate to taking that first leap? What were some of your thought processes or how did you end up on this particular path?

Adela: When I was here doing my graduate work, I hadn't even started my program yet, when I got a phone call from the university where I got my master's asking me to apply for an administrative position. When I spoke to my advisor here at BU, he said to me that if I could go into the administrative part, I should, just because you never know where the market is going to be. At that time I was an international student. Knowing that I had his support, I ended up doing my coursework in a year and I kept in touch with the people that had contacted me about the administrative position, which was at the university of Notre Dame in multicultural student affairs; an area that I didn't think I had a lot of experience in. But they were looking, in particular, for someone who was gonna run their academic programs. I did my academic work, I taught two classes and took five, but I knew that perhaps in the end I was going to have a full-time position. I thought it was worth the sacrifice for that year. And sure enough, in March I got an email from the person that at the time was the director of multicultural student programs and services at Notre Dame. She asked me to formally apply, which I did. Then in May, I had been offered the position.

Sarah: That's amazing. You used your network to help solidify that position and also focus on yourself at the same time. You knew basically before you were graduating where you were going and that enabled you to be selective about how you use your time while you were here at BU.

Adela: Absolutely. Then when I was working full time, I also had to be pretty intentional about how I was gonna allocate my time to finish the dissertation, which was good. It's a good set of skills to have.

Sarah: For you, was there a leap between the teaching that you did as a Ph.D. student versus the teaching that you did at Notre Dame or now? If so, how did you bridge some of those knowledge gaps from being a graduate student to a full-time instructor?

Adela: I was fortunate enough that in every program that I've been in, I was the instructor for the class. I didn't have to bridge that gap as much as I think other students who only run discussion classes or who just help out as TAs in grading. But I do definitely think there are skills that you can bring in, even if you're not the only responsible instructor for the course. That is helping your students during office hours and advising them in a way that then you will have perhaps skills for an advising position if you decide to go that route. You can also organize meetings with your students in addition to discussion groups that you might be leading and that



shows your leadership skills. I think that the more that you can veer out a little bit of just running discussion sessions or simply grading, the better off you will be in the long haul.

Sarah: That makes a lot of sense to me. I want to pick up on your third hat because I think this is more unknown to graduate students in terms of starting your own business and even knowing that you can have other jobs and have a business on the side. How did that start? Does that start right away or is that something that grew over time as you got more administrative experience?

Adela: It grew over time as I got more administrative experience. As I said, my first job was in Multicultural Student Programs and Services and I was responsible for running a mentoring program there and also for running an advising group that will help students from underrepresented groups look at Ph.D. programs as options. Then I went into advising. I was a first-year advisor at the University of Notre Dame, then I was an assistant Dean at the university of Notre Dame, and then I was the associate Dean of academic advising at Harvard. It was through the advising experiences that I thought I was qualified to start a business in terms of advising in particular.

But I also think that if you're going to start a business and you have a degree in arts and letters or liberal arts, you need to do a little bit of due diligence and get ready for what it takes to have your own business. What I did is I went into Coursera which is an online platform and I signed up for a class that was a business class and he'd talk about how to start your own business. Then I'm a pretty resourceful person and I think those are the things that you learn as a graduate student, that you need to learn how to do research. And if you can research your discipline, I think that you can research anything else. I discovered that in Boston there was a group of former entrepreneurs that advise people who are starting their businesses and I contacted them. Then I got a mentor through that organization.

Sarah: That's so cool. And yeah, whether it's Coursera or Canvas or EdX, there are all of these, sometimes free, but sometimes nominally costing courses that can help you get those additional things that you might need that you don't have from your Ph.D. because you studied something else. It's nice to know that there are resources out there that maybe aren't as intensive for new entrepreneurs starting out.

Tell me a little bit about it, and it could be the totality of what you do day to day, but what are some of the most rewarding things about the pathway that you've taken?

Adela: I think definitely one of the more rewarding things for me, and it might have to do with my personality, is that I really cherish when I see a student getting what they want. Whether it



be in the classroom when a student succeeds, learning Spanish and really getting to a point in the language that they didn't have when they started the class. Then after that, they start thinking about either studying abroad or applying for a Fulbright. I am also the advisor for the Fulbright Scholarship for Latin America and the Iberian Peninsula at BC. I can help students write their essays and when they get to that point I'm really is very rewarding to see where they have been and how much they've grown. For the students that are advising the college planning, it's rewarding when I see that they get into the school that is the perfect fit for them and where I know that they are going to be happy for the next four years because that was why I got into that. That even though I went to really good schools, I worked at Harvard, I also worked at MIT, I saw that the students in every school, no matter how much we think it's the best school in the world, some of them are not happy there. I think it's so important for students to go to an institution where when they graduate they can look back and be very proud of the place that they went to and also want to give back.

Sarah: I think that's really important too. It's so often that we follow a particular pathway because it's the way we think we should be. We should go to Harvard, or we should get a Ph.D., or we should do a postdoc because someone's told us along the way that that's how it should be. It's nice to have outside advisors like you that can provide that bigger picture of here are all the things you can be and what sounds awesome to you. Sometimes that conversation happens really late in the game for graduate students and postdocs.

But I agree with you, one of the most rewarding things about my job is the cards that I get from postdocs when they get a job after I've looked at their CV. It's not that I take credit for them getting the job, it's their qualifications and voice in the cover letter, but it's meaningful that in some way, the conversation that I had with them, they felt like it made a difference. That difference is one of the most powerful things about being an academic administrator.

On the flip side though, being an administrator myself, I know how challenging it can be. Tell me a little bit about what are some of the challenges, either in running a business or in the teaching and administrative positions that you hold?

Adela: I think that one of the biggest challenges today is that a lot of students have a lot of pressure. Some of the pressure is self-imposed and then other pressure is because I believe that living in such a high social media age, by nature, is gonna create a lot of pressure that I didn't have.

Sarah: We all have our fake Facebook lives. Right?





Adela: For them, it's like a Snapchat 24/7. That also creates pressure. Then it also brings in a lot of mental health issues. I think that that's a very difficult thing to navigate because while I think there are some students that are very much in need of mental health resources, I also have seen other students that say they have certain things that are never diagnosed. They are self-diagnosed and I think it is very important to navigate wisely this very important issue while holding the students accountable. If they have special needs, we are blessed at BC they are very supportive of that, but if they have it they need to register with the appropriate channels so they can get the appropriate support and we can all meet their needs.

Sarah: We have similar channels here at BU for accommodations but it does require the student to self advocate and to identify the issues that they are facing and request the help that they need. I think that's an important point, not only finding the right advisors to help you navigate some of the things that are challenging, but also being able to even just articulate the help that you need appropriately is an important point too.

I think the mental health crisis in education is just such an overarching challenge for all levels. It sounds like you're advising more at the undergraduate level. I'm curious, one of the things that shouldn't have caught me by surprise in the role that I have but did, was postdocs were coming to me with difficult issues. Realizing that my PhD is in biochemistry and biophysics. How do I develop the right tools to even triage these conversations? Because sometimes I'm not the ultimate person that solves the problem but I am the person that helps them find the resource that they need. As you've dealt with some of these students in distress, are there any particular avenues that you've taken or was it really your background in student affairs that helped you navigate some of these things?

Adela: I think it's definitely my background in student affairs and just in administrative roles prior to this that has gotten me ready because I know immediately, if a student comes with a problem, for example, we had a student who didn't show up for the final on Saturday, and immediately I know exactly who I need to contact. Even though I've only been in this role at BC for a year and a half because I was a Dean before, I knew they needed to contact me. Now I know exactly what is the language that I'm looking for on a website or what are the types of people that we need to contact on? Who are the people that we shouldn't contact? I think that those two things are equally important because if you contact the wrong person, your student is never going to get the help that they need. You have to be somewhat wise about knowing the different layers that there are at every university and get to know, if you're in an administrative role, the makeup of your university. Because every place is unique and every place has different places that help students with the same mission but it might not be the same name of the place.



Sarah: Yeah. And this comes back to your earlier point of doing your research and not just doing the research on what is an administrative pathway take, but how are different universities structured and how do they work? I think hopefully through this podcast we can continue to demystify that. I'm sure there are many similarities between our Boston University and Boston College, but also some differences in the way that we're structured and layered. As an administrator, the biggest tool that you have in your toolkit is knowing where to go and who to call quickly. I completely agree that that is something that you pick up over time. It took me a while.

Adela: And the other biggest challenge I think today are the parents.

Sarah: Interesting, I don't have the postdoc parents don't call me.

Adela: That's great. Yeah. Well, you know, because in my role as a college advisor, I can see the parents always wanting their kid to get in everywhere and I have never worked with somebody who gets into every single school. And that's an exception, not the rule. The rule is you're going to get accepted to some places and you're going to get rejected to other places. That's why it's so important for my role to help the students develop a diverse list of colleges. Not all of them can be in the top 25 because otherwise you are not going to go to college. But I also see in the classroom, some students are telling me that they have a lot of pressure from their parents. Now the parents fortunately do not call me as much, but even so that I don't get the calls, I do see how some of them feel that pressure.

Sarah: As part of your job then, you're basically giving students the framework, how to have some of those conversations with their parents to normalize what the real landscape looks like as opposed to the idealized trajectory of 12 admissions to every college that they apply to.

Adela: Well, I have to talk to the students and I do talk to them, but sometimes I also have to talk to the parents. For example, today I going to have a conversation with the parents that is very upset that her, that his daughter didn't get into the college that he wanted her to get in. And I sort of knew that she probably wasn't going to get in, and he also did, because he did acknowledge throughout the conversations that it was a reach. But I don't know what he wants to do now. However, I do have to have a conversation with him today. I talk to the parents a lot more in my college advising business than I thought I would. They are the ones that make the first contact usually and then I talk to the students.

Now there are some parents that are great. We talk, we have that first conversation, and then after that I am only working with the students and those are probably the students that benefit the most from the services. But then there are other parents that



think that they're going to be involved in the entire process. And I mean, as a person who runs the business, I have to cater to that as well. But I try to balance it out so that they understand that maybe their child didn't get in the school that they wanted to get in and the parents wanted to get in but there is a reason and if the student wants to go to that school because as their dream is school, then I talk to them about the possibility of transferring.

Sarah: Interesting. I mean, it's good that you're able to provide those flexible options to the students and to the parents. But I would imagine that some of these difficult conversations take a toll. Whether you're a faculty member advising a student who maybe doesn't get the faculty position in the first time on the market or your in your role talking directly with potential undergraduate applications, there's that emotional exhaustion that comes with managing other people's disappointment. I'm just wondering how do you decompress at the end of your day when you, after you talked to this very disappointed father, what will you do?

Adela: I probably will do this before I talked to the disappointed father. I am a person who is very rooted in her faith. I am a practicing Roman Catholic and praying is a huge component of my life. When I'm going to have a difficult conversation or a difficult day at work, which I know it's coming because I'm going to have to meet with people that I don't necessarily want to meet with, I spend time praying before I go into the conversation cause then I feel that it is out of my hands and I'm hoping that the Holy spirit is going to inspire me to say the right thing.

Sarah: Wow. That's really cool. I haven't tried that approach, but I do sometimes do a minute paper before I enter into what I know will be a challenging situation of just whether it's getting my thoughts out of what are the key things I want to impart to this person or just getting my thoughts out about what are the key things I'm worried about in this conversation. It gives me a quiet space to really think about what it is that I'm preparing for. I can definitely relate to that before we wrap things up, we usually end these career exploration episodes in thinking about advice for PhD students. And so I'm going to break up the advice here in two parts because you are on two pathways in parallel, so you have this, so we'll start with the academic side first. you have a combined administrative and teaching role and I think that's pretty common. We have a lot of administrators here at BU that are also faculty members and contribute to teaching. what would your advice be to a PhD student who's looking to go into, not necessarily a tenured path, but maybe some combination of academic administration and teaching? How could they do what you did, which was focused the last year of their PhD on that step?

Adela: Well, I think that first of all, they need to reach out to the people who know them best, right? If they have really strong connections somewhere along the way, ideally in their undergraduate school, to reach out to some people there. Just have perhaps an informational interview and figure out if they love that school, if there are some potential opportunities there





for them. I also think it's very important to be flexible in the sense not only of the job itself, but where the job is. I think that this is where graduate students tend to get stuck and particularly graduate students that go to school in a beautiful city like Boston. They don't want to leave Boston.

If you want to really give yourself the best possible chance to have an administrative career in the long haul, I think at the beginning, thinking that you're going to start in the city that you're going to end, it's a little bit unreasonable. Having that flexibility I think is key. Applying for jobs is obviously very important but also being wise about the cover letter. Because you cannot use the same cover letter for every school. You need to read, do a little bit of research on the institution. You use not only keywords for their mission in your letter, but also that you write the letter in such a way that he shows that you're the perfect fit for that particular job. In a sense is doing the same thing that the graduate students did when they applied for the graduate program in that personal statement. But now it's put in in a letter format. That's one several things that I would recommend for them. I also think that as they are getting the PhD, try to either shadow a couple of times an office where you think you might look at a job that is like that to see what it is day to day. I'm figuring out if this is what you think you really want to do because sometimes our idea of a job and the job itself are completely different.

Sarah: I think you're so right. The shadowing piece is a hidden gem of professional development because a lot of students are looking for internships and internships are great, some of them are paid. I highly recommend them as a in depth experience into a particular field.

Now let's switch gears to the entrepreneurship side. If you're a PhD student that really wants to think about starting a business after a PhD, we've already talked about taking some courses and some variety on business, but it sounds like networking was pretty important for you. Were there other things that you think those students might want to consider as they're finishing their degree?

Adela: I don't think you should start a business if you're not qualified to run that business. I think that that is one of the challenges that I see every day in the people that do the college advising. There has been a lot of press lately on some practices that were probably not the most ethical. I think that that is a very important thing. I wouldn't have a business if I didn't know how to advise people. There are, unfortunately, people in this field that started the business just because they think it is a lucrative business but they don't necessarily have the qualifications. Although I'm sure they get hired because unfortunately not every parent is well-informed about





what this is all about. I think that if you have a PhD, you should owe it to your school and your own profession to start a business in something that you can run.

Sarah: That makes a lot of sense. There's this balance between having a PhD gives you such a generalizable of problem solving skills and a critical thinking approach that can be applied in a lot of different places. But I think sometimes we might project too far. I think you bring up a valid point of my PhD in biochemistry and biophysics doesn't qualify me to do absolutely anything that I want. There's a limitation to where that expertise can go without additional training. And so I still take professional development as an administrator all the time and I think you have to, to stay up on what's happening in the world and how our higher education is moving. I think that's probably true of being an entrepreneur as well. I mean you're embedded in higher education, but there's probably a lot that you have to keep up with as the trends are moving over time.

Adela: Absolutely. Going to conferences, I think it's extremely important and that is something that I tried to do at least once a year for both of the fields that I'm in. I am part of a lot of groups that have discussions about both subjects, language teaching and then college advising. I think that having a PhD trains you in a very unique way but you also have to come to the realization that you don't have all the answers, which is okay. If you want answers, sometimes you just have to find avenues where you can get them.

Sarah: That's great advice. Well, thank you so much for joining us today. It's been a delight to have you on the show. I'd like to take this opportunity to just acknowledge that we have a wonderful partnership with WBTU here at Boston university and we are grateful for their partnership in producing this podcast. Thank you for listening to vitamin PhD and we look forward to our next episode.