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Hispanic Heritage Month Spotlight: James L. Rodríguez, Ph.D.

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Q: Why did you decide to choose developmental science as a course of study or career?

A: In my first year at Pomona College, I started as an undergraduate research assistant for Ray Buriel, who became my lifelong mentor. My first assignment was to become familiar with the research literature. I would spend my days in the library reading journal articles, books, and monographs. Back then everything was in print or hard copy so I would camp out with a stack of reading material. I discovered much of the research on Mexican Americans and other Latino populations did not reflect my experience or those of my peers and a deficit approach was often evident. After numerous conversations with Ray, I decided I would become a developmental scientist and would approach my work from an assets-based perspective. This was the ignition point for a journey that continues today and serves as a clear illustration of the powerful impact of mentoring.

Q: What are you most proud of in your career?

A: Without a doubt, the impact of my collective work as a teacher-scholar and higher education administrator on students, families, and communities. Serving others has been the focal point of my career. My service mission was ingrained in me growing up in Calexico, CA, then a small border community. My mother, a retired teacher, served as my earliest role model and inspires me to the present day. The first third of my career I was primarily a teacher educator at San Diego State University. I think about the hundreds of students who went on to be teachers, counselors, school administrators, and community leaders in the San Diego region and beyond. It was during my time at San Diego State that I worked with Michael Lopez, Marlene Zepeda, and Elisa Velasquez and the Founding Committee to establish the SRCD Latinx Caucus. Now in its third decade the Latinx Caucus has already left its imprint on generations of scholars, on developmental science, and related public policy.

Q: Do you have a mentor, or mentors, who have been instrumental to your career and, if so, who and how?

A: I have been fortunate to be the beneficiary of extraordinary mentoring throughout my career starting with Ray Buriel as an undergraduate student. Ray and I had a wonderful, productive mentoring relationship for the next 30 years until his passing. To this day, his lessons and consejos (words of advice) inform me on a daily basis. In addition to Ray, there have been many individuals who have provided mentoring at different times of my career. I understand the power of mentoring, particularly for first-generation students and scholars who often are from underrepresented communities. My deep appreciation for mentoring is reflected in my scholarship as a current line of research. More significantly, I have been intentional in paying it forward by mentoring others as a way of serving others throughout my career.

Q: What advice would you give to a student beginning their Ph.D. studies in developmental science or related?

A: Being a development scientist is a wonderful profession. There is an abundance of career pathways. Pursue your interests and opportunities with intention and enthusiasm. Be engaged and involved. Don't be afraid to say yes and learn how to say no. As you move forward in your journey, you will intersect with and be joined by others who will be supportive in different ways. Whether they are peers or faculty mentors, I encourage you to be receptive to the support being offered and to be open to asking for help. This is your journey and you are the primary author of it. Embrace it. Enjoy it.