

Interview with: IRIS RUIZ-GRECH

Marist College

Poughkeepsie, NY

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For the Marist College Archives and Special Collections

Transcript: Iris Ruiz-Grech

Interviewee: Iris Ruiz-Grech

Interviewer: Gus Nolan and Jan Stivers

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Summary: Iris Ruiz-Grech talks about growing up in Puerto-Rico before attending college at Tulane University and getting her master's degree at Columbia's Teachers College. Iris is director of the Center for Multi-Cultural Affairs and the HEOP program at Marist. She discusses her time at Marist, including the creation of the Center for Multi-Cultural Affairs, the functions of HEOP, and the value it has brought to the student body.

Jan Stivers ([00:07](#)):

Okay. So today is Wednesday, March 16th, 2022. I am Jan Stivers and this is my colleague,

Gus Nolan ([00:15](#)):

Gus Nolan.

JS ([00:16](#)):

And we're interviewing Iris Ruiz-Grech for the Marist College Oral History Project. The purpose of the project is to capture the experiences of members of the Marist community who played an active role in the development of the college. And so, we're grateful to Iris for all she has done to arrive at this point and for agreeing to make this contribution to the archives. So, the interview is really in three parts. Gus is going to ask you first about your life before Marist, your family, and your education. I'm going to ask some questions about your career, what you do, how you got to where you are, and then Gus is going to ask about your perceptions of Marist, how it's changed, what maybe it still needs to change. Why you're still here [laugh]? Okay.

GN ([01:09](#)):

Good. That being said, let me start at the very beginning. I was going-- tell me something about your early years, where were you born, and what was the condition, and your siblings if you have them?

Iris Ruiz-Grech ([01:22](#)):

Okay. So I actually was born in Brooklyn, New York. Both of my parents were born and raised in Puerto Rico, but as every, many Puerto Ricans in the late 50s, they came to New York--.

Iris Ruiz-Grech

GN ([01:37](#)):

Nice.

IRG ([01:37](#)):

For a better economic life. My sister is six, was six years older than me. So she also was born in Puerto Rico. And I was born five and a half, six years after they came here. We lived in Brooklyn for a couple of years. My dad used to work in a company that, I guess had many chemicals that poisoned his system. And probably around the time I was conceived, his system had started poisoning because a lot of the allergies that he has, I have too, and by the late 60s while he was coming out of the hospital, they fired him. Even though he was going in and out of the hospital. My mom was a talented hairdresser. She had a booming business as a beauty salon. But with the guilt and the double standard of the Latin community, of you have to take care of your husband. Everybody kept saying, you're going to kill him here, and they were young. So, they had recently purchased what was going to be their retirement home in Puerto Rico. But at that point, the late 60s, they realized that New York and the cold weather was just very, very bad for my father's asthma, and emphysema, and his allergies. So, they chose to go back to Puerto Rico. It was either Arizona or Puerto Rico. Of course it was more comfortable for them, Puerto Rico.

JS ([03:17](#)):

And how old were you then?

IRG ([03:18](#)):

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So, I moved, we moved in the, like one month before '69, '70. So I was little bit over six years old. No, maybe not even, not six years old yet. So we went to Puerto Rico, interestingly enough, here in United States, my mother had been here when she was single. And so, my uncles tended to live in more predominantly Italian and Jewish neighborhoods. So, my mom, when she brought her husband and her kid, that's where we normally lived. So, she had put us through Catholic schools and we go back to Puerto Rico. They moved back to the town they grew up in, they moved to a bigger city called Caguas. And so she did the exact same thing. You know, she decided it's time, you know, in New York, my kids were in Catholic school. So, in Puerto Rico let's put them. I wasn't able to get into Catholic school right away there was no room. So, the second half of first grade I spent in a public school in my neighborhood and my sister did go to Catholic school. I remember my mom went to a parents meeting and the priestess complaining about parents not caring about having their kids in the Catholic school system. And my mom saying, well, don't say that because, you know, I wanted both of my daughters and you didn't have room for my other daughter and lo and behold second grade I'm in Catholic school. [Laugh] So, needless to say, education has been, always, was always very important to my mom.

GN ([05:04](#)):

Okay. Let me just, you're doing a lot of talking. Let me ask you one or two things, because I want to hear my voice too.

IRG ([05:10](#)):

Okay. Sure [laugh].

GN ([05:10](#)):

Iris Ruiz-Grech

Let's see. How did you like school? Are you a good student? Were you a good student even in the early days? Did you like going to school?

IRG ([05:21](#)):

Yes. I loved school.

GN ([05:23](#)):

How you do?

IRG ([05:24](#)):

I actually would say I found great joy in reading and doing well in school.

GN ([05:34](#)):

Yeah.

IRG ([05:34](#)):

And so, I remember in Puerto Rico, you graduate in sixth grade, you graduate in ninth grade, and again you graduate in twelfth grade. And so, in sixth grade, my grades were really, really good, but because I had not started in that school, even though I could have had honors, I didn't because I had missed two years. But then, when I graduated in ninth grade that's when I would say it was my high time. I graduated, what is the equivalent here of valedictorian? And I received like fourteen different medals. And then twelfth grade was in, I graduated with honors, but I didn't do-- because we had an advanced science program and unfortunately the way my high school did it is that it really didn't matter what your curriculum was it only mattered or what your

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end GPA was. So even though I did have a couple of honors the valedictorian was somebody else.

GN ([06:42](#)):

Yeah. Okay. Describe the situation at school and how many in a class, what kind of you know, learning style was it, you know, the school itself a good substantial building or a small simple--?

IRG ([06:58](#)):

I would say that from second grade all the way 'til sixth grade it was in the middle of the city. Our cathedral in the city of Caguas in Puerto Rico and the order of priests and nuns was Redemptorist [affirmative] and so it was a regular building, small classes, no more than twenty-five, thirty students per class, our high school, our middle school was from seventh to ninth grade. Yeah, but the middle school together with the high school was in a completely different area, still managed by the Redemptorists. My high school was called Notre Dame high school. And that was in a more, outside of the middle of the city. And so, the classrooms were, it's almost like you had barracks and so you went into the classroom, but the minute you stepped out, you're out in the fresh air. So it was a very different environment than the buildings for elementary school--.

JS ([08:05](#)):

It's the same structure in Hawaii, where you take advantage of the natural--.

IRG ([08:09](#)):

Exactly. Exactly.

Iris Ruiz-Grech

GN ([08:10](#)):

You know, today, did you ever associate with the university here? Did you see yourself?

IRG ([08:16](#)):

No, the Redemptorist order-- but many of our students did go to universities here in United States. It was, it was very common.

GN ([08:27](#)):

Yeah.

IRG ([08:27](#)):

But the one thing that was a little bit different is that when we went to Puerto Rico, it was interesting because it was mostly children of upper-middle class that went to Catholic schools. [Affirmative] And we weren't that [laugh]. My father was disabled, and my mother had left her business and so she needed to start anew in Puerto Rico. So it was, it was very much of an economic culture shock for my sister, mostly for my sister than me.

GN ([09:00](#)):

In school. Did you do anything in sports? Did you do anything in art?

IRG ([09:05](#)):

No. I was more involved in leadership type of clubs--.

GN ([09:10](#)):

Clubs, organizations.

Iris Ruiz-Grech

IRG ([09:11](#)):

In organizations. Yes.

GN ([09:13](#)):

Okay.

IRG ([09:13](#)):

And so, I did more of the service projects and leadership. I did not get involved in any of the clubs in, excuse me, any of the athletic teams in the school. Separately as part of the community, my mom did put me in dance classes, so I danced.

GN ([09:33](#)):

Oh, you did.

IRG ([09:33](#)):

But not--.

GN ([09:37](#)):

A big social life?

IRG ([09:39](#)):

No, more like you go to dance class and you know, you come home and that's it.

JS ([09:44](#)):

Do your homework.

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IRG ([09:44](#)):

And do your homework and do your chores--.

JS ([09:47](#)):

Good grades.

IRG ([09:47](#)):

And yes. And good grades. Exactly.

GN ([09:49](#)):

You're a good girl.

IRG ([09:49](#)):

That was always expectation of my mom. Yeah.

GN ([09:52](#)):

Okay. Well, going through high school, that's pretty much what high school is. Then there's the big question here.

JS ([10:01](#)):

Well, you went to Tulane. How did you choose Tulane?

IRG ([10:04](#)):

Well, again, my high school being a-- run by the Redemptorists, it was always a push that students would go away to college. I mean, they did encourage students to stay, but many of us were looking to come to United States. For me, it was my sister, my sister, when we moved to

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Puerto Rico, she was almost 13. And so, she was very, very much used to the American way of looking at things. And so, the seven years she spent there, it was very difficult for her socially. So, once she had the opportunity to go to college, she came to United States and my mother always raised me, you know, she is your example, look up to her. And so, since my sister came to college in United States, of course I was going to follow. And I applied to different schools. My last two were either University of Maryland where my sister lived at that time. She had just gotten married the year before and was there or Tulane. My mother made the mistake of taking me to visit Tulane first [laugh] which was a beautiful campus, a very organized opposed to University of Maryland. That was this huge--.

JS ([11:29](#)):

Sprawling.

IRG ([11:29](#)):

You know, university, public area in-- with the possibility that I wasn't going to have residence on campus. I would have to live with my sister. She was newly married. I didn't want to do that. So, Tulane it was. And, so I went there and, and I loved it.

JS ([11:49](#)):

You majored in psychology.

IRG ([11:51](#)):

I, originally it was biology, but then, I realized that psychology was more of my liking and there at Tulane psychology was a natural science [affirmative] so, my mom approved of it [laugh]. But yes, and I'll never forget is like, I remember my senior year I took a graduate level course and the

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entire semester all we were taught was about the hippocampus and I loved it [affirmative] and so it was the right path.

GN ([12:25](#)):

Do you speak Spanish with the same perfection you speak English?

IRG ([12:29](#)):

I would say, I would say yes.

GN ([12:32](#)):

Yeah.

IRG ([12:33](#)):

Yes.

GN ([12:33](#)):

Because you're, it's incredible. I thought I might have difficulty with some words but your language is just right on line and better than mine [laugh].

JS ([12:45](#)):

You know that people who continue to speak two languages throughout their life have a protection against Alzheimer's [laugh] that I don't have.

IRG ([12:54](#)):

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Well, and it's interesting, because again, in a year I went, I started with English in school. My mom would, and my father would speak Spanish to us in, at home. But then because of our school's foundation, a lot of our books in Puerto Rico were in English.

GN ([13:12](#)):

Oh yeah.

IRG ([13:12](#)):

Like from all of my science books, as I said before, my, I graduated with advanced classes in science. All our books were in English. Our lectures were in Spanish, but our exams were in English. And so--.

JS ([13:29](#)):

Wow.

IRG ([13:29](#)):

The use of both languages has always been a constant with me. It's one of those things where, I don't see myself as having one language before the other one, it's, I had them at the same time.

JS ([13:48](#)):

Always bilingual.

GN ([13:48](#)):

What language do you think in?

IRG ([13:51](#)):

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Now, because I've been here longer than I've been anywhere else, ore English, but it depends because, you know, when I am around people that I know speak Spanish, I immediately turn to Spanish.

JS ([14:07](#)):

You know, I was taught Spanish for us here in the Modern Languages department before things got so intense with your work.

IRG ([14:15](#)):

Yes.

JS ([14:15](#)):

So we do want to, we want to talk about your work. Did, was there anything you'd like to say about your master's degree at Columbia at Teacher's College?

IRG ([14:22](#)):

Actually, it is interesting because I went to-- my original intent at Tulane was to be a pre-med student and I kind of lost my track. So, when I was graduating, I found out about a postgraduate program at Columbia, general studies. That specifically just taught you the classes that you needed to apply to medical school. During that year. For the first time I actually was advised, I actually had an advisor that sat me down and made me look at my strengths and my weaknesses. And I realized that as much as I respected and loved my mother, medical school was my mother's dream, not mine.

GN ([15:10](#)):

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Yeah.

IRG ([15:11](#)):

I was doing work study that one year of postgraduate. I was doing work study as part of my financial aid in the financial aid office at Columbia College. And at the end of that year, my supervisor was leaving. And so, my other colleagues said, Hey Iris, you can apply for her job, you have already a bachelor's degree. And that was my introduction to higher education as a profession. The year that I was hired we had an intern from Teachers College from their hire an adult education program. And so, I was introduced to that program and that's how I decided, oh, I'm going to go do my master's. It was interesting because, that master's was geared more for people who were in res life or in college activities. And here I was from financial aid. The master's is really taking student developmental theories, which is all psychology, and applying it to college students. And so, it, for me, it was a theoretical awakening on what I was already doing with the students. And so, it was an exciting time for me to be able to marry the support that you give students with theory. Because I was working full time, I did my master's, kind of sometimes part-time sometimes three quarters time. Because I was so unique and I was the only one in financial aid, they allowed me to do an internship that the master's required in my office. And so, I was able to expand certain things in reference of reach out to students regarding financial aid and really awareness type of opportunities that weren't there. So it was, it was a brand-new opportunity to really reach out to students. And so, it was exciting because it opened a new way of thinking. The challenge was that I, my examples were always very different than everybody else. [Affirmative] And the advisor, God rest her soul I found out recently that she passed, was not understanding where I was coming from. There was also a little bit of cultural incompetence on her part. And so there were certain times that it was a challenge--.

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GN ([18:00](#)):

While your work is really on an individual basis rather than teaching a class. Is that right? In the financial aid office and--.

IRG ([18:07](#)):

Well in the financial aid office it's, you do have to, again, look at the circumstances of each student, circumstances that many times require for you to really have conversations with them and really, truly understand.

GN ([18:22](#)):

Yeah. Well, you're not doing that in the classroom, you're doing it in the office.

IRG ([18:25](#)):

In the office. Yes. But I mean the classes though, all the work and all the projects that we had to do in the classrooms many times, you do have to kind of bring examples that for me it was completely different than let's say somebody in student activities or in res life. So it, it was a good way for my faculty as well to kind of see how many of the theories they were teaching us, many of the policies that a higher education needs to put together not only affect where the students live or just where they're taught in classes, but it affects the other areas of an institution [affirmative]. And so I do have to say that, being the atypical experience to the theories and to the things that I was being taught, I think really helped me begin to create the foundation that I feel very proud that I really think broad, a matter of the well-being of the entire institution instead of just siloed into just my department and what the needs of the students with this issue is.

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GN ([19:47](#)):

Yeah.

JS ([19:48](#)):

I could see how that has, I could see the roots of what you're doing now. [Affirmative] right in there and what you're describing, especially the importance of an advisor, the advisor who said medical school, I'm not seeing that as your strength [affirmative] and then the advisor who just wasn't tuned in, and I can see how that really would not only shape what you do, but give fire to what you do. So can we talk about that part, that transition to Marist okay. To move on?

GN ([20:24](#)):

Yeah. Well, what amuses me, when you came to Marist, it was for a teaching position. Was it not?

IRG ([20:31](#)):

No, actually I came to be the assistant director of the HEOP program.

JS ([20:38](#)):

Who was the director at that time?

IRG ([20:39](#)):

The director was Cynthia McCauley Lewis (?).

JS ([20:41](#)):

Oh, right.

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IRG ([20:42](#)):

And Desmond Murray had been the assistant director a little bit before, but then he moved to career services. [Affirmative] So an opening-- I believe in like '87, '88, '87, there was a lot of transition in the HEOP program here at Marist. My understanding is that Cynthia McCauley Lewis had been hired as a part-timer the director at the time, just got up and left [laugh]. And then all of a sudden it was like Desmond and her were left to manage the department, the program. So in, I believe-- I graduated from my master's in '89, we're getting married, my husband was also graduating, and we were relocating, and it so happened that my husband got a job in Poughkeepsie IBM. So I did the commute, I was still at Columbia for nine months before the opening happened. So there was a lot of new things happening here at Marist while I am still commuting to New York City and Cynthia at the time, was doing her doctorate at Teachers College. So the minute she saw her resume and was like, hey, somebody from Teachers College, let me, I'm curious, let me talk to her. And so I came in as assistant director.

GN ([22:12](#)):

Yeah. See, that's where I have to readjust my thinking because most of the people, I guess, that we deal with are classroom people who came to teach at Marist as it were. And you are a unique person who came with a special skill now in a special area that we'll talk about the HEOP, which is, you know, something I really want to unfold and say, you know, what's going on in this area and really how important it is, you know, on several levels for the diversity of the college, for the help of the student, as well as for the whole, you know, nation. I mean [laugh] what we need is really a breakthrough to better understand what it's all about. And my wife and I, we went a little bit and must tell you, trying to find out what HEOP meant, you know--.

Iris Ruiz-Grech

IRG ([23:08](#)):

Yes. And--.

GN ([23:09](#)):

Found out, you know--.

IRG ([23:11](#)):

Yes and actually--.

GN ([23:12](#)):

Equal opportunities.

IRG ([23:14](#)):

Actually the higher and actually the full title is the Arthur O. Eve higher education opportunity program.

GN ([23:23](#)):

Higher education--.

IRG ([23:25](#)):

The educational opportunity program started in '68.

GN ([23:29](#)):

Yeah.

IRG ([23:29](#)):

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Through a bill that Arthur O. Eve presented and SEEK, which is in the CUNY system, and EOP, which is in the SUNY system, started in 1968. And in 1969 the many of the Republicans realize, okay, Arthur Eve, you have something good going here. So then they wrote a bill--.

GN ([23:53](#)):

Yeah.

IRG ([23:53](#)):

For the private sector.

GN ([23:55](#)):

Yeah.

IRG ([23:55](#)):

And at that time, Ed Waters was a professor here.

GN ([24:00](#)):

Oh, I know him very well.

IRG ([24:02](#)):

So my history understanding is that Ed Waters, I guess, was very well connected and found out that this bill was being passed. And so they're a proposal for Marist college to have HEOP here.

GN ([24:21](#)):

Yeah.

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IRG ([24:21](#)):

So we were one of the first twenty-four colleges in the state of New York to have an HEOP program.

GN ([24:28](#)):

There should be somebody else here asking you, because this is a new area. I know about it from out here, you know, I was never directly involved in any of the administrative work that I don't know all about what goes on to make it tick, but it's been ticking very well, you know, for the fifty-two years that we've had it, you know, so that, all of that is part of it.

JS ([24:56](#)):

It, it has. And I want to say that I do think that a big part of the reason it's been ticking very well is your vision.

IRG ([25:04](#)):

Thank you.

JS ([25:04](#)):

I really think that you were ahead of the curve and that you pushed, you pushed us. So, even though this is something that is part of my own background in education, you were the person I first heard talking about cultural competence and the importance of cultural competence across campus. And you were the first person I heard talking about the need to not be in just an HEOP office, but to be a Center For Multicultural Affairs. So I want to ask you two questions about that. [Affirmative] And the first is how did you come to that? If you can say that, and the second one's a little more important and that's what strategies did you use to advance that vision in a

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place that frankly they weren't, we weren't resistant. I would not say Marist was resistant, but I would also say--.

GN ([26:01](#)):

Not encouraging either.

JS ([26:02](#)):

Not quick to jump on the bandwagon.

IRG ([26:04](#)):

Okay. I cannot take credit for the Center of Multicultural Affairs.

JS ([26:08](#)):

It was your idea.

IRG ([26:08](#)):

It was not, it was Dr. Don Ritschdorff's idea. My idea in 2007, Barbara Carpenter, who was the assistant Dean for student academic services had already, I guess, said she was going to retire. And so, the division that really was a default, not an organized reason, that she built-- need a transition. And so, Don Ritschdorff was in the position that he's in and he realized, okay, we're going to need to reorganize this student academic affair support area. What do you all want to do? So he had us, all directors, go to our offices with our staff and decide-- and write proposals to him. And so I wrote seventeen proposals [laugh] always creating a department that would have HEOP on one side and that would have general admit students that were here at Marist already, but that needed the same type of personal, academic, financial management support that

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HEOP students drive. [Affirmative] He, because we were all doing different research, I guess one of the areas that he realized is that, in our strategic plan, there was still that goal of diversity that needed to be answered in that soon middle states was going to come and ask. And so, with my proposal of creating the academic enrichment program, he also envisioned that there was a little bit more to that. And so that's when he said, okay, Iris, I think you need to be the Center for Multicultural Affairs. And that's when he then asked Karen Tompkinson (?), who was the coordinator for international student services and programs to no longer report to the Learning Center, but to now report to the Center of Multicultural Affairs. So in 2008, it was announced that the center was created, unfortunately, no budget [laugh]. Karen was down--.

GN ([28:49](#)):

Welcome to Marist.

IRG ([28:49](#)):

In the learning center while the HEOP staff was in the suite that we're in. And so he's like, okay, Iris, now you're in charge of that. And so the staff, we kind put our heads together and we said, we need to figure this out.

GN ([29:12](#)):

Let me ask you to fill in some of the spots, what percentage or numerically, how many students are we talking about and how many administrators running these proposals, you know, are there five or, or how many? I don't quite understand all the various points, you know, that center into HEOP you know. So numerically and student wise, are there a thousand?

IRG ([29:45](#)):

Iris Ruiz-Grech

Okay. No. The HEOP program is a fairly small program. The way we write the grant is according to our institution and, and when Marist first wrote the HEOP grant, it was a much smaller school than it is right now.

GN ([30:02](#)):

Oh yeah.

IRG ([30:02](#)):

So we are funded by, FTE, by full-time equivalency. And we have to write that grant every five years, it used to be every year and then three years, and now it's every five years. So for HEOP we're funded for a full-time equivalency of fifty-seven, but the head count, it could be up to sixty students. Then the academic enrichment program, which I did under my Center of Multicultural Affairs get my academic enrichment program, I have about another twenty. So in total we have about that, we directly do services with about seventy-five to eighty students. [Affirmative] But the key is that with our students, we see them regularly. We do weekly appointments with students who are in first year or on probation. We do bi-weekly with sophomores and juniors. We do workshops with them, developmental workshops, three, four times a year, as well as department meetings, meaning business meetings, where we want to make sure that they're aware of advocacy issues, being a state grant, we are constantly advocating to the legislature and the governor, and also a little bit of advocacy here at Marist, because one of the things that we have found through the years is that people not understanding where the background of our students, many times have expectations that are not realistic to them. And so we do try and empower our students to be their advocates, but many times it's us. So the same support services that we provide our HEOP students we have been doing with the other students as well. So that's

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one piece, as the Center of Multicultural Affairs, I like to compare ourselves to a tree. And so up to 2019, our tree was this one, the one branch for HEOP. We run a HEOP summer program.

That's five weeks in the summer that we have our students, and we provide them with classes, developmental workshops, study skills, time management, some cultural programming during those five weeks. Then we have them during the academic year, and then we graduate them and continue to have relationship with them. So that's one branch. Another branch was the international student programs, which we had undergraduate and graduate students. The other branch is the academic support programs, and our students in the academic enrichment program could be from the west coast, because many of them are from California. And we work in collaboration with the office of the president and the presidential fellow in support of those students. In the last couple of years, they're not only from California, they could be from Hawaii or any state on the west coast.

GN ([33:10](#)):

Yeah. The international students are from foreign countries that are here?

IRG ([33:15](#)):

Correct.

GN ([33:15](#)):

Yeah, okay.

IRG ([33:15](#)):

But the international student programs was taken out from my department in 2019. So when Karen Tompkinson, she was promoted to assistant director and then a year later she retired and

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the minute she retired, then they took that portion away from my department. But that still branches that we have is we have a diversity education component to us. And so since the new core, the first year seminars have a common read and the common read is usually a very DEI, diversity equity, inclusion, theme book. And so we create a workshop for every single book and we provide a workshop for first year seminar faculty that would want us to go into the class. The other thing is the education department has invited, and it started with Jan and Christina Fields, continues to invite Angel Arriaga, one of my, our staff members to talk about difficult dialogues, or cultural competency, or anything that will assist students. We help with RA training. We are also in collaboration with res life, for the multicultural living and learning communities. Then separately, we have the cultural programming component. One of our more demanding branches, which is we- ever since 2009, I can guarantee you that for every heritage observance, there's been at least one event. There's many times there's been five events, very tiring. But so, we always make sure that there's something for Hispanic heritage month for Native American history month--.

JS ([35:08](#)):

For Diwali.

IRG ([35:08](#)):

For Diwali since when we had international students, ever since international students as their own now Diwali is with them. But there's two things that remained under multicultural affairs that also is mostly internationally. And that is the commemoration of the 1994 genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda. And last year, we also started a tradition to bringing up awareness about the Armenian genocide. So I've been working with Dr. Garabedian and O'Sullivan and some

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students to have a commemoration. The cultural programming also kind-- it's trying to pull students from all cultures to really work with my staff and myself to do some type of programming. So we've done things like, again, the awareness about these difficult times in these countries, as well as something more light, working with fashion students to bring awareness about fashion from different countries.

GN ([36:21](#)):

Okay. I'm looking at the clock, see, and it is driving me crazy that, you know, we might have to come back while we have you today. We want to get a few more things out of you, you know? Yeah. And that's Marist, where we are and where we going, you know? Well, a short question might be, you know how you liked Marist?

IRG ([36:45](#)):

I do want to add one more thing that I think is really important and that is that HEOP students used to be, even though HEOP is not a diversity program, it's not a financial program, it's an academic access program. Anybody, regardless of their heritage can be a member of the HEOP program. In the 70s, most of the students that were being brought were primarily black Americans, Latinx community. That's not what the program is about, the program is for everybody. However, I do know that because in the 70s and the 80s, they were underrepresented in this institution, they had a hard time acclimating. They had difficulty really feeling a sense of belonging. And that's one of the things that I would say, I am proud that myself, as well as all the staff that has worked in HEOP all these years, is that we did provide-- not just to the current students we were working with, but the alums that would finally come back. And that was for them to see that we were creating a sense of community and a sense of belonging for these

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students. And so, in 2003, we had a, a young lady that, right after 9/11, was in Afghanistan and she realized the value. And at that time, Kristine Cullen, who is now assistant Dean in global and professional, she was our assistant director, and she was this young lady's counselor. And I had been talking to Shaileen Kopec about creating a small little alumni fund, a fund that we could use, our alumni could donate and use to be able to help our students with expenses that the grant couldn't cover. And thanks to this young lady, the fund was created and it has been in existence since 2003. And the last couple of years, Dominick LaRuffa and his wife have really, really continued to give to this fund. And it's growing to the point where--.

JS ([39:13](#)):

What's the name of the fund?

IRG ([39:13](#)):

It's the HEOP alumni fund [affirmative]. But because that fund was already established, then two years ago, no, three years ago, him and his wife decided to create another fund, which is a LaRuffa emergency fund that starts this coming year. And then separately, he also donated to create the LaRuffa endowment scholarship. That is going to be specifically for HEOP. So, needless to say, I just want to say that I think the foundation--.

GN ([39:48](#)):

Yeah, I understand. But I have to tell you this, I taught here for thirty years. Okay. You should go on tour with seminars, you know, I think most of the faculty, I'm sure, you know, have no conception of what you are talking about, about the need for opening up the diversity of the students who have to get acclimated. They come from different backgrounds. We just take it for

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granted to come into college, to be able to do. Not so [affirmative]. You know, they had to be worked, but, not to, that's--.

IRG ([40:24](#)):

But that's what I want to say is that your question was, where do I see? And I think that that's where I think it's important for us to continue to realize that as difficult as it is for all sorts of students, regardless of the background, to really have a sense of belonging that I think that that's the important piece is that the support services is not just the student in the classroom, but it's also all of what is provided to them separately. And this is where I have a huge plug for all of the offices in student academic support services, which is the Center for Advising Academic Services, the Learning Center, the Center for Student Athlete Enhancement, the Registrars, the Center for Multicultural Affairs, you know, but these are specific support services under the academic affairs. And there's a whole set of foundation that all of our offices provide our students and that work with students as they then go onto the classes. And I think that that's an area that we, as an institution need to realize is that yes, it is important to have a lot, all of the student affairs areas in reference to the activities and the social wellbeing of the students. But that many times though the support of them truly understanding, because even students who are not first-generation college students, they don't understand the difference between a pathway. And what's the difference between, you know, a minor and a major? And you know, how is this all going to be put together for me to not only be satisfied and have a sense of belonging academically in this institution and wanting to do research and wanting to go on to grad school and wanting to apply to, you know, the Fulbright or the Gilman or all these fellowships, but the importance of really interconnecting all of this and the value of it, not only on an academic and professional level, but even on a personal level as well.

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GN ([42:51](#)):

Tell me this, how does Marist compare or how does this problem exist at Fordham, Villanova, Fairfield, you know, you go around the other, are they aware of the same situation? Do you talk to anybody in those places?

IRG ([43:10](#)):

No, I don't. No, I don't. I don't have the time [laughs].

GN ([43:13](#)):

Do they exist?

IRG ([43:14](#)):

They probably do exist. I do have to say that I am very involved in the HEOP professionalization. I'm actually the regional representative for the Mid-Hudson region. And so on a monthly basis, I do meet with our board and it's regional reps from all over the state.

GN ([43:34](#)):

How many colleges are involved in that?

IRG ([43:35](#)):

In HEOP there's currently fifty-two programs, but, the executive board is primarily the regional representatives and then our board. So our president of the professor organization is at Cornell.

GN ([43:53](#)):

Where at the Mount?

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IRG ([43:54](#)):

Cornell.

JS ([43:54](#)):

But the Mount has a chapter?

IRG ([43:59](#)):

Correct, Yes. Here in, in the Mid Hudson region, Mount St. Mary has an HEOP, Bard has an HEOP, and Marist. So there's only three.

GN ([44:09](#)):

Vassar doesn't have one?

IRG ([44:09](#)):

No Vassar never has had one. No, and Culinary used to have one, but they, they stopped theirs years ago. Like in 1995, former Governor Pataki tried to eliminate HEOP programs and he didn't fund us. And so many colleges left HEOP, having programs since then.

JS ([44:33](#)):

I think we probably have time for only one more question. You better pick your favorite.

GN ([44:39](#)):

Well, and we kind of touched on already about the crystal ball, you know, where will we be ten years from now?

IRG ([44:46](#)):

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Well, I think Marist is very much in the sense that, you know, we've seen our international population triple, if not quadruple in the last five, you know, five, ten years. Marist because we want to make sure that we keep up with the times and reference to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Obviously, we've done a couple of different changes. I mean, in 2009, 2008, the answer to try and answer the middle state question and the strategic plan question about diversity, the center was created, but there really wasn't any influence of me as director on policy issues. Then later on, in the transition of Dr. Dennis Murray being president, the years of Dr. Yellen, he then created the position that now Dr. Addrian Conyers holds, which is director of academic, inclusion, diversity and inclusion. He also had created a temporary assistant to the president on diversity, which was Freddie Garcia, former HEOP graduate. But once Freddie left and that was kind of put on hold. And then now with Dr. Weinman coming on board who comes from institutions where diversity and inclusion was pretty much part of the makeup. Now next year, there's going to be a vice president of diversity, equity, and inclusion. So, I would say that I don't know what's going to happen. I am hoping that this institution, by giving the commitment to create a position of power that has to do with this topic. That indeed everybody is, is going to be in a buy-in.

GN ([46:52](#)):

Yeah.

JS ([46:53](#)):

That's a strong message.

JS ([46:54](#)):

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You take five minutes. You, I, another big one, we're going to be at another time for now about Marist Brothers and the institution and all of that. But, you must have a small question to ask to end with.

JS ([47:10](#)):

Well, there's an online profile of you. That's just wonderful.

IRG ([47:15](#)):

Which one? Because, last year, one of our students--.

JS ([47:19](#)):

On the Record, maybe.

IRG ([47:20](#)):

Gave me the privilege of nominating me for the record. Okay.

JS ([47:26](#)):

In that, you're quoted as saying, "the HEOP program for the fifty-two years that has been on the Marist campus has really met the mission of the Marist brothers." And I've heard you talking a lot about the sense of belonging and what is in the Marist mission statement about a sense of community. Is there anything else that you want to draw our attention to in terms of how the HEOP program brings to life the Marist brothers mission?

IRG ([47:54](#)):

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Well, the way I understand the mission of the Marist Brothers is to really help those that need an opportunity. And, that's what HEOP is about.

GN ([48:06](#)):

It was founded to teach, yeah, a country of children, really, who had no other way to learn about God and in learning about God, we were teaching math first, and spelling, and then by the way, there is a God, oh, you know, so make sure that they, we get that in. Yeah. But the other part of it is a certain sense of, to live, living in a hard unknown in the world. And there's not me, you know, it's the institution. That is the important part of it. You know, I have to, I have to be part of a team, you know, I'm not, I'm not a performer out here for myself, applaud me. It's, let me help do what the college is supposed to be doing. You know, I think that you got into it very well. I mean, granted, well, we even take females now into the Marist tradition. I mean, the longest time it was a male operated institution [affirmative]. And even now, I mean, women dominate here [affirmative] in several levels, you know, intellectually, first of all, and administration--.

JS ([49:13](#)):

And the numbers, the student numbers.

GN ([49:14](#)):

Yeah. And the numbers require--.

JS ([49:16](#)):

Are we 70/30?

IRG ([49:18](#)):

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I think so. Yeah. I think so. And I think that that's one of the areas that, you know, my staff and I, we really emphasize the fact that we want to make sure that our students, regardless of whether they're HEOP or they're in our academic enrichment program, is that they really understand that this opportunity is an important one for them. [Affirmative] And so, being able to see students that come to Marist and do well for themselves, they're trailblazers, but there's so many of our students that come here and all of a sudden there's new opportunities that are open to them. And the giving back, I think that that's the piece that-- all of our students have to take a career planning class, and one of the, the assignments is for them to interview an alum that is in the career that they want. And I never have any problems in getting at least twenty-five to thirty alums to say, yes, give my name, I'll be interviewed. And many of them try to continue. I call on, you know, any of our alums and I always have a good number that not only are willing to help our students within our department, but many of our students have been, again in other leadership positions, like President Murray had three fellows and two, no, yeah. Two, no four fellows, presidential fellows, because the first one was Dr. Opie's wife, then the next three, they were all HEOP or CMA students.

GN ([51:14](#)):

Wow.

IRG ([51:14](#)):

Like Eddie Summers--.

JS ([51:15](#)):

Eddie summers.

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IRG ([51:15](#)):

Freddie Garcia. And then Mark Palmer, which started with Dr. Murray and I'm really happy that Dr. Weinman is going to continue the fellowship. He's a academic enrichment scholar, he's from California. So, I've been proud to see that our students-- there was at one point that when I looked around campus, there was about fourteen of our graduates that were working here at Marist.

JS ([51:41](#)):

Wow.

IRG ([51:43](#)):

And it was really nice to go to meetings and look around the table. And number one, there was diversity. I was no longer the one and only person of an underrepresented background. So, it was nice to see diversity, but it was also nice to see that, wow, look at this. These were the students that, you know, just a couple of years ago were students, and now they're in leadership positions.

JS ([52:09](#)):

Is Doug Dogwin (?) one of yours?

IRG ([52:11](#)):

No.

JS ([52:12](#)):

Okay.

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IRG ([52:12](#)):

But, for a while there, we had, you know, Lu Santiago, Julio Torres.

JS ([52:18](#)):

Yeah.

IRG ([52:19](#)):

Melinda Martinez.

JS ([52:22](#)):

Yeah.

IRG ([52:22](#)):

Now we still have Dwayne Douglas. You know, so there's, there's so many that, that have been able to be here and to see that not only did they like being at Marist, but they actually like the area. And you know, now they're working here.

JS ([52:47](#)):

So, a question that we often ask is what kept you at Marist? What was the glue? I can kind of tell that what you're just talking about has to be part of it. You're so pleased.

IRG ([52:57](#)):

Okay.

JS ([52:57](#)):

To see that success.

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IRG ([52:59](#)):

It was one of those things when, and it's interesting because I remember I discussed this with a peer of mine, and he told me I became a better director since I became a parent [affirmative].

And for me it was the opposite. I was director before I had kids. And I actually was able to draw a lot of knowledge on how to raise kids by working with the students, and so when God blessed me with all my, I don't have a lot, I only have a son and a set of twin daughters, and a mother-in-law that unfortunately has passed since. It was the way that together, the staff that I had in the department, probably the supervisor I had at the time, that I didn't have to choose between being a full-time person and a parent. I also am blessed with an amazing husband [laugh] that it, you know the rearing and the taking care of extended family is not just one person's responsibility, but both of ours. And so, I think that it was being able to have the support at home, but also being able to know that the work that I was doing was making a difference, not only for one individual, but probably for many families. And, one of my biggest prides is to be able to say that when we go back to our roster of graduates, there's been maybe a little bit more than ten, twelve families that have sent their students to year to Marist and they-- all of their children are graduates. And so, it only didn't only make a difference for that individual. It made a difference for that entire family. And so, I think that passion, to be able to tangibly see how opening an opportunity for these students, you know, really created a different world for them. It's really exciting to see in LinkedIn, you know, where everybody is. And again, you know, being able to connect back and see that I'm blessed that they choose to come back and say hello. And that you could see that they're still doing well. And so being able to not only do that, but also what I taught my own children because they were behind the scenes seeing what was going on. And since I had them, while I was here, during the summer programs, we have cultural dinners. And

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so usually the staff-- we come and join with the students and our families. And so, the students are able to see the human side of us. And so my children, you know, grew up--.

JS ([56:18](#)):

Grew up here.

IRG ([56:18](#)):

Seeing--.

JS ([56:20](#)):

One daughter came here?

IRG ([56:20](#)):

Two, my son came here and one of my daughters, the other one went to Manhattan College to her dad's alma mater because she wanted engineering.

GN ([56:30](#)):

You got it. Yeah. Well, we have to continue soon.

JS ([56:34](#)):

Yes. We've come to the end of our time together. This has been wonderful. We're very grateful to you for this commitment of time and--.

IRG ([56:41](#)):

Oh, you're welcome.

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JS ([56:42](#)):

For all you've done for the college.

IRG ([56:44](#)):

Oh, you're welcome. And thank you. This actually went a different way that I thought, and I appreciate your questions and allowing me to share this piece.

GN ([56:52](#)):

We couldn't stop you [laugh].

IRG ([56:56](#)):

I know I'm a little bit too much of a talker.

JS ([56:58](#)):

No, no, this is what we love. I thank you very, very much.