



Titan Talks Webinar Series
Activism and Advocacy in the Latinx Community

Adriane Powell: Hello and welcome to the Illinois Wesleyan University Titan Talks Webinar Series! I am Adriane Powell, Director of Alumni Engagement and I am so pleased that you all are joining us today for this series of Titan Talks. These last few months we have turned our focus to creating dialogues that cause us to reflect on the inequities and injustices targeting the Black community by exploring topics such as institutional policies, the history of systemic racism in the U.S., personal experiences involving race, violence against Black men, and allies from white and Latinx communities. Through these Titan Talks and other programs, the Office of Alumni Engagement is committed to deepening our understanding of social justice issues. I want to express my deep gratitude for my partner-in-crime, Hannah Mesouani, Director of the Office of Diversity and Inclusion. We have had meaningful conversations while planning these discussions and her insight and assistance are immeasurable.

Hannah Mesouani: Thank you, Adriane! We at the Office of Diversity and Inclusion are excited to be partnering with you today - and next week for our panel on White Allyship on the 28th at noon. It is truly an honor to be part of these critical conversations which will continue throughout the semester for our faculty, staff, students, and alumni. Now for some housekeeping items. Most importantly, I want to make sure everyone is aware that this will be presented entirely in Spanish. It was important to provide our Latinx alumni and community members with space where they can speak comfortably together. A transcript will be shared in the next few days. During the webinar, all guests are muted, however, you are welcome to participate through the chat. There will be a brief Q&A after the conversation. Please use the chat tool to send any questions you may have and the moderator will try to get to as many as possible.

And now, I'd like to turn it over to Yesenia Martinez Calderon, Class of 2020, who will be leading the discussion.

Yesenia Martinez-Calderon: Good afternoon to all of you in attendance. As Hannah mentioned, my name is Yesenia Martinez-Calderon. I recently graduated this past May 2020, and I have the honor and privilege of being here with you. I want to introduce one of the first presenters that will be speaking today. Her name is Melissa Ramirez.

Melissa Ramirez '14 is a Chicana graduate of 2014, Psychology major with Hispanic Studies minor, originally from Los Angeles, CA. Today, she is an Admissions Counselor at Illinois State University as well as a graduate student in the College Student Personnel Administration program at ISU. She is very involved within the Bloomington-Normal community primarily working with Latina/o/x first generation students. She works within her community with Conexiones Latinas, a non-profit organization. She is dedicated to bringing awareness and access to higher education for young adults as well as advocacy for career opportunities. Coming from a similar background, she is able to connect with students and their families to help provide tools for access to higher education.

M: Hello everyone! I'm very happy to be here and talk about many topics that we're going to cover today in our conversation.

Y: Next, I have the honor of introducing Citlalli Gonzalez.

Citlalli Gonzalez '18 grew up in the western suburbs of Chicago before deciding to attend Illinois Wesleyan. A daughter of Mexican immigrants, she was the first person in her family to attend, and graduate from, college. She earned her bachelor's degree in International Studies with an Asian Studies concentration and a minor in Political Science. She was a Community Outreach Specialist for the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC) in the Morton Community College District. Her experiences at IWU and her work with ISAC inspired her to pursue a master's degree in Educational Leadership with a Higher Education concentration. Citlalli is currently an ENLACE fellow at Northeastern Illinois University. She aspires to work in student affairs in order to promote diversity and inclusion for students who identify as part of underrepresented groups in higher education.

C: Hello and good afternoon to all. I'm looking at the list of those in attendance and I see many familiar names, so hello to everyone that I know and it's a pleasure to be here with you.

Y: The last person that I have the privilege to introduce is Tristan Gunn.

Tristan Gunn graduated from Illinois Wesleyan in 2004 and is currently a partner at the law office of Tapia-Ruano and Gunn PC in downtown Chicago, IL. He has practiced immigration law for the past 8 years and is presently an active member of

the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA), Chicago Bar Association (CBA) and the Hispanic Lawyers Association of Illinois (HLAI). He graduated from DePaul University College of Law in 2011 and is a member of the Law School's Diversity Council that reports directly to the dean on efforts in diversity, inclusion, equity and antiracism at the College of Law. Mr. Gunn is fluent in Spanish, having obtained a Diploma of Language Certification from the school of Encuentros in the State of Morelos in Mexico in 2004.

T: Good afternoon and it's a pleasure to be here.

Y: Today we have prepared questions and points of discussion. If at any point anyone has a question they want to ask or talk about an experience please let me know. The first question that I have and I think it's important is what does a successful allyship look like?

M: A successful allyship needs to begin with one's own acknowledgment of our failures. It's important to acknowledge our privileges but also knowing our failures in terms of which groups do we make racist comments to or assign certain prejudices to. It's important to recognize those failures to be able to say "Okay, I have made mistakes but I've also learned lessons". The next step would be from an educational standpoint and that is a project that will never end because there's always something to learn when it comes to culture and experiences from different people. For example, since I work closely with students, it has been a privilege to learn about the different battles and circumstances that students have overcome. I have learned to adjust my prejudice and know how to correct them to be a more effective professional and be able to do this work with the students.

C: I agree with Melissa. It is also recognizing when people like your friends or family say something that they think is not racist or bad. It's important to tell them your perspective about what they said, that it is not right and that it can hurt people. For example, I work in high schools, and I've noticed that there are many young Latinos that think it's fine to say the n-word and when I tell them that they cannot say that word, they constantly argue with me and tell me that their black friends say it's ok for them to use it. AWhen I tell them it is not right and teach them the history of the word they still do not believe me. It is my responsibility to educate them because I know where they come from and I understand why they think it is okay but I know that it isn't, so it is acknowledging that you will be the person who stands up and says what is not right in order to help the community.

T: This is a broad question and so I will give a broad answer. There are opportunities to provide specific examples but the answer to the question here is that it depends on the situation, the people in the situation and what level of power those people possess. It takes a lot of listening, reading, and paying attention to cultures and the

world outside of your own. You might have an experience to share but often it's not your voice that needs to be heard by the community. It is the voice of the victims that need to be heard in this situation.

Y: Yes, I agree, Mr. Gunn. It is an answer that depends on the situation and it's impossible to give a concrete answer for every person and so sometimes an overarching perspective is necessary. But a similar question to the one I asked is how do you practice allyship without taking too much energy from yourself? Or what strategies or what do you use to be an ally during this time?

M: In my line of work with colleges, it's important for me to know that there will not always be acknowledgement of what I'm doing. For me it's more important to know that the work that I'm doing for the students and the changes that I'm making for them is the focus of attention. Knowing that they feel safe and heard and that they know that they have a space for them in the institutions that they're in. For the majority of the students of diverse backgrounds it's important for them to feel seen in those institutions. It's important to help them organize, listen to them, and direct them to the right people that will help make those changes within the institutions. My work has always been everything so it's important to do it correctly and make those changes for the students and the students of the future. We are adapting to the changes that will come.

C: It is accepting that I don't know everything and that I will not always know what to say or do, but accepting that I need to hear more from the members of the community that suffer these injustices. Listening to their stories is acknowledging that they're not just for one person. Often it is not just a personal problem but rather a systemic problem, so listening, learning and thinking about what I can do to be able to help the community. Right now I'm starting with one person but in the long run I'm taking the steps to help more people.

T: Can I hear the question one more time?

Y: What are some examples of actions that allies should take now?

T: Bring attention to racist behavior in groups of family, friends, and professional settings. Pay close attention to racist comments no matter where you are. It's not the same as saying that you are paying attention but then you end up responding angrily. It's important to think about your response before giving it because being mad does not help your message. It's better to think about how to talk to that group and how we can change their mentality. I will revisit this point in more detail later when I answer other questions. It's important to attend community events that aim to educate the public about racism and injustice. Attending professional events is very important for me, especially to attend events where you know that there will be

a diverse group. Read articles, newspapers, books. There is a lot of information out there especially at the university. During my time at IWU I received so much help to understand this topic outside of my personal experience.

Y: Yes, very true. We have the advantage of graduating from IWU and they taught us the way in which the liberal arts help us act in these situations. Another question is how do you invite white people to the conversation? Sometimes we all have different spaces where we work and when I introduced you I mentioned that you work in spaces with non-Hispanics, Blacks, and Asians. So how do you invite white people to join you?

M: Well as my mom says, "Food should never be missing." and that is a huge tradition for everyone, not just Latinos. I work in an industry that is predominantly white so, it's important that I feel confident and know who my allies are even though there are people that I would not recognize as allies. It is important to sit down with them and talk during the lunch hour. When there are gatherings, I bring traditionally Mexican dishes so that they can start learning about the experiences that I have lived and from there say, "Ok, we have eaten and have talked but now let's talk about more important and serious topics". For example if we work in healthcare, let's talk about how racism affects other cultures that are not white in the healthcare industry or education. It doesn't have to be a global conversation, it can be something that is directly affecting the work that you as professionals are doing. So for example, my mom works in cleaning and she doesn't meet many people, or used to work, she used to work in cleaning. She tried to start those conversations with her coworkers and help them understand that the demonstrations that young adults are attending in the big cities are being done for these reasons. They are trying to send messages that police need to make administrative changes regarding the ways they interact with people and not only with Blacks but also with Latinos. For example, for us as Latinos, if we sell fruit on the street, they take it away or they damage it or they arrest us because they think we are undocumented. So there is a huge value to making these conversations happen within your unit and say these are the experiences and that is why this is happening in the world. You are talking to people that understand you in your industry but you can start with something as simple as food, by bringing something. As Tristan said, it is about doing something that is not aggressive or angry but is valid to have those feelings. However, they don't take you anywhere without first starting the conversation in a specific way. At least that's my opinion.

C: Can you repeat the question ... I have problems with my internet and I don't think I heard the whole question?

Y: How do you invite white people to the conversation?

C: It's difficult because sometimes I think that they are scared. They identify themselves as allies, right? They say "I don't want to talk about you but rather I want you to say what you need to say." But sometimes I notice that they have a fear of sharing their opinion because they think that they will say something wrong and we are going to attack them by saying "No, what you said is racist. I can't believe that you said that." But as Melissa and Tristan said, it's not about being mad and I have demonstrated to allies that if they say something wrong I will tell them in order to educate them. I say something like "What you said is not right and this is why..." It's about having that trust with them and say from the beginning that I will tell you if you say something wrong and I will do it nicely because we are friends. I know that you are trying to help and we need you in this conversation because if it's just us talking we are all just complaining about the same problem and unfortunately we don't have the power. The more people we have in the fight is a good strategy because they have trust in us, they understand more about themselves and learn how to be better allies.

T: I have advantages here that a lot of people don't have. Yes, I am Latino. My mom was born in Cuba. All my mom's family was born in Cuba and all of them are immigrants. I am an immigration attorney, so that's the community where I live and work. That does not change that I am a white passing man so there are places where I can talk and I'm not going to experience the same kind of reaction or resistance that other people of color or women will experience. So for me, or those who look like me, it's just a question of wanting to talk about this topic. First do so with family, friends, and other professionals. It's not common for me to find a situation where people will not show me respect or at least give me the space to say what I want to say. [And that is a privilege] That is a great advantage for me. For others, it is more complicated and there is so much more to think about and work for, just like the other two women here were explaining. It's first having the will to have these conversations, to be patient not to look at it as if you are going to win or to create a fight. People will respond better if they think that you are genuine. If you just go in there and speak to the other person as if they have no idea what they are talking about and you will explain everything, just because you may be right, that is not the way to change the opinion of another person and the whole point is to change [a mindset], to put in the time, to be patient, and to be there to talk.

M: I think the point of not winning is important because if that is the purpose, no one really wins because the conversation gets interrupted completely. That has been the big problem because someone wants to have a louder voice than the other person and we are then fighting against each other. That happens in my family where they see things that are happening to Latinos and no one says anything. Then they kill a Black person and all these demonstrations happen. So for my family, we'll tell them "The purpose is not to have Blacks against Latinos because we all lose." I also tried to explain it to my brother using white people of low socioeconomic status as an

example, because they are white but they are poor like us. We were poor at one point so it's not about dividing us due to the color of our skin but we should unite based on our experiences and it's not about how someone has it worse than the other, like "Oppression Olympics", that one has been more oppressed than the other. When we start doing that we start to become divided and the conversation is not going to go anywhere. It's about uniting and finding that commonality where everyone has common ground.

Y: Yes, well said, Melissa. Typically in these conversations we talk about how the adults and professionals can navigate these conversations but we all were young at some point, so how would you navigate the conversation if you were talking to a younger self? What strategies would you give to the young people that return home after college and have a new perspective? Not that one is better than the other, but perhaps you have a better understanding. Do you have strategies for young adults that want to have conversations but end up fighting with their mother or father who aren't listening to you?

M: My mom said to me when the protests were going on, "Are you going to go to the protest? Every time this happens you become angry". The normal reaction is anger for everything that is happening. You reach a point where you realize that the injustices are there and they can't be ignored anymore. I don't have the right answer because I think that everyone is different. I think that my mom understands me but my brother disagrees. I think he does so to play with me but I don't know if that is the experience for everyone. My mom wants to learn and she has questions that I think are valid but that are not always productive. It makes a difference knowing when a question is productive and when it is just a disagreement. It is important to know when to remove yourself and think about what you said and come back to discuss further because if we are advocating and then we leave, nothing gets resolved. The first step is to give yourself a moment of peace, by removing yourself from the situation by going to your room or walking your dog and then come back and say "Okay, I thought about what you said so let's talk." Secondly it's important to turn off the tv. Here in the U.S. Univision and Telemundo are the only two Spanish speaking networks for our parents. I know that they have a lot of important information but it's also important to talk to our parents about the context of what is reported, using our own resources. Our education allows us to provide context about what is being reported because my mom will only hear the headline and that's it. She's not going to ask any other questions so it's important to facilitate that conversation.

C: I like that you mentioned Univision, Melissa, because I have gotten into fights with my family because of those reports. When the recent Black Lives Matter protests were happening, there were more reports about the violence than about the peaceful protests. I asked why they always report on the violence and looting of

Hispanic owned businesses. I pointed out that yes, this is happening but there's another side to the story. This affects how you see these people when the story is changed to focus on the protests that ruined the Latino businesses. My family was not happy that I was saying bad things about Univision, because we all grew up watching Univision. When you trust the reporters you want to believe everything that they're saying. They were not saying anything bad or incorrect but the way in which they were reporting was not right. When I talk to my family I try to discuss the videos on Primer Impacto. The other day there was a black couple and the police threw them on the floor and I asked "Why did they throw them on the floor when they hadn't even done anything?" My family said "Maybe they killed someone" and I said "But do you know that? Do you know if they killed someone?" The reason isn't mentioned on the show, so you just assume something negative happened. Don't you realize that this is not how a person should be arrested and that these actions should not be legal? This ties back to the conversation about the police system in this country. Not that all the cops are bad but the system is corrupt. How is it possible that a cop can grab a human being, throw him on the floor, put a knee on his neck and kill him. That shouldn't even happen even if he does have a criminal record. No one should decide when someone dies. We are not God and especially in Latino families where the majority are very religious. We should understand that.

T: There are two options to respond to that situation in my opinion, which are a short game and a long game. As Citlali and Melissa have mentioned, by reading articles with information to educate your families and discussions with strength and patience to explain that you can understand that this is your position and belief but here is additional information and alternative opinions. Regularly take the time to continue this conversation with your family to share this information. I know it's your family but maybe you will gain something small out of that conversation. The long game is when people can talk with those who are experiencing this situation. If you don't have a circle of friends that are black or people of color, I recommend including more friends into your life. The point is that you expand your circle of culture with these relationships, and you will start to understand other people's lives. When you begin introducing these people to your friends and family, they can see and understand the reality of people's situations that are not within their usual circle.

Y: Yes, I understand most of these experiences. Tristan, I like your point about tokenizing individuals that are not necessarily in our lives to teach, but rather they are in our lives to understand that the way one lives in this country is different depending on the color of your skin or your socioeconomic status. In the Spanish speaking and Latino community it is necessary, particularly right now with everything that is happening in the world. We have a question from the audience and I'm going to try to translate. How can we support the students that identify as Latinos who feel that they're taking up too much space or they are taking someone's voice away when they try to talk about anti-Black racism? Can we as a Spanish

speaking community or Latinos come up with ways in which we can have a discussion about racism that is anti-black but at the same time not take the focus away from the current movement?

M: It is important to talk about both equally because you're not taking the spotlight away from either conversation. If we're talking about the assassination of Vanessa Guillen, the young lady in Fort Hood and we're talking about the events that happened with George Floyd at the same time we are not taking the spotlight away from either. We are recognizing the importance to discuss both circumstances simultaneously, focusing on what is happening systematically. If that's the focus of the conversations it's productive and you're not prioritizing one over the other because the root of both cases is systemic. It becomes a problem when you say what happened to her is worse than what happened to him. It's important to discuss the root of why these events happen and not be concerned about "Oppression Olympics".

C: As Tristan said it's about inviting people to talk about racism against Black people. If you can talk to your Black friends and tell them that you will defend them and be there for them but that you don't know how without making comparisons about what is happening to each group. I don't want to take the spotlight away from what is happening to you, and I want to know how we can work together to know how to help us. I want to convey that my fight is your fight and that all of us should be in this together. At the end of the day the system is still corrupt and we have to work together to know how to solve those systemic problems so if there is a Latino that says they want to help but don't know how, maybe we can start with someone from that community to ask and they can give examples such as inviting them to a protest, church or specific event.

T: I'm still taking a little time to understand what is meant when students say that they're taking too much space. Where? In school? In personal life? In what way?

Y: Students might think that the conversations are not focusing on anti-black racism in comparison to conversations that are about what is currently happening. In what way can we support the student that may feel that they might not be talking enough about anti-racism.

T: If we are talking about conversations at Illinois Wesleyan, I think that it's easier to give a recommendation because groups already exist. There are groups for Latinos and groups for the black community. I don't remember what the specific groups are called now but those groups do exist so if they are not receiving enough help there are existing organizations where you can offer that help. Both groups are important and they have a lot of connections between them. I still can't understand why those

groups don't understand that they are fighting the same challenges in this world and community. At times there are fights between them. It's best not to not try to control a group with your help or make comparisons. We are not victims of this type of racism so we should be there listening and being present. I can understand, especially as a lawyer, that willingness to talk because a lot of us think that is the only way to take action but I recommend that it's enough to just show up and listen.

Y: It is important to mention that Alpha Psi Lambda has started an affiliated chapter at Illinois Wesleyan and it's one of the first Greek organizations that is Latino. Maybe it can be an organization that other students can participate in. We have a good question from one of the Hispanic Studies professors. Taking into consideration everything that you have said about educating others, what type of educational experiences would you like to have had at IWU that you didn't have as students. Specific classes about leadership, for example.

M: It's been about six years since I graduated but I always have said there are certain classes that I would like to have had at the university when I was a student, not just in English but also in Spanish. Leadership classes are very important. I was always a leader when I was in school but everything that I did was in part without guidance. I was learning and practicing along the way and I never had guidance from an advisor. I was learning just by doing it, so to have the opportunity to have those conversations in Spanish would have been beneficial. I also had the opportunity to connect with the Bloomington-Normal community when I was a student, so much of what I learned wasn't in school. I learned from working at Western Avenue Community Center and directly with the after school program. Much of what I learned during these conversations were realized in my work. Leadership classes, history classes, Chicano history, stories of revolutions in Latin America, but there's much more to learn about Latin American history that parallels with what is happening in the U.S. and how young adults can be part of these movements. I know that things are going to adapt but there are things that I didn't learn until after graduating because I'm working with students who are Latino, Chicano and African American. I'm not saying that Hispanic Studies should teach all those courses but it would be good to have more of those courses offered that include that history.

C: I want to start with a shoutout for Dr. Ferradans. Hi! Thank you for your question. I had a few experiences at IWU in which this was the objective but not necessarily everything that was needed. Even though there are classes that did discuss these issues in sociology, anthropology and Spanish classes, but not completely what I needed. I was also a student leader on campus and, similar to Melissa, without a guide. Everything that I knew was due to Melissa or someone from ODI (the Office of Diversity and Inclusion). There was always someone in ODI that tried to help me but there were also other opportunities for other members of the community that helped. There were many times that we would have to deal with the budget to plan

our events and we weren't experts in how to manage but that was a skill that we were learning. It would have been better if there was a class, a seminar or event where we could go and learn how to do that for the student leaders but also for the community. Many of us are first generation, and we didn't learn those skills in high school. Our parents are learning at the same time so there are a lot of things that an institution of liberal arts can provide for the students. It is not just about talking to the students about their needs but what can we do for you? And how can we help get you to that level to make you more well rounded. There is a balance to being good students but also contributing members of this community.

T: For me this is the easiest question in this experience today because I was thinking about this last night. I think about the class that was the most important for me during my time at Illinois Wesleyan and that was a May Term class called Urban Studies. May Term classes are a final class where you can take trips to Paris, England or other fantastic place to enjoy and learn. This class for me was Urban Studies and our group went to Chicago to live for a month. The class focused on the history of the people of Chicago, including immigration and segregated communities. It was a fantastic experience with books that we read and discussed. We learned about different social organizations and met with leaders about their experiences and current projects. It was a class that I recommend to everyone. I was very happy to take it because I now work in Chicago and know more about history and experiences in these communities where I live.

Y: Unfortunately I don't think it is still offered but it is a great opportunity and I think that someday perhaps the university can offer it again. If you want to come back and get your Masters or Doctorate to be a professor you can teach it. I want to thank you for participating in this meeting. I don't even know what to say because I don't know if it's a meeting or a conversation, but I want to thank you all for your honesty and the opportunity to give answers about topics that affect us all, not just the Spanish speaking community. Adriane, would you like to close out the session?

Closing Remarks

Adriane: Thanks to you all for engaging in this important conversation. Thanks also to those of you who joined us for this special series of Titan Talks. You will be receiving an email with a survey in the next few days, so we would appreciate your feedback.

Join us for our next Titan Talk - "White Allyship and Solidarity: How to Be Part of the Solution Against Anti-Black Racism" on July 28 at noon. For additional information and registration, be sure to visit the link on the screen.

Everyone, please stay safe, healthy and vigilant.