# Health and Human Science Matters Season 2, Episode 1: Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: I think CSU has a better approach to emphasizing what a land grant mission is. For me in particular, I think it's the access piece and engagement piece is making sure that we provide access to the people that probably doesn't have the means to get a higher education. Just resonate to me because like I mentioned early on, I am a first generation student and the reason I am where I am is because there were opportunities given to me. So that access piece is really important for people like me that at one point another even they have the best capabilities, but they don't have the resources.

Avery Martin: Welcome to Health and Human Science Matters, a podcast by Colorado State University's College of Health and Human Sciences. I'm your cohost and digital media strategist, Avery Martin.

Matt Hickey: And I'm Matt Hickey, associate Dean for research and graduate studies. In our college we make at our mission to optimize human health and wellbeing through discovery and innovation. Don't just take our word for it. Each episode we sit down with people who fulfill that mission, our college faculty and staff. And today we're lucky enough to have a friend from construction management. Rudolfo Vasquez.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yes, correct. Rodolfo Valdez Vasquez.

Matt Hickey: Thank you very much. Perfect. Welcome.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yeah, so no, thank you for having me. I'm excited to be part of this conversation and trying to do my best to make sure that everybody knows a little bit what we do here in the college and in construction management.

Matt Hickey: That's great. Perfect. And I'm really earnest when I say your best is just sharing who you are. We want to get to know you as a person and we want to get to know you as a scholar and we tend to do that the other way around. Talk about, show me your CV, and what's your latest publication, and what have you. And we want to blend a little bit of both. I'm going to start with a question about the big idea or ideas or problems that inform your scholarship, then we're going to get into some other questions. So talk to us about big ideas.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: In terms of my research areas, I normally focus on sustainable development, which bring me to sustainable construction design. Those are the areas I am focusing on right now. And definitely part of that looks into the pedagogy approach of teaching some of these concepts to the new generation with students and getting other perspective, part of these bigger problems. I think when I think about sustainability in general, I think about having challenging problems that we are facing currently related to climate change, energy efficiency, and getting people involved in these projects from a equity perspective too. So these problems is impossible to be solved by just one person. So I normally try to work with group of people that help me to figure out some of those solutions and bringing always a system thinking approach and also bringing different perspective. I think that's kind of one of the unique parts of sometimes my research is making sure that we bring other point of views when we are looking at these bigger challenges.

Matt Hickey: So well said. And there's so much to unpack here. When we talk about big problems, you're talking about a big one. It touches every family, every community as far as east is from west. It's a global problem. So there's no need to oversell it. It's a real significant issue for humanity at large. The other piece I love is how you weave your scholarship into the classroom with your lead in. It's not like I do this and oh, by the way I teach, but there's this wonderful interconnectedness to it and I just think that that's worth.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yeah, I'm probably the people listening to these too, my might be familiar with. Yeah, we normally will call scholars, but also we are teachers, we are mentors, we are mentees, we are learners because through the process of conducting research, we learn so much. And I think that's one of the beauties, the exciting part of why I decided to go back to academia instead of keep working in the industry is that opportunity of keep learning a different way, sometimes a systematic way that has been really not only sometimes challenging, but also really exciting to have that opportunity to be a learner in that process and help others people.

Matt Hickey: Agree. I mean that's one of the things I love the most about the academy is the learn together approach, whether that's in the classroom or with collaborators who can help us reframe our thinking. Sometimes give us a little bit of extra energy. Sometimes you get different perspectives and the solutions are broader in scope.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: And yeah, like I say, most of my research focus on sustainability and that's kind of the key. Because we don't know everything and we always probably going to be missing something. So having that open mind to bring other people and challenges when we are looking at solving these problems or just asking the question, I think sometimes we just need to start with that. What is the questions we need to be asking and how that questions need to be answered, that sort of things. So I know that goes more into the scholarship piece, but yeah, I think that's the exciting part too.

Avery Martin: Well said. For sure. So tell us about your journey. When you think about your educational trajectory over the course of the course decades, for all of us, significant influences, whether this have been family members, it may have been mentors along the way in terms of the educational pathway. Talk to us about moments, touchstones, mentors along the way that helped you get to where you are today.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Oh my God, that's a big question.

Avery Martin: It is a big question.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: I'm fitting all around here, but just thinking about it. So just a little bit of background about myself. I grew up in a low income neighborhood in Panama City, Panama. So that's where I originally from. My mom was a single mom, so she has three kids. So she have to provide for three kids. And I'm the youngest one.

I think the reason I mentioned this is because the first person I always think about my journey is my mother. Why is that? Is because she sacrificed a lot of things for making sure that we, her childrens were successful and she didn't have the means to go to college. So I am a first generation student to go to college. And I never really consider what that means at all through my career, probably until when I got to CSU. And that's one of the things I really like about CSU, celebrating first generation students.

But going back to the question is one of the stepping points of thinking about my journey is my mother, because she sacrificed so much. She always said, "The only thing I can give you is education, but you need to study." So I took that as an opportunity. We didn't have anything else, and so we just need to make sure we were successful.

So moving forward when I was in high school, I also have good teachers. I still remember my chemistry teacher, my physics teacher, they were amazing and they brought to me the passion for science and probably engineering at that point, even if we didn't call it engineering. But when I have to struggle deciding to go into an architectural field or an engineering field, because that's the field I decided to go, I have those conversations with those mentors and I didn't have that conversation with my mother.

Actually my mother, her passion was for me to be a medical doctor. That was always she was reinforcing that, "I want you to be a medical doctor." Definitely that was not me at all. I really didn't like that feel, which has so many beautiful things to do. But that was not for me. I was really clear about that since early days.

So anyhow, so my high school teachers were really influential for me deciding where to go. I did a pretty good job in high school. So at the end of my graduation I got a scholarship. So I got a chance to get a scholarship to study civil engineering. That was the field that I decided to do. And then I have to say the first year always was a struggle for me. I didn't have the same resources that some of my peers, but at the same time, I have the opportunity to be part of a group because there were a couple of us that have the same scholarship.

So we got together pretty quickly. So we became a group to support each other. So that was nice. So that group of friends became my friends too were great for me to be successful where I am. So I still keep with some of that in touch and has been one of the beauties of being at the college level, I think compared with the high school friends that I have.

So I mean, when I was doing my degree in civil engineering, I also found really good mentors with the faculty members. One of them was really influential to me in terms of thinking about, "Hey, this is not the only thing that you can do. You need to start thinking about maybe in the future doing a master program." And he say, "Well, if you want to apply in the future for a master program in the United States, probably they're going to start looking for our research capacity that you might have."

So what about if you do a thesis project, perhaps of your undergrad. And in your program was that required to do three things. Either you do a research project, you go to professional practice for six months, or you take two courses as a master level.

Avery Martin: Oh, wow.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: So those are the requirements to graduate. So you have to pick and choose which one you want. So I decided to do the thesis route. It took me eight months, so I graduated a little bit longer compared with some of my peers. But it was pretty fun. I love it. It was a topic that at that point was something that I was passionate about highway projects. And one of the things that was key in that point was understanding that you can develop knowledge. That was something that when you're undergrad and for all the undergrads, if you start listening to this, I think that's kind of the difference when you are being looking at doing your own research projects, you're developing new ideas and you're creating knowledge. That's when I started understanding what that looks like based on that project. So what else I can tell you? Well, that was just my undergrad.

Matt Hickey: If I may, I'm just curious because I want to run with the thread of our undergrads who are going to be listening to think about this. Was the thesis a real serious option for you before you had this conversation with this mentor? Or was it an eye opening? I mean you knew I had to do one of these three things presumably, but you thinking, I'm thinking thesis and it's just a matter who I do it with. Or was there really sort of a door opening exercise by that mentor for you in some ways?

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: I think I was more leaning to the professional practice, which was working for a company for six months. We still have to do a long report about that experience. But then he was the one that first mentioned to me, "Hey, you can go and get a master's degree." And that was not in my radar at all. I was just like, okay, I finished my degree, go to work for the industry. So being an engineer, do designs or whatever.

So he was the person that kind of had that conversation with me. Even if they probably, there were other people, I noticed that they were also maybe have the same advice after I have those, because I consult with other people to see what they thought. But he was the first one. So I thought that was like, "Oh yeah, I need to have that in my record. Why not?"

Avery Martin: Exactly.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yeah. So interesting enough, I finished my degree, I'm going to start working for his consulting company. So he has a consulting company in transportation. And I did that for almost a year, I think so. But then some of my other experience when I was an undergrad is that I was a TA for a surveying class. So I was teaching the survey labs. And this happened in my second to last year. The reason I say that is because my program had five years long program besides the thesis. So it was really well structured. I got more than 200 credits in my undergrad.

So in my second to last year before graduating, another faculty member approached me and say, "We have an opening for somebody to teach the labs, the serving labs, and do you think you can do it?" And I was like, "Sure. I always need extra money as an undergrad."

And we didn't have enough resources at home to pay for books and all these other stuff. Anyhow, so I say yes to that opportunity. So I will say for the undergrad students is at one point another, somebody is going to ask you to take a chance and sometimes it's good to say yes to that opportunities. And that kind of brought me to understand, hey, I have some knowledge that I can pass to people. And that was amazing my first semester seeing the reaction from the students understanding concepts or even when some concepts were not really well understood, I had the opportunity to clarify and help them.

So that was an eye opening experience for me and-

Avery Martin: Part of something big.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yeah, so why I mentioned that is because that also ties to these other concept about doing research is like, okay, when I'm going to do my masters, I need to start thinking about how can I improve my teaching experience.

So anyhow, I started working in the industry doing consulting work. That was a lot of fun. But at one point another, it became really repetitive doing transportation studies. I was like, "Oh, I need something more." And then one day, because I was a TA when I was an undergrad, one of the faculty members in my previous institution where I got my undergrad degree, they called me, "Hey, we have an opening. Somebody is leaving. Could you teach some of these classes?" So I started teaching early on has an instructor. So I did that for four years. At the same time, there was opportunities here and there to do some research, small research projects, because they knew I like research.

Matt Hickey: But you don't get a phone call like that without being on somebody's radar screen. So you had attracted some attention, whether it's your work ethic or your excellence in the classroom?

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Well, yeah I was. When I was doing my thesis, my undergrad thesis, I also was a TA at that point because I need to pay my bills. And the research project didn't have any funding. It was just like, this is your option to graduate. So anyhow, after those four years or during that time, I also have colleagues that wear Fullbright Scholars at that institution and they say, "Hey, you should apply for the Fullbright scholarship." And I apply in my four year. I got it, I came to the United States with a Fullbright scholarship and that's the reason I have my degrees from Clemson University.

Matt Hickey: And how did you find Clemson of all the places you could... And I'm not knocking Clemson. It's a great institution.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yeah, they are great. Probably similar to CSU. I never heard from Clemson before. I applied to Fulbright and Fulbright say, "Here's a couple options that you can have because the benefits that they offer." And one of them was Clemson. So I did the check mark. I definitely did my research at that point. Internet was different. I'm getting old, like I was telling you. It was different. But I Clemson have at that point since then, a good website. It catch my attention. And that's one of the reason I did a check mark for Clemson and they offer a good package. And then one of the other things I select Clemson, is that I want to do my research related to construction safety. That was a need in the institution where I work. In the past, there was no really construction safety class. Construction industry in Panama was different at that point too, in terms of understanding what construction means.

So I was one of the probably first ones to learn more about construction safety. And Clemson have a researcher that was expert in that field. And the reason that people always ask me is the question, well, "You're a civil engineer, why you didn't go to the civil engineering department." Well, I select construction science and management because they have the expertise on construction safety at that point. But one of the things I did was to take classes above departments because I was not thinking about PhD program. But hey, keep that door open.

Matt Hickey: Sure.

Avery Martin: Yes.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: So I did my research and construction safety, looking at how construction companies develop safety plans in their organizations and what they should be including why they need to improve. So I did that project and thanks to that I kind of follow the same process after I graduate, went back home because my Fulbright requirements say you have to go back home at least for two years.

So I went home for two years and I did kind of similar approach with construction companies in Panama. So they develop... Well, we develop a series of recommendation for the companies in Panama to how to develop their programs. In addition, I develop a whole class related to construction safety. That was the first class developing that institution. So-

Avery Martin: That's neat.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yes.

Avery Martin: That's neat.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: So they have a lot of benefits. And going back to the original question, it was like this stepping points in terms of how I got here. Being a TA when I was an undergrad, conducting research early on. Then when I went to my master's degree, there is multiple options, but I decided to do a thesis instead of just doing a final exam or just doing just coursework. So I was clearly in my mind that I want to keep my door opens for the future. So that's something for the undergrad students out there. It's just that you have to think a little bit ahead always about what's coming.

Matt Hickey: You know what else I'm hearing, and I hope you'll indulge me. Because I think I had a similar experience that is being active and engaged, even if you're not a hundred percent certain what the 10 year plan is.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Oh yeah, I didn't hear what that means.

Matt Hickey: But you're still visible, right? So professors had an opportunity to tap you on the shoulder and you get involved, and it doesn't have to be with some long term trajectory. And mind you were able to get a lot of really sort rich experiences and you look back now and say, "Aha, those are formative moments." But at the moment I'm just sort of being visible. I want to be engaged, I want to be active in some ways, right?

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yes, definitely. So I went home for two years, did all these research, create a course, it was teaching, but something was missing. I didn't have enough resources to do core research as I was trained to do. So that was one of the motivations to come back to do a PhD program because I was-

Matt Hickey: At Clemson, right?

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: At Clemson. So I went back to Clemson University just because the benefits of already being at Clemson and take advantage of those courses I took. And then this time I went to first interdisciplinary program was not really working for me. And that's kind of one of the lesson learned from people out there is if you felt like something is not working for you, it's okay to change your mind. So I switched programs to civil engineering. That was more my background. Through that opportunity, I have this chance to make one of the most influential people I have in my career.

My main doctoral advisor, Dr. Lighty Clarks. He really was a person that challenged me to think bigger. "Hey, there is many other opportunities out there besides these ones that you are thinking right now." At one point I was a little bit hesitant about my research project that was about social sustainability. And he was the one that really challenged me to think harder that, "Hey, you might not think it's a core engineering concept right now, but is most needed." He reinforced that into my thinking of, yeah, this is the right track to do.

He's one of the most cited piece of work I have has given me the opportunity to work with people, not only in the United States, but people from Brazil, Spain. I always get a lot of requests from people to know more about, one of the latest was from Venezuela faculty member from a university there asking me about how to engage in some type of research with them just because that work. So I'm thinking about these people that influence your life and sometimes you never know until things happens in the future, like you mentioned.

Matt Hickey: Yeah, absolutely.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: So that was an influential piece of where I am right now, having that mentorship.

Matt Hickey: And was that really the genesis of your interest in sustainability you think while you were in a doc program? Or is it more complex than that?

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Oh, actually, the first thing I hear about sustainability was with Fulbright. As a Fulbright scholar. When I was doing my master, they have typical these seminars that they provide to all the scholars. I went to Arizona State University, that was where the workshop was, and that was the first time that we hear about sustainability.

I knew about it, but never engaged. I was more focused on the safety aspect of construction projects. But then when I came back to do my doctoral degree, I started thinking about, yes, safety is important. But I mentioned always this to my students is that you can have the more sustainable project and high energy efficiency, low carbon emissions, but if somebody dies in the project, it could be the people operating the project or the people doing construction on the project. That's not anymore a sustainable project.

So I knew there was something missing and that's the reason I focus more in the social sustainability component that you zoom into safety per se. So yeah, so I don't know if that answered that question.

Matt Hickey: It does, definitely.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: But yeah, I think that that's where that passions come from is thinking about what is being practiced in the industry and what really truly sustainability is supposed to mean. And some of the gaps that we have sometimes. And that's going back to my original opening statement, is that we need to think about broader and we need to include more people when we are challenged by these type of problems.

Matt Hickey: It's a complex problem.

Avery Martin: Of course, academics are great for tunnel vision at some point.

Matt Hickey: Definitely's important to listen.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: I don't want to forget. I think I also have opportunity to work to the industry and work... And that also helped me to better understand what is going on there, influence how I think about research too.

Matt Hickey: That's great.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Because at the end of the day, you're right, sometimes in academia we be trying to be really pragmatic, but at the same time we tend to forget what is out there and how things can be applied. So research to practice is important, especially in our fields.

Matt Hickey: Yes.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: So I will speak for most of the fields in the college too.

Matt Hickey: I think you're right. I absolutely think you're right. So last fall we were able to talk to Montford [inaudible 00:25:52] was born and raised in Germany. And so I followed up on some questions so we can see the world a little bit better. So if I may, would you tell us a little bit about Panama and what do you like best about Panama? If you have any special moments again growing up or family memories or what have you so that we can expand our vision in another way here.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Okay. I'm not going get in trouble here. Well, during the winter time it reminds me that is warm, dry season in Panama. So I miss this, what we call summer here is right now happening in Panama. So I miss those days. One of the reasons I miss those days because in my childhood I have the opportunity to go back to my grandma's place and that was in the countryside. All the cousins were there. That was a great opportunity for us to play, to be free. Like I say, I was living in the city. It was so many restrictions because the place we lived so we have to be careful where to go and so forth. But in the summer times, that was the place that where you were free to go to do anything you want to do. And grandma always was just happy to have us there and have the time to go to the river, spend hours and hours there. So free to-

Matt Hickey: That's pretty good to me.

Avery Martin: Yes.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: So I will say that's one of the reasons I say I miss that during the winter time. But Colorado is a beautiful place, don't get me ground. It's a amazing state with views and people that are really forward thinking. So no complaints.

Matt Hickey: Are you able to get home to Panama on occasion?

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yeah. Yeah. I mean through the pandemic was a little bit difficult, but last year I went twice to Panama to visit my family.

Avery Martin: Nice.

Matt Hickey: That's awesome.

Avery Martin: That's great.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yeah.

Matt Hickey: So tell us how we were fortunate enough to recruit you to Colorado State University.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Oh, thanks. I appreciate that. At the end of my doctoral degree, like anybody else... My goal actually was to going back to Panama. I already have a faculty position there. So my goal was just go to Panama, but my mentor say, "Hey, explore the opportunities. You never know what can happen." So I started exploring, go to interviews here and there, and one of the places I got an interview was here at CSU.

Matt Hickey: And that was the first time you heard of it, right?

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yeah, CSU is still well known in civil engineering field because all the research that has done here in the past with water and some of that has been influenced in Panama. So there was some connections there, but that wasn't on my topic of research, I was just aware of that. But I was not really familiar with CSU even for college, which now is just a beautiful place to be. But my last year of my doctoral degree start applying as a doctoral student at that point, you go to conferences, presented your research and do a poster presentation in one of the conferences. Through that poster presentation, I have opportunity to map one of the faculty members in the construction management department and she say, "Hey, we're going to be looking for faculty member next year. If you want, you can do a presentation in my class so you can check it out before we start the process."

So I did that. I didn't have any funding. She said, "I don't have funding, neither." Going back to my mentor, my advisor say, "Hey, don't worry, I have some funding. I want to pay for the flight. You go there-

Matt Hickey: Fantastic.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: ... and you do your presentation." So other ways to practice what you are doing. So that was the beginning of how I start knowing more about CSU, about for Collins. And through that I submitted my application and I was called to be part of the finalist, came here. So that's how I start meeting people. And I think my research too, I think I did a good job with my presentation. One of the reasons I love the department where I am is that we not only do research, but also are really passionate about teaching pedagogy and service. In my presentation, I think I did a good job of mentioning how I'm going to be supporting those areas in the department.

Matt Hickey: Great. And so remind our listeners, when you joined us, how long have you been at CSU?

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yeah, this is the reason I say I'm [inaudible 00:30:41], it's going to be almost 10 years now since I arrived to CSU back in 2012.

Matt Hickey: Boy, you're making me feel old.

Avery Martin: 2012 was 10 years ago. Wow. Congratulations though.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yeah, thank you. I appreciate it.

Avery Martin: That is a benchmark.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Thank you.

Matt Hickey: Good for you.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yeah, so it has been great. I like anything new place, new systems, new organization. And switching your mind, you're not anymore a doctoral student now you're an assistant professor at that point or associate professor, so you have other responsibilities. Managing all those things is different.

Matt Hickey: Indeed, the learning curve continues, doesn't it?

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yes. Yeah. So yeah, that going back to we are always learning, right? We're learners.

Avery Martin: Oh yeah.

Matt Hickey: And we hope we never stop. That's when it's time to hang up your spurs and go do something else if you're not still learning. For sure.

Avery Martin: Indeed.

Matt Hickey: So talk to us about what you've got going on now in terms of life is a scholar, teacher, mentor, collaborator? What has you excited?

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: In terms of a scholarship currently have a National Science Foundation capacity building grant. That was awarded last October. So it is for two years is with a community of practice of civil and environmental engineering faculty members across the nation.

So that gets me real excited about, and one of the reasons is because one of the goals of the projects is how can we enhance the current capacity of that community of practice and infuse equity and inclusion into their work. In this case, most of their work is related to infrastructure courses and implementation of teaching strategies, and lessons and that sort of thing.

So that's one of the biggest projects currently I have working with three other faculty members across the United States. And we have also undergrad students and we have doctoral students, and master's students. So we are trying to grow the research group, helping them to understand to these challenges.

Matt Hickey: That's cool.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: In terms of research, that's one of them. If you go to my Vita, you're going to see that some of my research is more practical. That is some of theory there, but also there is a lot of pedagogy in my research. So keeping engaged in that area. And in terms of service, I'm faculty mentor for one of the clubs. I'm making sure that I can support the department as many ways we go part of the recruitment committee, part of the presidents sustainability commission at the university level. So that get me real excited too.

Matt Hickey: That's great.

Avery Martin: Keeping busy.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yeah.

Avery Martin: That's awesome.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yeah. So I don't know if that answered that question. There is so many other things that we do. But these are a few-

Avery Martin: You wear many hats.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: ... highlights. Yes.

Matt Hickey: That's great.

Avery Martin: That's awesome.

Matt Hickey: We've had this theme running throughout about the students who may be listening may be inspired by your story. And I can think back to when I was sitting in that chair as an undergraduate, I'm trying to imagine life as a professor was just beyond me. So give us just a vignette. We know there is no typical day to day varies quite a bit, but what does life look like for you? You come to campus on any given day? Just walk [inaudible 00:34:23].

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Every day, actually. I live close by. So that allows me to come to campus every day. When office hours, the office there, my teaching days too. And then I try to organize my research meetings. So sometimes it's a challenging that organizing meetings for research project and for committees. But I think even if now most of those meetings are online, I try to come to the office and has that space to separate it from my personal lives.

Matt Hickey: Sure.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: So I think that was one of the biggest challenge I have through the pandemic is being in my apartment and then feel like, "Okay, this is work. What is the boundary?" So I'm trying to keep my boundaries in terms of work and personal life.

Matt Hickey: So I've got two questions related to this professional environment you find yourself in now. The first is this college of health and human science is a really interesting and diverse mix of disciplinary expertise. And so I'm interested in your impressions about what you like the most about working in this college.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: One of the things with the college in general, I think everybody knows this, is that we are the microcosmos of csu. And I think that's one of the beauties. And also tell me could be the challenge too at one point another, but being part of a college where you have so many different backgrounds and disciplines with different point of views is a beauty. We probably need to try to reinforce that more and create more collaboration because I agree we could solve bigger problems if we collaborate more in our disciplines in the college. I think that that's one of the things I like from the college. In the Department of Construction Management, we already have some collaborations with the school of education. We have a PhD program with the school of education. That has been a blessing, finding people that really think about pedagogy and thinking about construction. So that's good. We also have, just because the nature of the disciplines with interior architecture design is another unit that we have some collaborations, but I think there is more opportunities out there.

Matt Hickey: I think there are too. So I love the vision of the colleges. A microcosm of CSU River Arch. I just think that's so true.

Avery Martin: Very well put.

Matt Hickey: Yeah. Yeah. Thanks for sharing it that way. I appreciate that. because I haven't heard that before, but I think it's spot on.

Avery Martin: Oh yeah.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yeah.

Matt Hickey: And so that leads us to this next level. So we're at an institution that holds out with great pride, the fact that we're a land grant and that means something. We're not just any university, but we're one of a comparatively small number when everything's said and done of land grant institutions. So talk to us a little bit about how that informs your approach to scholarship.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: And I have to be honest, when I came to the United States, I really didn't know what that means. Even I went through my master's degree and I was in a land grant institution. Clemson University is a land grant institution, and you didn't really realize what that means. And I think CSU has a better approach to emphasizing what a land grant mission is. For me in particular, I think is the access piece and the engagement piece is making sure that we provide access to the people that probably doesn't have the means to get a higher education just resonate to me because like I mentioned early on, I am a first generation student and the reason I am where I am is because there were opportunities given to me by having a scholarship to do an undergrad degree and then later for Fulbright to get a scholarship to get a master's degree.

So that access piece is really important for people like me that at one point another even they have the best capabilities, but they don't have the resources to get into this. And we all know that getting a bachelor's degree make a huge difference. I think it was a recent study mentioned that the people that doesn't get a bachelor's degree have more high incidents of smoking, debt because of the salaries they get. So I think access is key when we are thinking about my ground mission. And the other concept I really enjoy about CSU that has been reframing through the years is engagement piece. And the engagement office has really nice way to think about engagement, what that means to be engaged with our communities. And in my case, the engagement don't only apply to Colorado communities, but also outside of the state and even overseas.

And one of the things I've been engaging with is with my study abroad program in Costa Rica, and we work really close with communities in the countryside to see their perspective about sustainability because that's, again, thinking about engagement. We need to hear voices that sometimes don't have the opportunities to be heard. And I think that's the land grant mission, making sure that we are engaged, but not us telling communities what to do, but communities telling us what they need and how they can help us to solve these biggest problems that we are trying to solve in our day to day scholarship work.

Matt Hickey: You're a wonderful steward for engagement because I think that that's an elegant way of putting things. And I think, again, the university has tended to have this top down, push out knowledge sort of approach. And I think engagement's the right word because we go not to tell so much. Oh, occasionally we're obliged to, and that's part of our translational research. But to engage with community partners on sustainability related issues requires us to be willing to listen. Because we may have perspectives on sustainability that for a particular community, don't move the needle. That's not what is on our top 10 list of things that matter to us.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yeah. And I see it in my word too. When we talk about rewriting systems like Lee, that those are coming from a different point of view of marketing compared with the people, what they really need, why we are using high energy efficiency high balls. What that makes sense to me as an individual, as a community. So we really need to think harder.

Matt Hickey: About solving problems together as opposed to pretending, here comes the expert on the white horse and we're going to ride in and rescue you. And that's just rarely the case.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yeah, definitely that's not my thinking. And I always tell my students, we are not here to solve problems. We are here to listen and to learn from our communities.

Matt Hickey: And to work together.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yeah, work together.

Matt Hickey: Well said.

Avery Martin: Yes. And that speaks to your DEI work as well.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yes, yes. So yeah, definitely. When you're talking about diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice, you really need to think harder. I am not an expert. I am in my journey. I think if you go outside of the United States, countries have different perspective about what we are talking about here. But I am learning through the process of being involved in this research projects, learning from my students. And I probably face sometimes some of those challenges. But also I am privileged position too of being a faculty member and having some resources compared with other people. So yeah.

Avery Martin: I agree.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Spirit of humility and collaboration is a great foundation for me.

Matt Hickey: I have heard humility today twice. So probably this is the word that we should be.

Avery Martin: The word of the day.

Matt Hickey: ... using. The word of the day. But I will say not the word of the day, I think the word that we should remind ourself, being humble about what we do, whatever you are coming from, where you coming from and the experience you have, because sometimes we tend to forget.

Avery Martin: It is easy to forget, isn't it? We get on the train sometimes and we're busy and accomplishing things.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yeah. Yes. A little humility goes a long way.

Avery Martin: So Rodolfo Valdez Vasquez, thank you so much for joining us today. We really appreciate it and I thoroughly enjoyed the conversation.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Thank you.

Avery Martin: I've got some gems I'm going to keep, attribution will go your way.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Of course. I love that.

Avery Martin: Yeah, really, really insightful. So thanks for your time.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Well, I think I just want to thank you for having me, but also thank you for putting this together. I think this is the first time we are doing something like this and it is exciting to learn more about other people, what they are doing. And I think hopefully this will infuse some of that collaboration we were talking about between the faculty members across the different units.

Matt Hickey: We hope so. That's part of our long term strategic plan, right?

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yes, [inaudible 00:44:10].

Matt Hickey: Our community and I think so many important problems we can solve together in ways that right now we're not apprehending because we tend to find ourselves somewhat to siloed. And I think we can do better as you have already articulated. So here's to it.

Rodolfo Valdes Vasquez: Yes, indeed. Perfect. Thank you.

Matt Hickey: Thanks so much. Thanks so much. Another great interview is in the books. Thank you for listening to this episode of Health and Human Science Matters.

Avery Martin: Be sure to check out the rest of season two as well as season one. If you want to learn more about the college, go to www.chhs.hollowstate.edu.