# Health and Human Science Matters Season 2, Episode 8: Paula Yuma

Paula: I just want everybody to have access to a lot of the knowledge and information that comes out of this place. You know, Matt, from interviewing so many folks and being the dean for research, that there's so much compelling work in so many different areas coming out of our college. And I would love for high school teachers to have access to that and moms and dads to have access to that and high school seniors to better understand who they're going to be interacting with.

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 co-host 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 it 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 and colleague from social work, Dr. Paula Yuma. Paula, welcome. We're so glad you could come and spend a little bit of time with us.

Paula: Oh, thank you. I'm excited to be here.

Matt Hickey: Well, we're excited to have you. We've been enjoying these conversations so much. We were just talking about this a little bit, that we can get so busy in any profession, I think the academy is like this where we of have tunnel vision and sometimes to be able to pull a curtain down and look across the college that we work in and say, "Ooh, there's somebody who I've sat in meetings with, but I didn't know this about their scholarship. Or equally important, what do you do for fun? What are the things that interest you?" So we're interested in pursuing both of those today and I'm going to start with the big questions that you pursue as a scholar, if you're willing to share some reflections on that.

Paula: Yeah, sure. Well, most of my research and my applied community work is really around a grand challenge. The social work has 13 grand challenges that we've agreed as a field are really the priorities for human health and wellbeing. And so the one I focused on is called closing the health gap. And it's two parts. It really works on the disparities that are created by lots of structures in our society that mean not everyone has equal access to human health.

And then the other part is really about access to care in communities, so knowing that we have disparate levels of health driven by structural factors. Once people have these health conditions, we also have difficulty getting them into appropriate and timely care where they trust the providers and feel like they can get what they need. So my close the health gap focus is also at the intersection of public health and social work. And so I always joke that I'm adopted by social work because I have a master's in public health. I've never been a practicing social worker. I did practice as a health educator and policy advocate for many years and then came back and got my PhD at a school of social work, which had a lot of public health overlap. So I'm this public health transplant that has been adopted and accepted by social work for which I'm very grateful.

Matt Hickey: I suspect they are as well. I think you probably bring a perspective that by virtue of the academic training may not be widely shared.

Paula: Yeah, I think that's one of the great things about our college is the interdisciplinary approach we take to these big wicked problems in our society. And we certainly have that in the school of social work. In the areas where I'm not an expert like in clinical interventions or counseling kinds of interventions, my colleagues totally rack it out there. So I think we all fit pretty well together.

Matt Hickey: And it's fun to be in an environment where you can celebrate other people's successes and including those opportunities when we can celebrate our own as well. But it's fun to say, "Wow, look, look." It's one of my favorite parts about this job is to celebrate scholarly successes for sure. So 13 grand challenges, and one of those emerged on your radar screen as something that you have a passion and interest you want to pursue. Talk to us a little bit about among the 13, how was it that one was centered for you as a mission focus area?

Paula: Yeah, well, luckily those developed after I was already established in my work. So they've been around, I'm going to guesstimate about seven years now, but the public health world has had the healthy people priorities going for several decades now. And those have always concerned health equity, access to healthcare, the kinds of things that I work on. So I've always been able to find some alignment with these national priorities in my work.

Matt Hickey: That's great. So tell us a little bit about your journey. How did you end up here as a member of the academy? We'll talk about the specifics of here at CSU later on, but I'm interested in significant moments, touchstones, mentors, et cetera because we are hoping many of our students or prospective students will listen to this and have those aha moments of, I can relate to that and maybe I can do this too kind of scenario.

Paula: Yeah. Well, I hope they do too. This is a story I always share if I'm invited to talk to our freshman or sophomore students about professional pathways. But I was very fortunate to get to go to college. I had great support from my parents growing up. They really prioritized education, but hadn't been able to earn their college degrees themselves. And I went to the University of Texas as an undergrad and I thought I wanted to be an athletic trainer. So I majored in kinesiology and worked as a student athletic trainer for four years. So I actually lettered in football and I lettered in women's basketball and men's tennis and it was a great place to be, but I majored in completely the wrong thing. Kinesiology drew on none of my strengths. There's a lot of, like there is in the medical field, a lot of memorization, a lot of anatomy, and all of those things served me well later, but didn't ignite any curiosity, any passion on my side. I was so tired of it by the time I graduated. I just really never wanted to tape another ankle.

So because I'd majored in completely the wrong thing, I realized either I'm going to have to go work in this field or I need to go to graduate school. And the women's basketball coach at UT, Jody Conradt put me up for a graduate school scholarship that was specific for people who'd been trainers or managers. And it wasn't very much, but just the idea that Jody Conradt, one of the winningest coaches, the women's basketball, thought that I should go to graduate school was enough to make me think I should go to graduate school.

Matt Hickey: Indeed.

Paula: So I applied to a relatively new school at the time. They're very established now. And this was viewed as a high degree of tradership by my fellow Longhorns, but I went to do my master's in public health at Texas A&M, which had a school of rural public health at the time. Now they've become more general. They're just a regular school of public health. But they were really focused on rural issues at the time. And I just fell in love with public health. I had such great professors. I was totally on board with the idea of preventing things from happening rather than treating them after the fact. I really liked learning about population health approaches and doing community health assessments that I got to be part of in my master's program, so that's really where I found my heart was aligned with work.

Matt Hickey: Thank goodness. Tell me how public health at that stage of your development got on your radar screen. Kines was not it. You had Coach Conradt nudge you and thank goodness for those things, but of all the places you could have gone in principle, really anywhere, how did public health emerge?

Paula: Yeah. Well, when I was a trainer, as I thought about what to do after graduation, I realized I love helping people and I like helping people have a good quality of life. But where I am now, there's help lined up down the hallway. There's so many people here to help athletes, and I'd much rather be helping in a place where there's not people lined up down the hallway. So public health seemed like a place where I could get those skills. And I was in more of an area of public health that does overlap pretty closely with social work, which was in social and behavioral health. And so I learned a lot about health education strategies, theories of behavior change, just all super interesting stuff. And I also got to do some really cool things as a graduate student.

I don't know how I've gotten so lucky, but I got to be part of a community health assessment in a seven county area of the Brazos Valley that the school was partnered with local governments to run. And I got to do things like go to cafes at 6:00 in the morning and have dinner, have coffee, excuse me, with, the opposite of dinner, very early in the morning, have coffee with retired folks and just hear what they thought about their communities. And I got to ride along with an undercover police officer and see where all the good spots to buy drugs were. I got to do all kinds of really neat things as part of that community needs assessment.

Avery Martin: That's awesome.

Matt Hickey: What a cool experience.

Paula: Yeah, it really was. Like I said, I've been really very fortunate.

Matt Hickey: So formative influences in the MPH program, now we're moving to this next stage. And were there particular times, moments, events that led you to the I want to get a PhD or was that a delayed decision?

Paula: That was delayed. So I really wanted to get out there and work with families. I was really fortunate to get a job in Dallas at Children's Medical Center Dallas in the injury prevention program, which is trauma centers, places that you'd go if you were in a motor vehicle crash or fell skiing and broke your leg or something like that. They have to invest in prevention for their communities. It's part of the process they go through to be designated as trauma centers, and that all has to be very data driven. They really have to demonstrate that they're taking evidence-based approaches to preventing injury. And so the Children's Trauma Center in Dallas was working to be the first level one pediatric trauma center in Texas. And so they had to start a pediatric injury prevention program. And I got a job there as a health educator, which I loved.

But within six months of taking that job, both my boss and the other person who worked there had gone out on maternity leave and decided that they weren't coming back. So I was the only one left, and we searched for someone to fill that position for quite a while. And finally, I went to my boss and said, "Do you think I can do this job?" And she said, "Oh my God, I've just been waiting for you to ask that question. Please do this job."

And so one of the best things about that is that's where a mentor relationship really developed with the trauma surgeon that I worked closely with, Todd Maxson, he's now in Arkansas, but he really encouraged me to use everything I learned in my MPH and apply it to what we were doing on the prevention side. So he'd always say to me, "Be a scientist, be a scientist." Yeah, even when I felt my heart pulled in other directions, I'd go back to the data or I'd go back to my program evaluation skills or I'd go back to the literature and I'd be like, "Fine, Maxson, I'm here being a scientist." And that's how I'd make recommendations or design art programs. And I still say that to myself sometimes when I'm trying to figure something out. Just be a scientist, Yuma.

Matt Hickey: You can almost hear him saying it probably, right?

Paula: Oh yes.

Matt Hickey: So the PhD, when did that emerge on your reaction?

Paula: Yeah, so our whole team from Children's Medical Center Dallas was recruited to the Children's Hospital in Austin who also wanted to become a level one trauma center, so Dr. Maxson and lots of the clinical staff. And I got to move to Austin, which is great because that was my hometown. I was really excited to go back there. And while we were there, we started working really hard on getting a best practice child passenger safety law passed in Texas. I don't know if you know this about Texas, but Texans don't really like to be told what to do.

Matt Hickey: No kidding.

Paula: Yeah. I don't know if you've heard. And they really did not want to pass a law that would keep kids in car seats to the age that was recommended and still is recommended, which is you're in a car seat with a harness till age four or five, and then after that, you sit in a booster seat till eight years of age, that's when a seatbelt starts to fit.

And we worked on getting this law passed for three legislative sessions, which is six years because the Texas leg only meets every two years. And the first time we made basically no progress and ended up with a law that if interpreted in a certain way was actually worse than the one that we started with. And so the second time around, I worked really hard to gather data from all the children's hospitals and identify advocates who'd been in crashes with their kids and much more organized effort with some help from the State Hospital Association and the Pediatric Association's lobbyists, so much more organized, lot of collective action. We still didn't make any progress. And so I got really frustrated and I thought we just really need better data and we just didn't have it and I didn't have the skills to analyze it.

And luckily, a researcher in another part of the country had published a paper about the fiscal benefit of booster seat laws and how one kid in a booster seat can generate such large cost savings to the state. So we extrapolated that data to the data that we did have. We were able to demonstrate the fiscal benefit of the booster seat law. And that's finally what got it passed in Texas.

Matt Hickey: Congratulations.

Paula: Yeah. Thank you. I'll probably never do anything in my career again that'll save that many lives though. I mean, just having people look to the law for what to do. And yeah, all of us kind of agreed, even Dr. Maxson, who spends his days saving kids lives, agrees that that prevention strategy will probably have the biggest impact. So yeah, I peaked pretty early, guess only 28 or so at the time, but it was just undeniable to me that I needed more research skills if I was really going to be good at this.

And we were partnered with some professors who were public health trained, but working at the school of social work at UT and they became good friends and mentors as well. And they started bugging me about coming to do a PhD and Dr. Maxson started bugging me about getting my PhD. And again, just those nudges from anybody else can make you start thinking about that. But yeah, I never would've would've considered that 10 years before as a child or anything like that.

So yeah, I started to do my PhD at UT and the School of Social Work, which is just an amazing place. They're a top five School of Social Work, really big faculty, really incredible people. And they were very encouraging all along the way. And I did something I will never encourage a student to do, which is work full-time and to do your PhD full-time. I did that for two years and then I defended my dissertation proposal when I was eight months pregnant, I think. And then I realized I can't work full-time and do the PhD full-time and be a parent. So that's when I stopped working at the Children's Hospital and picked up a little teaching at UT after my daughter was born.

Avery Martin: That deserves a congratulations as well.

Paula: Oh, well, that was a long time ago, but thank you.

Avery Martin: That does not matter. You still did it. That's incredible.

Paula: Yeah. Well, and we have people all across CSU doing things like that too. So it's not abnormal, but it was a busy time.

Avery Martin: I could imagine.

Matt Hickey: It's impressive, my goodness. And I think you're absolutely right. It's not uncommon. So I think again, that voice of support, even if there's a whisper of it here for our many millions of listeners, we decided we're going to claim it in advance. One of his days we're going to be there.

Avery Martin: Speaking to existence.

Matt Hickey: Exactly.

Avery Martin: There you go.

Matt Hickey: So Paula, talk to me a little bit about family. So you've spoken to this unbelievable moment when you're working and pursuing a PhD and eight months pregnant with your first child. Talk to me a little bit about Paula outside of the campus.

Paula: Yeah, I think, now I'm a single mom, two kids, kindergarten and fifth grade.

Matt Hickey: My goodness.

Paula: And they're just so much fun. And we love just our adventures together. I try to do things that scare me a little. So my pandemic survival move was to buy a camper and learn how to tow and operate the camper and get us places. So we camp a lot during the summers. We have a little A-frame popup campers love that. And they really are at an age now where they're so much fun. And my older one, her own interests and things are starting to emerge. So yeah, it's really great. Pandemic parenting is not for the fainthearted, as I'm sure everybody out there can recognize. And I think it's definitely made me a better professor to think about my students as entire people, not just people who are in the classroom and nothing else.

Matt Hickey: That's such an important part.

Paula: Everybody has so much going on outside of the classroom and so many challenges they're facing right now and that's always been true. But maybe a silver lining of COVID can be that we remember that about each other.

Matt Hickey: Amen, well said.

Paula: I do think CSU has done as good of a job as they can do, trying to recognize what everybody has going on outside.

Matt Hickey: Sure, yeah.

Paula: I guess there's always more we can do, but I think hearing from people at other universities, I think we're doing pretty well. And I know in the social work department, we're really focused on figuring out more ways that we can support our students and everything that they're facing right now,

Matt Hickey: I have to ask how your professional experience and your academic training informed your approach to navigating this last couple of years? From what I've heard, you strike me as being way better equipped than I was at this.

Paula: It's funny. I mean, one of the areas of research that I've been engaged in for a long time with my colleague, Tara Powell, at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign has been responding to disasters and providing organizational and community level interventions to build resilience in all the helping professions where people have been providing help while experiencing all the impacts of a disaster. So we first started developing this work after Hurricane Sandy in New York, and then continued after several floods and smaller disasters across the southern us. We made some very good friends in Louisiana.

And then after Hurricanes Harvey and Maria, an intervention we developed was delivered by a team in Americares to over 4,000 people who had experienced disasters. And so through that work I learned a lot about resilience and coping, which is really the focus of our intervention and social cohesion. So I think the benefit of that is I recognize what resilience can look like, what coping strategies can be effective, and how important it is to maintain social relationships in times of difficulty. But it's a little bit like a mechanic who is really bad at working on their own car or a carpenter who always has projects at home but never gets them done.

So yeah, I wouldn't say that made me immune to the impacts of the pandemic and certainly as a single parent, the overlap of the year of trying to homeschool my kiddos, being up for tenure, trying to teach from home, trying to support students who had all these things going on too. Yeah, it was a lot, but none of us were alone in that. It was a lot for everyone, I think. Yeah. I giggled a little getting ready for this because I knew one of the things you might ask was five years from now, how's your research impacting people's lives? And I laughed about how three years ago I just would've answered that question and been like, "Oh, here's what I'll be doing in five years." And would've been very certain about my research trajectory or how it might be impacting people's lives. And now I think, huh, I don't know. If there's anything we've learned, it's we can't predict things as well as we thought we could.

Matt Hickey: Yeah. Humility has been engendered by this experience.

Paula: Yeah. Thanks COVID.

Matt Hickey: So I want to talk about the transition here. How did we get lucky enough to land you here?

Paula: Oh my gosh, I got so lucky. So I've just been really fortunate. So as I finished my PhD, I had a young kiddo, a two-year-old and a professor on my committee, David Springer, who's now the head of the RGK Center at the LBJ School of Public Affairs, had just started a partnership with the Austin Police Department to work on a community engaged intervention with community police officers who would be on a walking beat and essentially the police officers would serve like social workers in just solving problems in the community. I think the only arrest they made during the three year project was someone was breaking into their police car and they really didn't have a choice, but they were really trying to partner with the Rundberg area of Austin, which is about a four square mile area with, I think, 60 different languages spoken. It was refugee resettlement site.

And the police department had received funding from the Obama Administration to look at innovative ways to reduce crime through community building. So the walking beat police officers were just spending a lot of time engaging in the community. There were community meetings, all those kinds of things. And I took on the role of coordinating the evaluation and the technical assistance from the university. And that was postdoc that I was awarded for three years and a year into the postdoc, I saw the position at Colorado State, and this was one of the few places that has a dual degree in PH MSW program. So I thought this is one of the few places that might hire me in a school of social work, given that I don't have a master's degree in social work, which is the practice degree and is required by many social work schools to be on their faculty. In fact, we require it for a lot of positions.

So I just applied so that I could get some practice on the job market. It was pretty low pressure because I wasn't at the end of my postdoc yet. I could stay a little longer and I thought, best case scenario, I'll get a trip to Fort Collins, which is such a cool place. Worst case scenario, I just keep working in my postdoc. But this was the only application that I submitted and they brought me to campus to interview and I just completely fell in love with it and I was just lucky enough to get a job offer. So then we packed our bags and came to Fort Collins, but it almost seemed too good to be true. And yeah, I felt really fortunate about that. I don't know many people who just interview at one place and get to go.

Matt Hickey: There's two themes I'm hearing from you, they move me. One is the spirit of appreciation, just thanksgiving. Almost every question I ask, you start with that and I think that is really cool.

Paula: Well thanks. Well, I do feel like I've been very, very fortunate.

Matt Hickey: And that's the other half of this. You have been, but I think a lot of that is tethered to grit and imagination and hard work. And I don't think these things just dropped out of the sky into your lap. Your pathway is interesting to me and it's multilayered and so good for you and good for us. Let me just say that. But I really appreciate both of those, this spirit of thanksgiving and a spirit of I've been fortunate, I've been blessed, whatever kind of language we want to use for that, I think it's a healthy approach to life. I appreciate it.

Paula: Well, I mean, I did have really hard working parents and grandparents and I do try to be guided by this idea of being a good ancestor, so both being a good ancestor and a tribute to the generations of my family that have come before me and then trying to be a good ancestor for my kids and grandkids and their kids.

Matt Hickey: Here. Here.

Avery Martin: Yes.

Matt Hickey: Good for you. So when was it that we landed you to Fort Collins? How long have you been here?

Paula: So I've been here seven years now.

Matt Hickey: Okay, great. And as we were talking before we went on the air that you're in the midst of a transition, from a traditional maybe faculty appointment to one that has some more administrative responsibilities. And for what it's worth, by the way, I can relate to that the last couple years.

Paula: Yeah. Well, I'm glad I get to keep being a researcher because I really do love it. But we have a super cool program in the School of Social Work called the Center for Lifelong Learning Outreach and Education, and it's CLLOE for short. So the mission of CLLOE is really to embrace that land-grant university tri-part mission. And CLLOE was actually established to meet the continuing education needs of extension agents. So what from the social sciences did extension agents need to learn? In the years that CLLOE's been in place, it's since morphed and changed and now CLLOE offers five different certificate programs that people can earn master's level certificates in. And those are really in areas that are priority areas for the state. So we have certificate in advanced behavioral health, nonprofit management school, social work. We've really got some compelling areas and then we're working now to expand and offer continuing education opportunities that I really hope will reduce the barrier to accessing CSU.

So I just want everybody to have access to a lot of the knowledge and information that comes out of this place. You know, Matt, from interviewing so many folks and being the dean for research that there's so much compelling work in so many different areas coming out of our college. And I would love for high school teachers to have access to that and moms and dads to have access to that and high school seniors to better understand who they're going to be interacting with, all the social science professionals who are out there in the helping professions, just providing new strategies, information, things that they can use to do their jobs even better. They're already amazing, but what other kinds of expertise could we share that would support them more? And then how can we design our programs to meet their needs? So I hope there will be a feedback loop too with what they can teach us, where to focus and what we should be working on, where we're missing the boat and what we can do better to provide to our communities across the state.

Matt Hickey: That's fantastic. I have to ask you a question that's a hard one to answer because I think we all know that there is no typical day in the life of an academic, but if you were to describe to our listeners on any given day, this is what I might find myself doing.

Paula: Yeah. Gosh, I've been trying to sit with the different percentages that I'm supposed to be aligned with. I don't know if people outside the academy know this, but any semester you might have 20% of your time set aside for teaching and 40% for service and 50% for research or something like that. Well, right now my percentages are way off from what they've ever been before. So I'm getting used to teaching a little bit less, putting some boundaries around the research rather than being a researcher all the time. And then lots and lots of working on CLLOE, strategic planning. I'm writing a business plan, which is really fun. I've never written a business plan before, so I've been consulting with the business school asking some business students to help me. So that is one really fun thing about the academy is how varied your job is, the interesting conversations you might have day to day.

So I'm currently adjusting how I might spend a regular day, but I might work on a research project for some period of time or work on writing a paper for some period of time. I might consult with some students, I might work on some continuing ed applications. These are all just things I've done this week. So I'm just pulling from that list. But yeah, it's really varied and I do love that. And it also can be a challenge to track things across many different projects, so that's a skill I'm working on.

Matt Hickey: Good. Me too. I have not mastered it in any way, shape or form, that's for sure. So you've hinted at this, but I want you to talk a little bit about what you like the best about working in this College of Health and Human sciences.

Paula: Our college is really cool. I love that the mission of our college is really just aligned with my personal mission of, I mean, it sounds cliched I guess, but we all just want to make the world a better place through our different gifts and abilities and areas of focus. So it's really easy to align with the mission of the college. I think one thing I do really appreciate is that I think the college is authentically trying to make progress on our diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice goals. I'm getting to co-chair the committee on social justice at the School of Social Work with my colleague Tiffany Jones. And we're working really hard right now on an in-depth needs assessment of our school and where we are and where we need to make progress. And students are super involved in it. The administration's very supportive of it, all the way up to the dean.

And I really see that authentic support for those goals rolling out across the college, which I think is great. I don't think that's the case at every university in the country. So I feel fortunate that we're in a place that really is working on that and just everybody is really very supportive and collaborative in our college. I've had some really great experiences with people from other departments. I love serving on committees with people from other departments. I get to be on a podcast with people from other departments. There's just all kinds of cool opportunities that having such a varied college brings and a lot of the things people working on really are related, like the way buildings are designed.

Often that has been an equity and access issue for people with disabilities or people with sensory differences. And our construction management department really does attend to those things. I know a colleague in design and merchandising is looking at the environmental impacts and benefits of using hemp to make clothing rather than other things. And that is an environmental justice issue. So there's just so much overlap and it does seem like we're very different, but really the overarching goal and interweaving of it all is really there and that mission of making the world a better place. If that sounds silly, I don't know, but I do love that about the college.

Matt Hickey: Great. The next layer up, of course, is CSU, and you've already touched on the land-grant mission piece, but I wonder if I could ask you to unpack that a little bit more. When you think about opportunities to work in a land-grant, what does that mean?

Paula: The land-grant mission of CSU to me is really like our beating heart and soul.

Matt Hickey: Well said.

Paula: Yeah. Extension, of course, is one part of that. And I love working with our colleagues in extension and engagement on whatever I can work with them on. They're really great to partner with. I've gotten to interview extension agents through a couple of different research studies and I'm just so impressed with what they do every day, how many different areas of practice they're engaged in. Their skill sets and dedication to their work is, I mean, just so admirable and impressive. And the work like our Office of Engagement is doing with really trying to teach people through the Family Leadership Training Institute and other interventions that they're engaged in, how to elevate voices within a community, really attend to what the community members are saying that they need, rather than imposing agendas on communities.

It's just such a cool time to be at CSU for those kinds of things. And then our students are amazing. I mean, students have really dug in and engaged and are really guiding a lot of what's happening in the School of Social Work. I don't know what it's like and the other schools, but we are just really fortunate to have the kinds of students that we have. I do love the way that we support first gen students and students who are veterans and students who are working parents and all of those things I think are... They're part of our land-grant mission, but they're also things I think we do really well.

Matt Hickey: Well said.

Paula: We still have a lot of work to do. I mean, that much is true everywhere, but I think we're doing our best to do the work.

Matt Hickey: Miles to go before we sleep, right?

Avery Martin: Yes.

Matt Hickey: Well, Paula, thanks a ton for coming and sharing us.

Paula: Yeah, this was so fun. This was so easy.

Matt Hickey: It is fun. And it has turned out to be easy because I think we just are hanging out and having a conversation. 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.colostate.edu.