

# A Bit of Me

*This series of profiles on SUNY Broome community members is a part of the Student Village diversity calendar initiative. We will be highlighting members in our community who identify with or can speak on the diversity theme or topic for each month. The theme for September is Hispanic Heritage month and the topic is the Black Lives Matter movement. To be featured in this series please reach out to Pamela Alvarez or Alexandria Donkor.*

## Venessa Rodriguez

### EOP Director and Co-Coordinator of the Men of Excellence Program



**Hometown:** I have lived in Long Island, NY, Coral Spring, FL, New Berlin, NY, Brooklyn and Bronx, NY and so it is hard for me to identify a home town. All of these locations and the experiences I have had living in them have had a hand in shaping who I am. I currently reside in Endicott, NY.

#### WHAT IS YOUR ROLE ON CAMPUS?

I am the Director of the Educational Opportunity Program or EOP. EOP serves students who are academically and economically disadvantaged but who possess the grit and resilience to earn a college degree. The program provides wrap around supports (academic, financial, personal and social ) to EOP students in a culturally responsive environment. Our goal, is the same as our students, that they achieve the academic success needed to graduate from SUNY Broome.

I began my career in education shortly after graduating from Colgate University in 2002. My first position was as a middle school ESL teacher at Theodore Roosevelt Gathings, MS 158 in the Bronx. I was a middle school teacher for two years when I decided to move to Upstate NY to be closer to family after having my son. My partner, Justin, had graduated from SUNY Oneonta and he had wanted to visit the campus and introduce me to some of the staff that had been pivotal to his time on campus. During that visit, he introduced me to a woman who would, in short order, become my friend and mentor, Mrs. Eva Vega-Olds. She and I hit it off immediately. At the time that I met

her, she was the Director of Multicultural Student Affairs and I found her to be smart, funny and a fierce advocate for diversity, equity and inclusion. While we were visiting with Eva, she said, "I like you. You get it." The "it" she was referring to was the importance of concepts of diversity in an educational setting. She then asked me if I was looking for a job, to which I replied yes. She proceeded to tell me about a new opening for an EOP Counselor position. She was adamant that I apply and made me go to a computer in the lounge area of her office suite to print my resume and write a cover letter for the position. I did and the rest is history!

I worked at SUNY Oneonta for 6 years and in that time I served as an EOP Counselor, the Interim Director of Multicultural Students Affairs and as the Assistant Director of EOP before taking an unpaid leave from the College to finish my Master's Degree in Student Affairs Administration at Binghamton University. While on my leave of absence I became pregnant with my second child and made the decision to resign from SUNY Oneonta. After a year and a half hiatus, I took my first position with SUNY Broome as the Assistant Director of TRIO Student Support Services. Two years later, I became the Co-Coordinator of SUNY Broome's Student Success Squad and then, in 2017 the Director of EOP.

#### HOW DID YOU COME TO CHOOSE THIS CAREER?

I LOVE my students! The best part of my job is having the privilege to work with such amazing students and getting to bear witness to their successes. I attended Colgate University as an HEOP student (HEOP is the same program as EOP, just for private Colleges) and understand on an intimate level what it means to be counted out before you even begin. HEOP provided me with access, support, life-long friendships and the mentorship I needed to not only achieve, but exceed expectations. I am honored to be in a position to give a portion of what was given to me back to students who come from a similar background.

#### WHAT IS SOMETHING YOU WANT TO LEARN OR WISH YOU WERE BETTER AT?

There are two things that I want to learn/be better at: 1) I wish that I spoke Spanish fluently. Unfortunately, I do not and this is something that bothers me. I can understand most of what is being said to me and I can

speak a little Spanish but I am nowhere near fluent. 2) I think something that I wish I were better at is developing a better work/life balance. Working with students and developing close relationships with them can sometimes make it difficult to turn off or compartmentalize that part of my life.

### **HOW DO YOU DEFINE SUCCESS?**

I define success as being able to walk away from a task or project knowing that you did your very best to accomplish whatever goal was put in front of you, even if you fail. I have found that in moments of failure is when I have learned the most. Those moments have provided me with invaluable lessons and opportunities for growth and have in turn lead to other moments of success.

### **WHAT IS YOUR BIGGEST FEAR?**

I think my biggest fear is leaving this earth before my three children are prepared to take care of themselves. My mom passed away when I was 22 years old. Fortunately, I had graduated from college and had secured a job and was living on my own. Even still, I felt unprepared to be without her in the world and so I can only imagine what it would have been like to lose her any earlier in my development.

### **WHAT DOES HISPANIC HERITAGE MEAN TO YOU?**

I am proudly and unapologetically Puerto Rican (Boricua). I draw great strength from my cultural roots. I have always felt this way but I think even more so since hurricane Maria hit the island in 2017. Watching the strength, grit and resiliency displayed by Puerto Ricans in the years since that catastrophic event (and others that have happened since....rising to take back the island from corrupt politicians, the earthquakes, the way the Trump administration has disregarded the island) has forged my pride in my identity and in my people. To me, being Puerto Rican means to be strong, to have a profound love for family and community and to be courageous. It means to celebrate even when things seem hopeless and to keep getting back up even when you've experienced defeat.

### **WHAT DOES SOCIAL JUSTICE MEAN TO YOU?**

Social Justice is when society has achieved equity and inclusion and has dismantled systems of oppression in all of it's institutions. I have chosen a career field that aims at providing equity for a population of students that has faced an enormous amount of institutional barriers in all facets of their lives. I absolutely see my work and the work of social justice as connected. It is my job, in part, to speak truth to power in an effort to make our institution a more equitable and just place for all students.

### **WHAT WOULD YOU DO (FOR A CAREER) IF YOU WEREN'T DOING THIS?**

I always struggle with this question I think in part, because I have a hard time imagining myself doing something different. The part of my job that I dislike is that it's largely sedentary. I wish I had more occasion to get up and move more often during the day. I find that I need this for my own mental and emotional well being. With that said, if I were not a Student Affairs Practitioner, I think I would pursue a job that requires more activity, like a fitness instructor.

### **WHAT WOULD YOU MOST LIKE TO TELL YOURSELF AT AGE 18?**

I would tell my 18 year old self to not waste time on activities and people who do not have my best interest in mind. Although I was an active and academically astute student, there are certainly opportunities that I missed because I was focused on the wrong things. I would also tell my 18 year old self not to worry so much. I worried about my ability to accomplish educational goals. As the first person in my family to attend college, I worried that I would let my family down. I wish I had been able to articulate that to someone who could have told me what I now tell my students, you are capable of this experience and you've already overcome greater challenges than any one class, assignment or exam can present. You've got this!

### **WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO OUR STUDENTS?**

I think it's important for our students to know that they belong here and that they can accomplish anything that they put their mind to. I would also advise students to be conscious of how they present themselves to their peers and other members of the campus community. There are many doors that can be open to you, but they can also be closed shut if you aren't careful. My entire career in higher education began as a result of a conversation I had with a stranger. She saw something that she felt would serve what would become our students, well. You never know how someone may be able to positively impact your life so be kind and respectful to everyone you meet.

### **IF YOU COULD LIVE ANYWHERE, WHERE WOULD IT BE?**

I would love to live in Puerto Rico. I was born and for the most part raised in New York but I am an island girl at heart.