

The Hawk

PhD Project: Learning through diversity



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Ruben Mendoza, Ph.D, assistant professor in the decision and system sciences department, is one of 45 Hispanic-American Information Systems business school professors in the United States. Mendoza achieved his Ph.D through the “Ph.D project,” an organization that recruits minorities currently practicing business to perform doctorate programs for various business fields. After six years at Saint Joseph’s University, Mendoza has just been granted tenure, an example of the success of the Ph.D project.

The PhD project was founded in 1994 by the KPMG Accounting Firm, one of the biggest professional services networks. The Ph.D Project's mission is to "increase the diversity of corporate America by increasing the diversity of business school faculty. We attract African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, and Native Americans to business Ph.D. programs, and provide a network of peer support on their journey to becoming professors. As faculty, they serve as role models attracting and mentoring minority students while improving the preparation of all students for our diverse workplace and society." The Ph.D Project has tripled the amount of minority business professors in 15 years.

Mendoza's journey with the Ph.D Project started in 1995 when he attended the "November Ph.D Project Conference," a conference that invites all recruited members to attend. This specific conference and others held by the Ph.D Project offer the recruited potentials an opportunity to speak with deans and other professionals to explore their doctorate program options at over 100 institutions.

Mendoza then began his Ph.D program in 1996 at University of Michigan. He left in 1999 with a Master's degree in Business and a Master's degree in Information Systems. He then found a job teaching at Rensselaer graduate center in Connecticut. Mendoza then revived his Ph.D process in 2000 at Rensselaer main campus in upstate New York. Mendoza then moved to St. Joe's in 2006, where he finished the remaining step of his Ph.D program: defending his dissertation. Mendoza then started his six-year probationary period here at St. Joe's to gain tenure.

The Ph.D Project spoke fondly of Mendoza after his successes through the program and his membership in the PhD Project Information Systems Doctoral Students Association. The president of the Ph.D Project and president of the KPMG Foundation, Bernard J. Milano, said, "Dr. Mendoza has succeeded in the very difficult endeavor of being granted tenure" and "[he] has demonstrated dedication, hard work, and intelligence in joining the rapidly growing ranks of minorities choosing to influence the next generation of business leaders as college professors. The Ph.D Project takes great pride in his achievement, and looks forward to following his success throughout his career."

Mendoza loves his work at St. Joe's. He described his department as being half traditional information systems and half operations, research, and statistics, where every business major has to take three of his department's courses. He discussed how the students with a DSS major typically go into data analytics or consulting and accounting with business intelligence.

As an immigrant from El Salvador, Mendoza talks about how he hopes his being a minority can give his students a unique perspective. He said, "One of the things the Ph.D Project does not talk about often enough is that I don't know if my being in the business school attracts minorities to the business school, to my university, or to my classroom, but it does do a couple of things: one, is any minority who comes through

my classroom is suddenly aware that they too could be a college professor. Why not? Again, I'm one of 41, it's not very often that they get a Hispanic in the classroom."

He continued, "In the worst of cases, it changes pre-conceived ideas about what minorities can do. Students here can choose to avoid any interaction with underrepresented minorities, but they cannot avoid me."

Mendoza believes, "The kinds of things that I have seen, that I have done, the food I eat or grew up eating, the friends I have, the struggles I have faced in the U.S. make me say things in the classroom that are going to be substantially different, not right, not wrong, but just a different lens from what other faculty members are going to say."

Christopher Zaccaria, '12, had Mendoza as a professor his freshman and junior years. Mendoza being a minority enriched his experience, as he said, "He teaches from a different perspective in experiences he's had in being a minority; his experiences in being an employee in a corporation, his career, and his decisions that he's made."

Zaccaria also believes that more teachers like Mendoza should be hired at St. Joe's because, "He's one of my favorite professors here. He's really compassionate about the subject." He continued, "He always said, "Have a system, it doesn't matter what it is, as long as you know it," which is a motto to help students navigate through life.

Ryan Feleo, '12, another one of Mendoza's students, said, "From the perspective of being a professor, he puts a lot of time into the major and his students." And on his perspective of being a minority, Feleo said, "He talked about his upbringing, he's very prideful in the way he carries himself."

Another professor with a background with the Ph.D Project at St. Joe's is Karen McDougal, assistant professor of accounting. McDougal received information about the Ph.D project through an invitation to the November conference in the mail. She attended the conference and submitted her application.

McDougal commented on the Ph.D Project, "It has been instrumental in enabling me to pursue a Ph.D program and to complete a Ph.D program. The Ph.D program provides financial support, as well as mentoring and general information that allows you to navigate every aspect of pursuing a Ph.D from the application process through completing each year of study through job search and placement. Their goal is to, of course, recruit individuals that work in practice to bring them back to the classroom with valuable work experience so that they provide a new and exciting element to the teaching dynamic."

In reference to how this program affects students, she said, "I think it's benefited students because the primary emphasis is on diversity and academia and I honestly can say as the college student being a minority – I attended Temple University – I did not have a single minority professor and I do believe that it makes a difference. I think that the individual standing in the front of those classrooms should in some part represent

the diversity of the students that are attending the classes. I think it adds a different viewpoint, a unique viewpoint and I think students of all races benefit from this viewpoint.”

The Ph.D Project has brought St. Joe’s and the nation unique professors who can enrich the education of all students and serve as role models to inspire minorities to achieve something that might not have even been in their vision prior to having a Ph.D project professor. The ultimate success of the Ph.D Project is perpetuated by the efforts of instructors such as McDougal and Mendoza.