

Episode 4: Staying the Course to Grad School (PhD program applications) with Ana Ramirez

Victoria:

This is the Duke Life Pod, the audio archive of first-generation college students and low-income students at Duke University. I'm Victoria, Pinedo, your host and current Nowicki fellow of student engagement at the office of undergraduate education and I bring you transparent storytelling from our current students and recent alumni.

Through interviews, we will discuss the highs and lows of being the first in their families to attend college, navigating new career and educational opportunities, and entering new socioeconomic spaces.

If you're interested in understanding how a community of very special students at Duke are carving their own legacies as the first-gens please don't go away.

Victoria:

hi, [00:01:00] everyone. How are you doing today? I hope you're doing good. Wherever you're listening in from. Today's interview is with Ana Ramirez, who is one of my friends, a Duke alumni from classes 2020, and she was a previous colleague of mine in the Office of Undergraduate Education as the Spark Fellow. I actually recorded this interview with her back in February when she was still receiving her offers to different PhD programs.

And I'm so excited for y'all to listen. I hope that you gain a lot from this interview, and if you're currently in your journey, post-grad figuring out how you're going to get to graduate school, if you're figuring out what kinds of programs you want to pursue, definitely listen to this interview is very inspirational.

Ana talks a lot about how she stayed the course to applying to PhD programs. It's definitely one to listen to if you're first-gen-low-income and really [00:02:00] trying to not compare yourself to other people, but also listen to what others have gone through and realize that everyone's journey is different, and really embrace your journey and everything that you're learning from it. I know it's easier said than done, and I'm currently also learning how to do that.

And I hope that's what you gained from today's episode is whatever you set your intentions on, you can achieve it. And yeah.

Let's go back to February, 2024 and get straight into our episode.

All right, welcome to the Duke Life Pod. I'm Victoria Pinedo and I'm here with a friend and colleague of mine, Ana Ramirez. Do you want to introduce yourself, Ana?

Ana:

Yeah. Hi, everyone. My name is Ana Ramirez, she, her pronouns and I am the Spark Fellow. I work in Duke's Office of Undergraduate Education.

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Victoria:

I would like to ask you [00:03:00] if you could share a little bit more about yourself, like what are some things that you do outside of work? Things like that.

Ana:

Yeah. I've had a really busy last few months. And so, I think outside of doing like grad school applications, I've been leaning in a lot into like game nights. I've been doing salsa, Victoria and I do salsa together when it's a lot of fun. I have been bingeing a lot of TV shows doing a lot of that. So yeah, those some three things of who I am outside of work and outside of school.

Victoria:

You're an amazing scholar. You're amazing peer colleague in your current position, right, as a spark fellow, but also, 2020 grad shout out 2020 grads who grew up, who literally graduated during the pandemic.

And fast forward four years later, now you're like in this transition period again. Getting your acceptances to grad school for PhD programs in sociology, so that's incredible and it's been such a great journey to witness you go through that, and I would love [00:04:00] if you could tell us a little bit more about that journey to grad school, when did it start, and we could just go based off of that.

So, when did the idea of going to grad school come about in your brain, like who cemented that seed, or planted that seed in your brain to go to grad school? How did that start?

Ana:

Yeah. Want to start there? Okay, I feel like I implanted that seed without knowing.

When I was little, and I was learning English. I remember that I fell in love with like reading and I just, I remember my teacher gave us ...we were learning how to read. I was like in a special group with students, which it was in Florida, it's called ESOL... English as a second language. And their strategy, I just remember, was having us engage with books a lot. And I loved it And I remember thinking when I was younger dang, if reading was a job, I would do that. That's why when I was little, I really, I wanted to be a librarian. I just wanted to be like in the [00:05:00] library surrounded by books.

And then eventually also writing, like just continue to grow and expand. And so when I got to college when I got to Duke and was trying to figure out yeah, what I wanted because even now on this side of things, when we're like we're talking to students or me and my job, like I do a lot of advising and first-year in sophomore advising and we're talking to them about what it means to declare your major. What does your major mean? Some of the questions we ask them to think about is, okay, but what do you what would you like to do after college? What's your like career aspiration? Or even if you don't have a clear sense of like exactly what you want to do, what are you good at?

What do you enjoy? And so, I was asking myself those questions as well, like freshmen, sophomore year. But I had no answer, and I thought I wanted to be a doctor that lasted like a week here after

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chem 99. I just couldn't do and. A friend and a mentor Elizabeth Barahona, she encouraged me to apply for [00:06:00] the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Research Fellowship and because I was interested in the in religious studies.

I remember at the very beginning, I was just getting such a like, ideal picture of it I don't, because I was still learning about what it, what what does a PhD mean? And so I was getting the sense of Oh, the prestige, right? Oh, to be like in the 1 percent of Latina or whatever the percentages, but like the very small percentage of Latinas, I get like a PhD, right? Like prestige of it was really attractive to me. Also, I think the romanticization of again, reading and writing oh, to read and write whatever you want whatever passion topic you want was also like, I was just getting like this very picturesque version of what grad school is.

And it wasn't until later that I started. While hearing like the other complete side of the spectrum of the difficulties and the competitiveness and the scary bits [00:07:00] and pieces of it, when my friends started experiencing grad school themselves.

Victoria:

Can you explain how that affected your thought process of still wanting to pursue a PhD?

Ana:

Yes, definitely. I..I so I actually enjoyed like writing my thesis. There were so many signals and signs to me being like, Oh, no, yeah, this is definitely for me I know I want to go to grad school. I remember my senior year. One of my friends who had just finished her, I think maybe her first year of her PhD program, came to visit me in Durham.

And she about how her first semester was going and she was at a place where it was really cold and she was still trying to find community because she had moved to a new place and Classes were hard and and she just felt really sad especially because of the winter time and you don't get the sunlight and or the daylight and she was just I think because she was in her own feelings, right?

And just it [00:08:00] was really hard. She was like, girl, don't do it. Save yourself, and so that is what I've been getting here and there when amazing, powerful, women are doing the thing they're in grad school, they're like doing their thing, but they'll have moments of just difficulties or whatever.

And so they just turned to me and say "Don't do it. Don't do it" And so it was really hard to hold because ,I know that this is what I want to do, but now someone that cares about me is telling me not to do it. What do I do? And so that actually caused some confusion for me.

I had I graduated into the pandemic. I knew I needed to take a break from school after having been in school since kindergarten.

Victoria:

When did you make that decision?

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Ana:

I was just so busy. I like, I hadn't taken the GRE. I did not set myself up to apply cause you have to apply. the fall of your senior year if you want to start. You know the next year and so I was just so busy writing my thesis and enjoying my senior year for the first time and just enjoying the college [00:09:00] experience I felt like I had met all my requirements and everything for my majors and so I felt more like

I had the ability to actually have an intentional time with my friends and I was living off campus And so right at the beginning of that semester, I realized I made the decision.

I'm just gonna find a job I'm just going to find a temporary job and take a gap year and then figure out when I want to apply because at the time I was convinced that it was going to be a religious studies PhD programs.

Victoria:

When did you decide how many years you were going to take off? And did any of your plans ended up unraveling differently than what you expected?

Ana:

In my head. I think I wanted to just do the standard one year should be enough for me to get everything together, figure out where and what and why? Umm...The issue was that it was 2020 the world paused and so did I. January 2020. I was writing my thesis. I was [00:10:00] trying to finish this paper. I had a job lined up because I worked as a student worker for an organization here on campus

I was like a student worker. I got along well with the staff my supervisor. And so they had told me like, we would love for you to come on and like full time if you're looking for something. And then I was. And so I did have a sense of security Ooh, great. Like once the time comes, like I know I have a job lined up.

This is going to be my gap year job. And yeah, so that everything was gonna play out like I felt good. I was excited to graduate, then the pandemic happened. And then slowly as time went on, we started hearing of people getting their offers rescinded.

Like my friends they were posting on LinkedIn, posting on Facebook Oh, this company rescinded my job because the pandemic, people were losing their jobs.

They rescinded my offer too. I met with the supervisor, and she was like, and I'm so sorry, but Duke has a hiring freeze. We cannot hire anybody new. [00:11:00] So we cannot bring you on board.

I thought I had something lined up for my graduation. And now I don't. And so with the job security, I was like, I was already thinking about the next step, which was grad school, but then I had to put that on hold to figure out the immediate future which was what is gonna pay my forthcoming bills and I wanted to buy a car I can't get a car without a salary and so I was renting, I didn't have a job.

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I was just living off of like my savings that I had. And I was just like ferociously applying to any and all jobs.

Ana:

I remember applying like I was like, Oh, shoot, I don't have experience. I don't have work experience. I don't have this. I don't have that.

Victoria:

Did you have internships at Duke?

Ana:

Umm no, not really. I had some jobs here and there, but not like I was a TA for a class. Had this Family Connects job. But I mostly did all like my summers and stuff was like research focused.

I was applying for humanities. So it wasn't like I [00:12:00] had like lab, experience. It like writing papers and like archival material stuff. And ...

Victoria:

That's still good experience make sure like everyone knows like you have to really know what you're talking about. But I guess like it doesn't help in the practical sense of when there's like a global pandemic and you need to be as marketable as possible to different industries. If you haven't invested your time during undergrad to have an internship in a particular industry devote your entire like undergraduate experience to curate more of your career goals.

I think that's where first-generation-low-income students sometimes forget that school and your grades really doesn't make up the entire college experience, right?

Ana:

Yeah, you're right. I just didn't know how to market my like, I didn't I couldn't make the connection the my ability to work on a team with my undergrad, student groups and stuff translated directly to being able to do that for a job.

Because I didn't have the [00:13:00] standard internship experience. I'm like, Oh my God, everything was a waste. I can't believe I, I spent a summer in Alaska instead of working at a consulting firm.

Victoria:

No, but that's incredible. The fact that you went to Alaska to study abroad is so incredible. You did an Engage or a Study Abroad?

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Ana:

I, so I did Duke engage in Hawaii and then the next summer I did a Duke in Alaska.

Victoria:

A Oh, wow. See, and those are incredible experiences that Duke offers that you can definitely use to your advantage, but it's just about knowing how to do that, how to market yourself it's difficult if you don't have that guidance.

So it's also good to know right for first-generation- low income students, even if you have questions about "How do I make my college experience make sense?" Ask.

Ana: Yes.

Victoria:

Ask people in industries. I still have to ask that and I'm at the point recently where I'm like, you know what? I think it's you who like made me think about it. Once you actually start talking to somebody about your experience and explaining [00:14:00] to them your journey, Things start to make sense, and you start to be able to understand how you got to where you are.

Victoria Narration:

It was at this point in the conversation where Anna and I continued talking about her different job pivots and how she landed the spark fellowship. If you want to know more about job searches post-grad and the highs and lows about all the hidden curriculum that has to do with those first couple months after you graduate, please let us know in the comments on SoundCloud or on social media. If you want to learn more about that for now, we're going to pivot and talk about Ana's journey to applying to graduate school. Starting three years after she graduated from undergrad.

Victoria:

When did you start applying again to grad school? How did that come about? And what has that experience been

Ana:

Yeah, so I applied twice. The first time was once I started my new job in in [00:15:00] 2022 that summer, fall, I started applying, I stuck with my guns, and I was like, religious studies, PhD that's what I'm going to do. I was a religious studies major. It made sense to me. I felt I was a little lost, like I would ask my friends and stuff and some professors for advice, but it felt like I wasn't asking the right questions. And so, the process was very overwhelming and I felt like I was doing things late.

And so, all that to say, I applied to three programs, just three religious studies, PhD programs.

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Victoria:

Can you say which ones, or do you want to say which ones?

Ana:

Yeah, it was Duke, Northwestern, and Yale. Big schools.

Victoria:

As you should!

Ana:

And and for, and honestly, because and this time around, the second time I applied, I was only applying to private schools. Because I'm DACA and I'm undocumented. And so private institutions have an extra level of protection for undocumented students versus state schools that have to abide by the state laws. And so [00:16:00] being undocumented and there are like undocumented grad students and here in North Carolina and Florida and Texas, all of that. But I made the decision that I just wanted to look at private schools. And so I applied to those three. Didn't even use like my melon mays perks. I didn't get a single fee waiver. I paid for all those three applications It's just so many things that I didn't know My statement of purpose it felt good at the time. But in retrospect, I did not know what I was doing

Ana:

Yeah, I, In January 2023 I got no's, and I was shocked, I don't, I just I really thought I was going to get in.

I was hurt. I was disappointed. I was sad. I cried so much. I was like, I'm never doing this again. I don't want to get rejected again in my life. And so Once I got that final no.

Also, it hurt. It hurt to get a no from Duke. That really hurt. Truthfully, it was so painful. Especially because I know the professors.

But it, [00:17:00] but honestly it just, I wasn't ready. My application was not there. I didn't know at the time, but it wasn't there. And so, I just put it aside. I avoided it. I'm not dealing with this. I don't want to think about it. I'm just going to focus on my job and happy.

Exactly. I had the Taylor Swift concert. There were so many things I was looking forward to. And then my summer I just was like, all right, it didn't happen. whatever. I'll see if I'm going to apply again. I don't even know.

Victoria:

When did you start applying again for your second round?

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Ana:

Over the summer, I met with one of my professors, Joseph Winters, he was my thesis advisor and he was one of the people who wrote my letter of recs for grad school. So, he was able to give me some feedback

It's all about fit, it's just like all the language and terminology that I didn't know at the time because I did feel like it was me. It felt like they said no to me, the human being, the person, the academic, right? And was like, religious studies, maybe it's not that one like maybe there's another one and he planted that [00:18:00] seed of Maybe I don't have to do religious studies to get a PhD and so I started exploring that a little bit.

I talked to John Blackshear who was Dean of students at the time here and I told them about what I wanted to study, what my project was. That was the first time I had said my research out loud to someone.

Marker: Ana's Phd Research Question

Ana:

I applied to PhDs in sociology, spoiler for kind of sociology of religion, immigration, and like political sociology. And I'm curious to study and analyze how immigrants, Latinx immigrants, when they come to the United States for those who find community and sanctuary, in a religious institution, like the church, how the church influences the way that they then integrate into society, racially, socially, economically, politically, and how they use their social networks in the church to find stability or not find stability.

And then I'm also interested in figuring out [00:19:00] ways we can talk to immigrants of religious backgrounds. Christian immigrants, like maybe more conservative leaning immigrants how to talk to them about social justice issues like, pro choice, or LGBTQ rights.

How do we talk to especially adult immigrants whose values come from religious texts or they have more conservative values, but still have the immigrant experience in the United States that for many young people tends to radicalize you more.

Victoria:

Yeah. And can you explain to us why you're interested in that? Why immigration? Why that intersection of politics and religion? I know you said that you were undocumented a couple moments ago, but yeah, tell us why this topic.

Ana:

That's exactly what your grad school statement of purpose asks you. It's like, why? Why do you want to do this? Comes with my upbringing. So, I immigrated to the United States with my family from Ecuador when I was three years old.

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I grew up in Florida and my family found a lot of stability and [00:20:00] resources from the Church. They used to be Catholic. They converted to Christianity, and I grew up in the Church and so our first car was free. Our first car was from the Church. My parents found Their community here in Florida and the Christian church. There's a lot of positive things in my life that I wouldn't be where I am today without that community that I had. And also there were really tough things that came out of my time at the church. Including becoming undocumented, a part of my, of the reason my family became undocumented was because when we tried to apply for an R1 visa, because my parents wanted to open up their own church or at least be part of the church.

Our application got denied and it was a whole thing and the church didn't really, help us because my parents wanted to leave that church and go to another one. So it you're leaving us my dad wanted to be a pastor. And so they switched to an R1, which is the religious visa. And that's for anybody who does any type of religious work. So like clergymen [00:21:00] pastors, things like that, you can apply to that one. You just have to have a good case and a church to sponsor you and so it just, it didn't work out. My parents wanted to leave that church anyways, because they were feeling exploited. They were just putting a lot into it and not getting much out of it. And financially, they just, they would be there almost every day. They were running some services and the church just wanted them to do more they just didn't have the capacity for it. And then they felt like they weren't. Receiving, they also wanted to feel like spiritually fulfilled and it just wasn't happening anymore. So they wanted to pivot to a new church. And so that's where my research interest comes from. I think as well as I got older and especially got to college I was an environmental science major during my undergraduate career.

And so I would talk to them about climate change and I would talk to them about like environmental racism. And it was hard to have some of those conversations, especially when it was things that very tangibly contradicted, the Bible. it was [00:22:00] frustrating because I know they're good people it was hard to have those conversations. I didn't know how to I didn't know how to like, get them to see my side without offending them and their beliefs and their religion. 'cause that's also not what I wanted to do.

Victoria:

I know you were frustrated about those conversations, but can you explain to us how that process came to make this an academic project? Cause those are extremely personal conversations.

Ana:

Yeah.

Victoria:

How did you come about being like, I want to study this?

Ana:

My first job helped a lot, actually. I did a lot of civic engagement work. My first job, it was, 2020 fall, which was the presidential election. And I was a TA for a Bass Connections called "elections and the pandemic". And so this was a class where students were working on projects related to voter access

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in person voting language barriers like absentee balloting, misinformation. There's so much misinformation happening

Victoria:

Yeah i think we were talking about that just the other day and I'm like super interested that's what I'm interested more so now Than [00:23:00] ever before, because we're at the turn Of another presidential

It's 2024. So we're talking about 2020 when you started thinking about your actual research project that you wanted to conduct not that you knew.

Ana:

No, and didn't.

Victoria:

and I love that. I love that. We're going like back to that point because it just shows, That all of your experience during years, it all connects.

Ana:

Looking back at it, and as I was writing my statement of purpose, the second time around, I was like crying a lot because , back in those moments I didn't know what I was going to do. Like nothing. .. There were no dots to connect.

As I'm writing my statement of purpose and this time more purposefully and I had asked more questions, I got more advisors, more people were reading it. I was talking through people with that, and I'd look back and the dots were there and when you're in the moment, like you don't see it, but like when I looked back and , how do I justify why I'm four years out of undergrad, have been working professionally for four years, have truthfully, and now I can say this now that I've been accepted, never taken a [00:24:00] sociology class in my life. I'm like, how does this make sense? Yeah, to your point I didn't take that job because I was looking to figure out what I wanted to do for grad school. I took that job because it aligned with my interests and I needed to pay my bills.

And so again, in retrospect, that class and the work that I did for the 2020 election canvassing talking to Latinx immigrant community members here in Durham. I was having those conversations that I couldn't have with my parents. And I was having the same issues of like, how do I convince you to not vote for Trump? Yeah, and even more practically to , how do grassroots organizations and like people on the ground doing election work? how do they canvas immigrants? How do they talk to them?

Victoria:

I love that it all makes sense, your passion and life experiences have brought you to this point where you can confidently say that you're going into a PhD sociology program in the fall. and it feels right.

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just feels like that's what you're meant to be doing. And it [00:25:00] falls in line with your purpose, with your values.

But I know you took your GRE this past year, and I know that you took it on a very short timeline. Can you explain to me a little bit? About that experience, signing up for it, studying for it, taking it, and do you really believe it's a barrier to entry or not?

Ana:

And so this was end of September that I was like, Oh, shoot. The latest I could take the GRE the recommended was end of October. And so I realized I had one month to study and then take the GRE. And so I registered for I think it was October 30th.

So like the day before Halloween, it was a Monday, I think. And, that was a terrible month. Like I was so stressed. I took a practice test and I did terribly, absolutely terribly. , vocab was never, has never been my strong suit. Like math. The time pressure of it [00:26:00] is really hard. and I was diagnosed with ADHD in 2021, but I haven't done, the official, paperwork to, get, Accommodations or anything so I knew that I was gonna have to just take this as is it was a stressful month, especially because I was taking care of my sister who still had surgery October was a busy work month. Yeah, if you ever take the GRE and at the end it asks you to submit scores, submit them. Because I later then had to pay, in theory, I had to pay 35 to send the scores to each school. And so if I was 14 schools, 35 each, like that's a lot of money. And you get three or four or five free, like right after you take the exam. I'm just gonna take it and it is what it is. And at that point I had just honestly accepted it. Didn't cry. I was like, okay this is what I'm working with.

And even to you, like I recommend talking to people that know you and especially, friends are great, but a lot of like my clarity and like feeling good with my personal statement and even my low test [00:27:00] scores was talking to Michael Damrocki. He's a director of academic engagement here at Duke. They do specialize advising and man, I was meeting with him Twice a week for weeks, even during winter break, I think we might have also met the week of Christmas or the week before , we were having conversations thinking about it, thinking out loud, and I hadn't ever really done that with somebody who understands the grad school process.

Once he got to know me and know my research, know me as a person and stuff, like it made everything much more manageable. And I had a clear sense of what I was getting myself into and like, why?

And the, and your, why is the most important thing for something like grad school? Like, why are you doing it?

Victoria:

Exactly. And , just to end this conversation on a very positive note tell us a preview of the universities and programs that have admitted you. If you feel comfortable to do so and. Just tell us what these next couple of [00:28:00] months you think are going to look like as you make your final decisions about where you're going to go

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Ana:

yeah, so I have officially been admitted to University of Notre Dame Emory University, and then University of Pennsylvania. And I, am at the interview stage with Baylor in Waco, Texas.

And so yeah, it's really exciting. I think these four are really great options for what I want to do. The next few months are going to look like I'm visiting these schools. I'm learning more about the programs learning more about the culture and the faculty and and yeah, come April, I should know where I'm going to head. So I'm really excited.

Victoria:

When you visit the schools, are they able to offer you any type of aid to be able to travel and go visit them?

Are you just using the money you make in your current job, to pay for that. I just want to be like more for those listening so that they understand.

Ana:

Actually, let me say that this time around, the second time I applied to 14 schools and I got, [00:29:00] Almost all of them paid for via fee waivers and then the ones that I couldn't get fee waivers for I use my professional development funds at work to pay for them That they also paid for my GRE essentially. I really I didn't pay for Almost anything. I think I paid for one app.

Victoria:

Did your waivers come from need based waivers or did they come from the Mellon Mays?

Ana:

I got from Mellon Mays, the majority of them, I applied to a few Ivy's. And so some of them if you say that you were , first gen or low income, they automatically waive it.

Victoria:

Even if you have a current salary right now that you're making

Ana:

Yes, but it varies. Every school has their own Baylor, for example, like they do not give any fee waivers unless you're like a certain scholar. I think it's a McNair but everyone else has to pay. And so then there's other schools. I applied to Loyola as well, and they don't even have a fee waiver.

So that one was like free to apply to. So it varies, but if yeah, [00:30:00] I got most of mine from Mellon Mays or being first gen.

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Victoria:

Exactly. Oh, my gosh. I love that. Thank you so much for giving us all your wisdom and for unpacking that incredible story of like you're for almost four years post grad and having the audacity to continue pursuing your dreams because it could be very daunting and almost it's I know it could become like a very jaded experience when you feel like I should be somewhere already with that or maybe I'm stagnant.

I know you mentioned things like that of your story and those moments of those highs and those lows. I'm just so glad that You're able to come here into the studio and be able to share that because I think a lot of people will benefit from hearing all your transparency and your vulnerability and the power that you hold. Because now all of that, all of those highs and lows become [00:31:00] power moving into that next journey that you're headed into. And I'm so excited for you as a friend, as a peer, and as a mentee, because you also mentored me and you continue to mentor me. Throughout my career, throughout my post grad life, so I'm like so grateful for.

Ana: stop. Thanks for being a great host

Victoria:

Thanks for listening to our stories from first generation low income college students and alumni at Duke. You can keep listening to new and old episodes that link straight onto the Duke Life website at dukeliflife.duke.edu under the Community and Belonging tab. Thanks for joining us and I can't wait to share more stories next time.