

## Transcript- Episode 2

**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 the current Nowicki fellow of student engagement at the office of undergraduate education. 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, navigate new career and educational opportunities, and enter new socioeconomic spaces.

If you're interested in understanding how community of special students at duke. Are carving their own legacies as the first gens, please. don't go away.

In this interview, we will be talking about building a strong network of mentors in college. I've brought on a good friend of mine. Elizabeth Barahona, duke alumni and current PhD candidate in history at Northwestern university. I actually met her on my own quest for mentors. We talk about the purpose of having a strong team behind you as you pave your own success. What do you think of when you hear the word mentor? Is it someone older? Someone who does what you want to do. Is it a college professor or a friend? In this conversation, we frame mentors as people who can help you form the kind of person you want to be and the kind of professional you want to emulate. Your network of mentors is the team behind you. That gives you advice in intervenes for you. In times that you may need help. In this informative and vulnerable conversation. Elizabeth shares her advice on [00:02:00] mentorship. She also shares some of the most valuable intervention.

Some of her mentors have had in her life as a young person and how they've affected her ultimate success today.

**Victoria:** Hi, Elizabeth.

**Elizabeth:** Hi, Tori. Good morning.

**Victoria:** Thank you so much. I just want to start off by having you introduce yourself maybe a little bit about who you are, where you're from, and where you're based currently.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah so I'm Elizabeth Barahona I am a sixth year PhD candidate at Northwestern and I study history so I'll be graduating next year with my PhD

I graduated from Duke University in 2018, where at Duke I studied history, so human rights and Latino studies. And I'm originally from Orlando, Florida, and now that, you know, I'm a student at Northwestern, I am living in Evanston, which is the north suburb of Chicago, but I really spend a lot of time in the city which is really close by.

So I'm so excited to be here with you, Tori. We've been friends for, Hmm, like a long time now, right? A couple years.

**Victoria:** Yeah, I want to say we probably met like at the cusp of the pandemic, so like 2020 maybe so it's been like almost what like four?

**Elizabeth:** Yeah, yeah, I, I remember, , I would go down to Durham a lot because I was doing my fieldwork, looking at the archives, seeing what I needed, and I remember reaching out to you and, like, wanting to get to know you just because, like, I'd heard of you from, our friends, Ana and folks in the Latino community at Duke. So yeah, I'm so glad that, you know, we've, we've stayed friends and we're, we're doing this podcast now.

**Victoria:** And I remember hearing a lot about you when I was in school, [00:04:00] because you're such a, like, a powerhouse leader in the Latinx community here. So thank you so much for being here.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah, of course.

**Victoria:** Yeah. Well, I wanted to chat today with you a little bit about your first-generation story here at Duke. And we were chatting a little bit before we started recording about mentorship and how important that was to you while you were here at Duke as an undergrad and how it continues to affect your life now as a PhD student.

Would you be willing to kind of share with everybody listening your journey to Duke first and then we can go into the themes that we want to touch such as mentorship?

**Elizabeth:** Of course, so starting in like 7th grade. I started looking into how to get into college. I would look on the internet at the time, like YouTube was just sort of starting out. I would look at the library, the resources, I would talk to older kids at my high [00:05:00] school, like just try to get as much information as possible.

So, when I applied, I think I applied to over 20 schools. And I made sure to get application fee waivers for all of them. So, I didn't pay a single application fee because I couldn't afford it. And I applied to Duke because the year before my senior year, I did an internship at the city of Orlando mayor's office with the city attorneys and my direct boss. She had graduated from Duke, and I'd never heard of the school. I'd never heard of the blue devils. I was like, girl, what is that?

And I, you know, she's like "Hey, I think you're a great student. You've been a great help this summer. And I think you should apply to the school I went to, I think you'd be a great candidate"

And I was like, sure, why not? And then, I look into Duke, it's it's a great school. It's in the South, it's in North Carolina, not too far from me. And I apply and she writes my letter of recommendation. And I, I get in, I, I was a good student. I was valedictorian of my high school.

I was president of everything. I was community service... queen. I was getting awards from the mayor of Orlando. I was, I was doing my thing. I was putting in my work, and so out of all the schools I got into, I got into Cornell. I got into Duke. I got into Florida schools. Duke was the best school I got into.

And not just that but Duke gave me a full ride. And on top of that, I had gotten like enough scholarships. I've got the Millennium Gates scholarship. I got all these like awards that would allow me really to go to any school without paying out of pocket. But I chose Duke because they were also offering full financial aid.

And so, it just made sense. It was close by, the weather was going to be great, and it was a top 10 school. The Latino Student Recruitment Weekend also helped, right? You come, there's a lot of Latino students just like you, you make friends. You have a great time, and it really seals the deal for a lot of us choosing between other schools.

And so, I arrived to Duke on my own with my two big bags. My parents couldn't afford to move me in. It was just by myself, and I made the best of it. And that's how I started out. At Duke.

**Victoria:** Elizabeth found that Duke was a great fit for her college career, with the proximity to home being relatively close and because of the financial aid and scholarships she had been awarded. However, she probably wouldn't have even thought about applying to Duke if it wasn't for one of her first mentors—her boss at the city of Orlando mayor's office—who was an alumni at Duke. We continue talking about what hopes Elizabeth had for her college years, which included getting the chance to reinvent herself in college.

**Elizabeth:** from the beginning, low income, first gen kids. We don't have, often, a network of folks who could tell us, prepare for this when you go to college.

Make sure you talk to these people or talk to my buddy who was my roommate in college, who's this big-time professor. We don't have those connections off the bat.

So it's steep learning curve in learning how to talk to professors and learning how to ask for letters of recommendation and learning how to move and carry yourself as a college student at an elite institution, it's tough, right?

Even to learning how to dress. learning how to eat, with proper manners at the dinner table, right? These are all skills that if, you didn't have them before, it's going to be a steep learning curve to learn them in college, but you will learn them, right? You will learn them either the easy way or the hard way.

So I remember from my freshman year coming into Duke, I was like, I got here because of my mentors. , my supervisor at the city attorney's office, my, my high school teachers, my club mentors that's how I got here and I will succeed in this place if I find. the right mentors who are going to guide me in this new experience.

So, from the bat, the cool thing about Duke is that you get a first year advisor who's a random person on campus, but as someone who is either the head of the Baldwin Scholars, is maybe the provost, maybe it's the president of the university, someone is going to be assigned to you at Duke to sort of hold your hand through your freshman year.

And that's how you get your first mentor. And I remember I got Dr. Zoila Erroll, who was the assistant vice president of student affairs. And she was wonderful. She really guided me. She would talk to other folks about me in really positive ways.

That would get my name around the school and Duke is a small school, right? So, your reputation matters, like who you are as a student, who you are as a scholar is going to matter. So right off the bat, it's important that you're kind, it's important that you're positive, and it's important that you,

are really conscious about the kind of young person you want to become because that reputation is going to follow you throughout your four years at Duke and maybe even after.

So building a network of mentors in different ways and capacities from older students to faculty, to administrators, to mentors in the community are all going to be important in your success. At university?

**Victoria:** I appreciate you, sharing about specifically like the first year, right?

Being assigned an advisor. And how to really, utilize that advisor. What would you say to those who are entering in their first year at Duke about how to really utilize that first-year mentor?

**Elizabeth:** Yeah, I would say ask, ask the questions that you are curious about because, you might not be able to ask your parents. Hey, I have to get rid of my wisdom teeth, but I can't afford it. Do you have any advice on where to go or what to [00:11:00] do, or. Hey, I am feeling sad and I'm feeling overwhelmed and I feel like it's too hard for me to handle.

Do you have any resources for me? And they know, they can send you to CAPS. They can send you to financial aid. They know the tricks. All the way to, to saying, I came in thinking I wanted to do law, but now I'm thinking of doing history. I don't want to disappoint my parents.

How do I talk to them about this? Those were the conversations that I was having my first year. So not being afraid to ask these questions and not being afraid of being judged. They have gone through so many students that I'm sure they're not shocked or surprised at the questions that you have to ask.

And also having the courage to go to folks that aren't your mentors and being outright saying, Hey, Professor P. Hose, I've enjoyed your class. I really look up to you as a scholar. I think, we have a great connection, and I would love for you to be my mentor. Would you be willing and able to do that?

And they'll say yes, or they'll say, no, I don't have the capacity for it. And that's fine. But you put yourself out there and that's sort of what I did. I would go to professors that I really admired and one was my first year, first class ever at Duke professor, Peter P host. And he's still one of my mentors.

He's still someone that I hit up by text or email. We meet up every couple of years and it's still someone that I could ask, right? He's a full professor in history. And. That's what I'm aspiring to be now. So, it's really having the courage to ask the hard questions, even if they're not academically related.

Hey, I'm experimenting with drinking for the first time, and I want to do it in a way that's fun, but you know, I also have this peer pressure from this group that I'm in, like asking the hard questions and having the courage to ask people you admire to be your mentors is something that I advise. Incoming students to do wherever you go to college. The worst thing that they could say is no. And the best as an answer or a redirection to another answer.

**Victoria:** Want to like circle back to one of the things that you mentioned about not disappointing your parents with Your different choices that you're making in college. How was that conversation

like for you with your mentors? Can you give us a specific example of a conversation that you had with a mentor about conflict that you were having with your academic journey at Duke.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah. So, the big one was right. I'm a child of immigrants. So usually, the expectation from our parents is to become a doctor, an engineer, or a lawyer. Mine was lawyer. Almost all my family was undocumented and being a lawyer was what I was told to be since I was little. And so, I come to Duke. With, full intention of being a lawyer, I was going to study public policy, apply to law school after Duke, the whole thing.

But I remember taking public policy classes and I just absolutely did not enjoy them. I thought that, the lessons which they were just not for me, right? I wasn't meant to calculate the cost benefit analysis of undocumented person in the U. S. Like these weren't the type of conversations that I wanted to have in my four years at Duke that I thought would grow me as a person.

So, when I started looking into history I really loved it. It really spoke to me. I felt like I could really grow and be myself, but I knew that the life of a historian would entail a PhD and maybe not the same, pay as an attorney. And I had to break the news to my parents that I didn't want to be a lawyer, that I wanted to pursue history, and that I was maybe looking into being a history professor and my parents had never heard of this. They didn't really know. And I didn't know what it would entail as a profession, but I knew it was the right thing for me. So I had to ask my mentors like, Hey, this is my choice. And how do I tell my parents?

It disappointed them for a long time. But at the end of the day, my mentors were like, you just got to let them know. [00:15:00] And. You are going to be okay. You're going to graduate from Duke. You're going to go on your journey, and you will be fine.

You will make decent money. You will pursue what you want, and it'll be okay. And your parents will one day be okay with it too, even if from the onset, they're not. And they were right. My parents were really disappointed up until a couple of years ago.

But you know, I'm graduating with my PhD next year and my parents get to brag that I'm the only PhD in the family so I'm going to get a tenure track job next year. So it's going to all work out. But those are the tough conversations that you have to have with your mentors.

**Victoria:** Having tough conversations with people who you trust, look different for everyone. In Elizabeth's case. She shared an example of a tough conversation she had with one of her most trusted mentors in college. Professor Sally Deutsche. The conversation resulted in Elizabeth getting the help that she needed. At a time where she was too overwhelmed. To resolve it alone.

**Elizabeth:** One of my mentors from Duke that is still is my mentor and one of my closest, friends, I'd say, her name is Dr. Sally Deutsch and she retired from Duke, but she is a historian, and she became my thesis advisor my sophomore year when I started writing it and she still reads my dissertation chapters, gives me feedback on my grants.

So one example is I was having a hard time in my Latin American history class. I had a professor who I felt would interrupt the woman in his course often, more often than the men. And I was a sophomore. Like I'd never felt hostility from a professor before in the way that I was feeling it in this class.

And so it got to a point where I ran into Dr. Deutsch's room sobbing, telling her how I was feeling, how this had been ongoing from the beginning of the semester and just feeling, , vulnerable. I hate to cry in front of folks, but I just felt like it was so tough for me to deal on my own. And she was the person that I could trust and that I could feel like, maybe she'll judge me, but at the end of the day, I need help because I don't know what to do.

So, I go to her, I tell her what's going on. She consoles me, she validates my feelings.

She's like, don't worry about it. I'm going to make a few calls, and this is gonna end, we will take care of this. And so, I go to class the next week and the professor apologizes about their constant interruption.

And I have a pleasant rest of the semester because of the call. And conversation that Sally Deutsch had with this professor, I felt so taken care of and so relieved that I was like, wow, the power that she has to do this for me was so incredible. And so yeah, like mentors will have your back.

Sally Deutsch later took on, another student that I recommended to her that wasn't a historian and she took care of her too. My friend went off to law school in Boston and Sally bought her a brand new coat to brave the winter because my friend could not afford one, right? A good mentor will care about you. They'll advocate for you. They'll fight for you. As we get older, right? Like the folks listening might be incoming first year students, but one day they will also be mentors, and so it's also our responsibility to give back that love and care that we were given to folks that need it.

**Victoria:** Yes. And I hope that to the folks listening that they can understand that when we say these things, we're also like actively practicing them.

In our journeys, I feel like you've been that person for me, like a mentor to me in my network of mentors that I have felt just so comfortable sharing with you. And a lot of what we talk about has been incredibly pivotal for me and transformative for me because I see so much of who I want to be also like in you.

And so, I just really appreciate being able to archive, like this little conversation too that I know is like, it's not little to me, but it is, it is a small portion of just the big impact that you have also on other Latina women and first-generation folks.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah, I think Tori, you made a really good point. You have to surround yourself with people you wanna become, right? So, I think there's a lot of peer pressure. Your first year as a college student, wherever you go, you might find yourself in a group of friends that you might not, share values with or.

You might find yourself in an organization that gives you a sort of social status, but maybe you don't find that these people really have the best intentions for you in mind.

So, I think that it's really important off the bat as a first year student to be really intentional in the type of relationships that you're going to build throughout your four years at university, because these people will

Yes, everyone will grow and transform and hopefully grow for the better, but setting yourself up with a group of people that don't have your values and aren't where you want to be.

Or have those goals will set you back. So be intentional in making friendships and mentorship relationships with older students that you find inspirational, that you find are good role models for you and surround yourself with them. When I was a freshman, I, organized a group of Latina woman who I thought were an inspiration, who I thought were good role models, who I thought, I wanted to surround myself with.

And I did. So I joined a sorority, of the woman that I admired. Really, that's what it was. And they are still some of my greatest and closest friends. They are now journalists at the New York Times and they are now PhD students across the country. And they are now professors across the country.

And they are no longer my mentors, but my peers and my mentees are no longer my mentees. Now they're my peers. So really surround yourself with people who love you, who want to see you grow and succeed, who show nothing but kindness and love and who are willing to help you grow. In all aspects of life.

**Victoria:** Thank you so much. I really appreciate that advice. And I think a lot of people are going to take that with them as well when they hear the podcast. Is there anything else that You can think of that we didn't touch on that. you want to talk about before [00:22:00] we wrap up.

**Elizabeth:** I think the mentors that you have, you keep the ones you have for life. Eventually they become your peers, but you continue, you have to continue to gain new mentors at every stage of your life. So my mentors as a first year student at Duke were different from my mentors as a senior at Duke.

And so even now, I continue to have an extensive mentorship system that I, ask from and now I've become a mentor to different type of students based on my position. So no, they're ongoing. just need the best team we could make to reach our goals in college.

So, you made it here, you're going to make it here and now it's the How do we get to the next step and what are our next goals?

And what team is going to get me there? So, I think that's, that's it.

**Victoria:** Thank you so much for sharing all of the highs and lows. I love this episode because we really get to explore. All the highs and lows of, building mentorship and being a first generation college student. I think that's really encapsulates a lot of that experience. And thank you so much for being so transparent and vulnerable with us today.

Is there any way that people can reach you if they have questions in particular, maybe they might be interested in studying history at Duke or getting a PhD in history and want to like directly reach out to you. Is there a way for them to be able to do that?

**Elizabeth:** So, if you just search up my name and Northwestern, you can find my email. I think, maybe we could link it to this podcast, my email, but yeah, absolutely. I'm on LinkedIn. I'm on all the

platforms. So feel free to reach out if you have any questions or you just want to chat about anything. But yeah, I really appreciate you, Tori, for putting this on.

**Victoria:** Yes, thank you so much, girl. I really appreciate you being here. You're that girl. You're one year away from getting your PhD and every single step of the way you've been that girl.

Speaking to Elizabeth is always such a great time. Because she has so much wealth of knowledge and provide such great advice for young people, navigating new college experiences. I was left the most impressed by all of the questions. Elizabeth asked her mentors during college. Because it wasn't really what I thought she was going to say. Having to ask your professors questions about how to navigate ordinary things that we need help with, like how to get your wisdom teeth taken out during college and what to do.

If you're feeling sad or overwhelmed with life. I also found some of the more complicated questions. Very helpful. Like Elizabeth experience, asking her mentor about how to address an uncomfortable or inappropriate class dynamic with a hostile professor.

I think these kinds of relationship dynamic questions are something that more students should do. With the professors that they trust. I tried to go to my professor's office hours in college. To talk about a wide variety of things ranging. From more personal topics. Like my mental health. And physical health. To more school related topics like my academic interests. Office hours can be a place of refuge for a busy and overwhelmed first-generation college student. If you're willing to ask the questions, bravely and vulnerably.

This episode was a great segue to other topics that we will cover on more episodes. Like managing your mental health in college. Mentorship during the grad school application process and more. I hope you enjoyed listening to this episode of the duke life pod. And keep tuning in.