

## **Scholar Holler Podcast**

### **Episode 1 with Azu Pacheco: Selecting The Right Program For You**

Manuel Galaviz:

Welcome everyone to Scholar Holler podcast, series by LibroMobile Arts Co-op LM Voices. I'm your host, Dr. Manuel Galaviz. I have a PhD in Sociocultural Anthropology. I am first-generation formerly undocumented. And from 2003 to 2009, I was a construction worker hanging drywall in Southern California. My trajectory in higher education has certainly been a challenge as much as a unique journey.

Manuel Galaviz:

So if you're listening, then perhaps you're applying to graduate school or interested in graduate studies. Whatever's the case with the help of my colleagues and friends, we will share some advice and tips that we wish we would've known as first-gens when we were initially pursuing graduate school.

Manuel Galaviz:

Joining me for our very first episode is Azu Pacheco, a PhD candidate at the University of Texas at Austin. In today's episode, we will be discussing the process of selecting the ideal graduate program for you. And why is it important that you select the program that matches your needs and your desires. So please help me in welcoming Azu Pacheco.

Manuel Galaviz:

Azu welcome.

Azu Pacheco:

Thanks Manny. I'm really happy to be here with you all.

Manuel Galaviz:

Well, thank you for joining us. In true fashion of LibroMobile for all our guests, whenever we have a presentation, whenever we have poets come by, presenters, anyone who visits us, we like to introduce some through what we call our comadre, compadre or compadrex introduction.

Manuel Galaviz:

And what that is, is how we came to know you, how we know each other, how we are relatives in that way. And this stems from the different traditions that we found in Austin, Texas at Resistencia Bookstore. So shout out to Red Salmon Arts and Resistencia Bookstore in Austin.

Manuel Galaviz:

And I met you because we were in the same cohort, in the anthropology department at UT Austin. And I think 2015 awhile back, but it's been a few years. I remember hearing about you before you were in the program from other professors, Kamran Ali and Dr. Charlie Hale who were saying that they had this

scholar who was coming in from California and they were very excited, and sure enough I met you I think, on the first day during the orientation.

Azu Pacheco:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Manuel Galaviz:

And then we had a class that was very difficult, at least for me, the social court to this day, I'm still a little anxious about it. And it keeps me up at night to this very day. And it's all social theory, so it was definitely not very pleasant in terms of reading things about old white men constantly.

Manuel Galaviz:

Nevertheless, that was the one way that we were introduced to each other, but in the same light being in Texas Austin, we had the opportunity to go to concerts, just hang out party and have barbecues and really just enjoy each other's presence with other folks and with the Austin Latinx Communities, which was always fantastic, on-campus and off-campus, so it's something that's very unique.

Manuel Galaviz:

I want to thank you for joining us today, and I'm going to read your more official bio, just to let our listeners know just all the important things you've been doing and perhaps where you're coming from as a scholar, but also as someone who's very much engaged in various transnational communities.

Manuel Galaviz:

Azu is an Indigenous Latinx first-gen student from South Central Los Angeles and Guatemala. Azu is a doctoral candidate in Latin American studies. Their work combines critical public health, Latin American studies and Indigenous studies. Most current work is on community-based documentation project of the Indigenous Xinca systems of medicine. So thank you, welcome.

Azu Pacheco:

Yes, Manny. Thank you for those two very wonderful introductions. I do remember when we first met, that first day at orientation. It was really exciting because there were three students of color there in that cohort. We were like half of the cohort or something like that. And that made me so excited. I was like, "Yay. I have company here."

Azu Pacheco:

And it turns out that we were all from California too-

Manuel Galaviz:

Exactly, yeah.

Azu Pacheco:

... which was crazy. I was like, "Wow, I can't believe I had to come to Texas to meet other cool..." Kelly, grad students. I feel like that was a really exciting moment for me. Things then took a turn later on at UT, but I can talk about that a little later.

Manuel Galaviz:

No, thank you. I tell people this, that my master's degree is in Latin American studies from LLILAS, Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies. And while I was a LLILAS student, my first year as a grad student ever, I did not have one white professor. My professors were Latinx. Perhaps they were white Latinx, but they were Latinx, and the only one that fit that, I would say Bill is from Puerto Rico, and an amazing archeologist.

Manuel Galaviz:

But otherwise it was people of color, POC, and it was something that I never experienced ever in my life as an undergrad. Even then I kept thinking, I'm like, "Wait, have I ever had a black professor?"

Manuel Galaviz:

And these are things that sometimes, a lot of us can go through our education system without knowing, or having that experience. But it's something that's sad in many ways because it really shows those inequities that exist.

Manuel Galaviz:

Seeing POC students in your cohort is wonderful. And I think that was one of the reasons why I appreciated Austin. That's very much a reality that there's a lot of first-gens there and there's a lot of POC students, and definitely a very welcoming community there.

Azu Pacheco:

For sure. Oh my goodness. That's actually one of the main reasons that I was excited about UT Austin, because to be honest, I never thought that I would leave California because I was like, "I'm in California. Why would I leave California?" Especially for Texas, which I know nothing about, I just knew it was a Republican state.

Azu Pacheco:

But when I came to visit here, I honestly thought I wasn't at all. I was trying to be polite because the university was paying for my flight and I didn't want to be rude. So I was like, "Okay, I'll just go, meet people, whatever, do that thing, but I know I won't go there." But then when I was on campus and I was primarily at LLILAS, at the Lozano Long Institute, it was full of students of color.

Azu Pacheco:

A lot of Latinx folks from Latin America, international students, but also first-gen students here and I was just blown away. I was like, "What? Is this even real? Is this even possible?" Because actually the week before I visited UT I had gone to the accepted student event at UCLA. I was excited about it because it's in Los Angeles and some of my family's there. Like seriously, I think at least for my cohort, I was the first-gen, like the only first-gen student.

Azu Pacheco:

There were primarily white cohort and there were some other students of color, but they were definitely not working class backgrounds. And so those stark differences, it was just so evident from the beginning. I didn't feel really comfortable to be honest, but part of me was like, "It's UCLA, this is how the Academy is. It's primarily white. That's just the reality."

Azu Pacheco:

So I was 90% sure to be honest that I was going to accept the UCLA offer. But then once I visited UT Austin, I was just amazed. I was like, "Wow, I can't believe there's just an actual place that has so many students of color, from all sorts of backgrounds and both masters and doctoral students." I was just amazed, and I think that definitely was a big reason why I ended up making that move to Texas.

Manuel Galaviz:

Well, I'm glad you made that move. This should also be an educational lesson, if we have any professors out there or any administrators listening, you're losing students because you're not diversifying your cohorts.

Manuel Galaviz:

Alright, I had a similar experience with UC Irvine when I was admitted to their PhD program. And there was two students of color, me being one of them, who were admitted to that cohort. And there was at least 18 people at that open house. So I'm just looking around, who's there and what's there. I was like, "Okay, I should stay in Austin, at that point."

Manuel Galaviz:

I want to ask you before we move on, if you could just tell us a little bit about your research, about what you're doing as a doctoral candidate at UT Austin. If you could share a little bit about your research and what you've been doing in the past few months, that would be excellent, so our listeners can know who you are, what you do.

Azu Pacheco:

Yeah. Okay. I am currently, as you mentioned, a doctoral candidate in Latin American studies at UT. Latin American studies is of course, an interdisciplinary department. I feel really at home there because my work is interdisciplinary. I think I was trying to do interdisciplinary work before I knew what it was called, to be honest, and I feel finally there's a place. In LLILAS I found a place where all the dimensions of my work makes sense.

Azu Pacheco:

I come from a background in public health, I got my bachelor and a master's in public health. And then I also have a master's in Latin American studies. I did a dual degree from my master's, which I can talk about later on, what that means. And so when I came to UT, I was actually in the anthropology department at first because I was interested in doing global health anthropology or medical anthropology type of work.

Azu Pacheco:

So currently my research is in one of my communities, the Indigenous Xinca Pueblo in Southeastern Guatemala. So I'm helping to document the Indigenous system of medicine in that region. And part of me, has always dreamt of doing something like this in the sense that it's something that's contributing, a concrete project, to one of my communities, which for me is important.

Azu Pacheco:

And then also, it has allowed me to be able to return to Guatemala, as an excuse to return to Guatemala to do research. But I actually have spent a lot of time with family and just learning a lot about my history

as well. So I feel like my research is definitely personal, as well as academic. And that's where I'm at, helping out with this documentation project and really seeing, and being available for whatever other community based projects come up in the region.

Manuel Galaviz:

Dang. No, that sounds amazing. You brought something up that I think is very intriguing to first-gens is, we often find ourselves doing research within our own communities. And it's not that we want to expose these paradigms, whatever it might be, to the world, but rather it's often from a state of trying to understand ourselves a little better. And that's what I feel is very beautiful about this, that you're coming at this with your doctoral training, but also as someone who's there who can... In a way it is a privilege to be able to study yourself.

Manuel Galaviz:

And let's be honest, it's also great to spend significant amount of time with our families, with our relatives, that otherwise we might only see during holidays, or for a weekend or two at a wedding or whatever it is, but it is quite an honor to be able to do that. So I'm glad you've mentioned that.

Azu Pacheco:

Yeah, exactly. I feel like, "I took advantage of the system," to be able to do this. To do this, a personal project that is also academic and is also relevant to the Xinca Pueblo. I feel really blessed to be in an interdisciplinary program that supports me in that.

Manuel Galaviz:

Yeah. And then that's key to have that support from your institution where you're a grad student. Because often that's not the case, if you're going to a program that might be in one specific discipline, they might expect you to know and only work within those theories and also those methodologies. And even if you try to explain something that's outside and even maybe if it's not even that radical, they might look at you a little bizarre and perhaps make it very difficult for you to graduate, and complete that degree.

Manuel Galaviz:

You're bringing up a lot of important things here. You bring up this issue of taking advantage of the system, but I think it's not necessarily taken advantage of, because the system has taken advantage of us so much that I think it's just inverting that and saying, "Hey, it's repatriation," or whatever. I don't know what you want to call it, but definitely reconstituting that for our community's advantage.

Azu Pacheco:

Exactly. And I actually laughed and I did my little air quotes when I said that, but of course y'all can't see that. Like you're saying, it's not really taking advantage, I think it's just being strategic in a way that is beneficial for myself and my community.

Azu Pacheco:

Because I have access to funding, that allows me to have the time to be in Guatemala and to be able to pay rent during the summer and pay my bills through my research funds, but also have the privilege to be in Guatemala working on a project that I'm passionate about.

Azu Pacheco:

I feel like, "It's okay to play the system." These systems, these institutions are not created for us. So I feel like when we are there, you do the best you can and be strategic to meet your needs. To have these institutions meet your needs.

Manuel Galaviz:

At what point did you realize you wanted to pursue a graduate degree? Or when did that idea start emerging in your mind? Or when did that become something that you saw as a reality?

Azu Pacheco:

Yeah, I knew about med school since I was in high school, because I wanted to go to med school originally. So for me, grad school equaled med school. But then once I was in undergrad, I found out about public health, which I didn't even know that field existed.

Azu Pacheco:

And from there, I found out more about, master's programs, PhD programs and things like that. But at that point in my life, I was still pretty obsessed about going to medical school. I feel like I didn't pay too much attention to any other option.

Azu Pacheco:

I actually ended up doing a post-baccalaureate program for pre-medicine and that's when I found out about PhDs and these other routes. So I ended up deciding to do a master's in public health because that was the field that included community-based work. And I love being out in different communities, just talking to people about health needs and just health systems in general.

Azu Pacheco:

So I knew that a master's in public health was where I wanted to go. So that's how I got my foot in the door for grad school.

Manuel Galaviz:

You're still going to be a doctor, not an MD, but PhD, which equally is as valid and amazing.

Azu Pacheco:

Actually there's a story I wanted to share about, when I first found out about PhD programs, because it stands for doctor of philosophy. And I remember thinking like, "Well, I'm not a philosopher. Why would I even apply to those?" So that was me in undergrad. I remember hearing about a doctorate of philosophy and I was like, "Okay, that's not for me, I'm not a philosopher."

Azu Pacheco:

And then later on it was that I actually found out that that's just a title. That there's a bunch of different disciplines and fields, that grant PhD programs, it's not just limited to the traditional philosophy.

Manuel Galaviz:

Yeah. I remember hearing that too. And I think I was in community college because I had a professor who had a PhD and they mentioned what it was, and I discussed it with another friend of mine, shout

out to my friend Daniel Rangel from Escondido, an amazing artist, someone who we would have these conversations with.

He's the one who put it into more perspective. He's like, "No, when you are a PhD, that means that you're creating philosophy about whatever discipline you're in." And I was like, "Okay, that makes sense." So it was an artist who showed me the way of the PhD.

Azu Pacheco:

Wow. That's so interesting. And that is a good way of putting it. It is about, "Knowledge creation," not necessarily already being a pro.

Music Interlude

Manuel Galaviz:

So shout out to Gloria Estrada from Viento Callejero for that wonderful musical score. Definitely check them out. They're from LA, they play amazing Cumbias, just great music to get you dancing, to get you in a great mood. If you're thinking about graduate school, it's great music to just have while you're in graduate school too, to keep you happy and then to get some endorphins going, because it can be draining.

Manuel Galaviz:

But at the same time, we're not talking about how draining grad school can be or how those seminars can really take a toll sometimes on your time and energy. What we're talking about is getting into graduate school and selecting the right program and specifically why it's important to select the right program that fits your needs.

Manuel Galaviz:

We're chatting with Azu Pacheco, PhD candidate and Latin American studies at the University of Texas at Austin. Can you just explain some of your own trajectories in to selecting the graduate programs that you were a part of. How did you come to choosing the programs that you went into?

Azu Pacheco:

Yeah. So as I shared before, I feel like my journey into grad school was definitely like ¿Como le dicen? long-winded. Because like I mentioned, I really wanted to go to medical school and after getting my undergrad degree in public health, I did pre-med post-baccalaureate program, which is an informal program pretty much, that helps you to meet the requirements to then apply to medical school.

Azu Pacheco:

And while I was doing that, post-baccalaureate at San Francisco State, I actually found community-based public health field. And I was so drawn to it that I was like, "Okay, well, I guess I'm just going back to public health again for my masters." And I applied to a few master's programs, and then I found out about this program at San Diego State that had a dual degree.

Azu Pacheco:

So they had Latin American studies and public health. And by that time I knew that I wanted to work in Guatemala, so I was like, "Perfect. This will allow me to be able to do that." And sure enough, that was actually the beginning of my academic and research, public health work in Guatemala.

There's actually a lot of different types of dual master's degrees. If anyone is interested in that, I feel like now there's such a variety out there. Like I mentioned, I did a master's in public health in Latin American studies and it was a three year program. Most master's programs are two years, but the dual degrees tend to be about three years.

Azu Pacheco:

And so once I was doing my research for my master's thesis in Guatemala, I actually was working at a small hospital in Guatemala, it's called Hospitalito Atitlán.

Azu Pacheco:

They actually had a lot of relationships with universities in the US and they received a lot of medical volunteers from the US and just other parts of the world. And so I was able to interact with a lot of professionals doing global health.

Azu Pacheco:

And at that point I realized, I was like, "Well, with a master's in public health, I can't really design my own programs, or even apply for funding for them because for that you need a PhD or an MD." You need to have a "Professional degree." And I was like, "Oh, no. So I guess I have to go into a PhD now."

Azu Pacheco:

So that's how I decided to do a PhD. As I mentioned before, my interests are medical anthropology, public health, global public health. And so those were the programs that I ended up applying to. And that's how I ended up at UT. I was accepted to the anthropology department, but then later on, I figured out, a lot of things happened, I'll keep it brief.

Azu Pacheco:

One of the main things that happened was also understanding, coming to UT and realizing that it wasn't the department I thought it would be. Primarily because three women of color left the department that year as we were coming in-

Manuel Galaviz:

The summer before we went in.

Azu Pacheco:

Right. Yeah. And I was like, "Those literally are the people that I want to work with." This is not the department I applied to. Other things happened with my funding, I felt like, "No, this is no longer a good fit for me."

Azu Pacheco:

And my advisor happened to be in Latin American studies. He was actually the chair. And I think that also played a role in why I ended up transferring to Latin American studies. So it was definitely a journey to finally find a program that felt like the right fit for me.



But ever since I started in Latin American studies, we call it LLILAS, the Lozano Long Institute for Latin American Studies. I felt definitely at home in terms of my research. Because it is an interdisciplinary program and not only do they encourage, but they require you to have interdisciplinary work.

Azu Pacheco:

And so finally I felt like I was in a place where I was like, "Okay, all my interests make sense now, public health, Latin American studies, Indigenous studies. I finally felt a sense of, this is where I want to do my work, you know?"

Manuel Galaviz:

Yeah. And you mentioned a few things there that I think perhaps we can touch on it a little bit more and just your journey to arrive into a program and then having... Because I don't think that's very common, when someone goes to a program they realize it's not ideal for them, it wasn't a good fit.

Manuel Galaviz:

To have the ability to then transfer to another program, that is a great fit. And I feel that's one place where a lot of universities lose students, is that they promise something and then you show up and you realize it's not what they promised. Then it looks very different. The faculty definitely looks different.

Manuel Galaviz:

To speak of UT anthropology, as someone who graduated from there recently, I saw that transition happen, but obviously I wasn't aware of the chisme, you know the real rooted chisme, but you get wind of it, and it definitely had to do with biases and there is an implicit bias towards women of color, not only in that department, but you also see it across the university.

Manuel Galaviz:

And very recently there's a lawsuit against the anthropology department, or there's a movement towards a lawsuit that I can't speak of too too much, but it is something that's been spoken of very publicly already in terms of, not only retention and tenure of faculty of color, but specifically Latinx Hispanic faculty. So there's a report out there that that was put together by various faculty members and highlighting the inequities in payment, and also inequities in retention of faculty of color in Latinx faculty.

Manuel Galaviz:

So these are things that we don't know about, the politics that are happening in departments. And often, at least in my case, I was just excited that I graduated from undergrad. And then this thing about graduate school came up and someone was like, "You should consider graduate school." And I was like, "Okay." And I had heard that UT was a good university. And it is a wonderful university, but at the same time, I wasn't aware of the internal workings or what's going on behind the doors, and how some things can be very negative or perhaps can then affect students, the politics of the department itself.

Manuel Galaviz:

To research that, to know that, you really need to know someone who there. You really need to speak with people. So when you were applying to programs, did you reach out to anyone who was already a graduate student or perhaps a faculty member, did you have a mentor to guide you through this process?

Azu Pacheco:

Yeah. So for me, I feel like this whole journey to a PhD program was so ¿como se dice? ... long, because I actually didn't have a mentor. Some of my friends, they have shared that they do have mentors from undergrad and things like that. But I just didn't, and part of that is probably because I was just jumping around a lot and trying to figure out what was the best fit for me, while also balancing a lot of family responsibilities and things like that. So I feel like my mind was only half present into really figuring out the grad school situation. That would be a piece of advice I would give people for sure, to seek out a mentor or just someone who can help you really think through this process and guide you. More than likely you're going to have multiple people you can talk to, because they'll all serve different purposes.

Azu Pacheco:

If you can find some advisor or mentor at your institution, that would be great, because they can walk you through the process in terms of the bureaucracy, their requirements, the letters of rec, the statements that you have to write.

Azu Pacheco:

You need people who can give you feedback and edit those because those do need to be edited multiple times-

Manuel Galaviz:

And that all takes time.

Azu Pacheco:

Yes. That all takes a lot of time. I was fortunate to have two really close friends who were already in grad school. And so they shared a lot of their experiences. And then just along the way, through jobs and just different places like that, I would talk to professors or my bosses, and I would get advice and tips here and there.

Azu Pacheco:

So I feel like anyone you can talk to, to be honest and ask advice, talk to them, because you do want those different perspectives. And actually, if you have an idea of universities that you're really interested in, reach out to the grad students.

Azu Pacheco:

Most universities on their websites will have, our current student profiles and you can reach out to them. Because honestly they're the ones that are more likely to give you the honest insight, like the tea into the department. And you really do need to know those things, because on paper, the programs may be one thing, but like what happened to me, I've actually met a few other people who had similar experiences where after a year or two, they ended up transferring out of the programs because it just wasn't the right fit.

Azu Pacheco:

Just talk to everyone, just let people know you're interested in these programs. Because sometimes also opportunities come from unexpected places. Right?

Manuel Galaviz:

Exactly.

Azu Pacheco:

So you might have someone suggest the program that you didn't even know exist and maybe that's the right program. Just be open. I feel like I was almost secretive, because I was just really insecure. I was like, "Am I even going to get into grad school? Because my undergrad GPA wasn't really that great."

So I feel like that was probably a part of why I didn't seek out as much mentorship as I probably could have, but like I said, through jobs, through friends, I've managed to inform myself enough. And then once I was in grad school, then you have your own experiences to guide you.

Manuel Galaviz:

That's how I was, the same way. I came in from a Cal State to apply to masters and PhDs. Just one faculty member who really believed in me. In my undergrad at Cal State San Bernardino, talking to other professors, but I feel like I didn't know what to do.

Manuel Galaviz:

I was always told that you could email graduate students, but I didn't even know how to approach that subject or what do you even say. I do want to encourage our listeners, again people are there. If it's a public university, the professors are public servants.

Manuel Galaviz:

I know some professors might not want to hear that because they might think that they're above, what something, or that they're just amazing and great. But no, it's a public institution, their public workers are there to provide a service to the public. You're the public. If you live in California and you want to apply to a UC, your tax dollars, your parents' tax dollars are all going to pay for those resources that are there.

Azu Pacheco:

You reminded me of something I wanted to stress Manny, that when you're applying to these grad programs, from my personal experience and the experience of some friends going through this process, I feel like there's a lot of insecurity around, whether we'll even be accepted, if our research ideas are even considered good or something.

Azu Pacheco:

I learned that we tend to be our harshest critics. Right?

Manuel Galaviz:

Yes we are.

Azu Pacheco:

Yeah, we are. Just go for it. If you already have an idea of universities and maybe even professors you might want to work with, write to them, connect with them, tell them a little bit about your research interest, something about you, so that they'll remember you, give it a personal touch.

Azu Pacheco:

I was surprised that honestly I think every professor I wrote to, because I applied to about eight PhD programs, they all wrote back. And I was like, "Oh, I wasn't expecting that." And I was just surprised, but in a good way, because they were all interested in what I was proposing. Now that I think about it, I was like, "Wow, I really did have a low academic self-esteem."

Manuel Galaviz:

We all been there. It gets imposed on us and it's-

Azu Pacheco:

Yeah. Let's be honest, again these institutions aren't necessarily built for us. But that doesn't mean that there aren't people inside the institutions who want to bring more students of color, more critical minds into these institutions.

Azu Pacheco:

And so take a chance. Write to these professors. And also I learned later on that actually, that's just critical. Because if you submit an application and mentioned professors that you want to work with, but they don't even know who you are, they've never heard from you, they're not likely to vouch for you when your application comes around, because they don't know you.

Azu Pacheco:

But if they've at least had a phone conversation with you, maybe an in-person meeting, if possible, then they can at least connect the application with you. Honestly that's a game changer. I didn't know that the first time I applied to grad programs.

Azu Pacheco:

Master's programs are a little different because they don't really expect you to have that connection already with the professors when you apply. But if you do, that's even a bonus for you.

Azu Pacheco:

But for PhD programs, you definitely need to do that because a professor's not likely to vouch for your application if they don't know you.

Manuel Galaviz:

Yeah. And that may sound a little harsh for some folks who are coming across this the first time, they'll be like, "What they don't know me." It's not necessarily that they don't know you, but they'll at least recognize your name from an email or something.

Manuel Galaviz:

And don't be discouraged if they don't respond. If you send a professor an email. It could just be like, "Hello Dr. So-and-so. I'm considering the master's program in Latin American studies, a master's program in sociology, whatever it is. And my potential project is, I want to examine this." And it could just be very broad and open-ended, and you could just immediately say, would you mind speaking with me via zoom? That's very common now, or on a phone call, if it's more convenient. And then see what happens.

Manuel Galaviz:

And if they don't respond to you within a week, it's okay to send an email again. It's okay to follow up. Like I said, professors specifically, if they're at a public institution, they are public servants and you can press them until they respond to you.

Manuel Galaviz:

You might annoy him after the like 500th email, but at that point it's like, are they really professors? Are they going to be an ideal mentor if they can't even respond to these emails? So those are red flags.

Manuel Galaviz:

So definitely don't be shy, go out there, just email and definitely try to set up a meeting, and that way as Azu said, at least they will recognize your name, recognize your work, recognize who you are when that application comes in.

Azu Pacheco:

Yes, definitely. And that in and of itself it's a big step. Them being able to say, "This is Azu, Azucena. Oh yeah, she's the person that does public health and anthropology."

Music Interlude

Manuel Galaviz:

So welcome back everyone. We've been talking to Azu Pacheco, PhD candidate at the University of Texas at Austin in Latin American studies.

Manuel Galaviz:

We've been chatting a lot about, just reaching out to profes, reaching out to the graduate students, how it's okay to do that. When someone is an undergrad and they're considering going to graduate school and they're a little lost, but then they start deciding what they want to do and they get a better idea.

My question really is, how far in advance should they start looking into the programs they want to apply to? And what should not really guide their decision in selecting a graduate program? What things should they just slip be like, "Don't even worry about that. Don't consider that."

Azu Pacheco:

I love that you brought up that second question, because I feel like we don't really talk about that, that often, but it is important to really think about... So I'll start with that one actually.

Manuel Galaviz:

Yeah, that's cool.

Azu Pacheco:

What should not guide your decision in selecting a graduate program? Now that I'm in my thirties, it feels like I have friends in their twenties who are considering grad school. And what I tell them is to honestly consider grad school, if your soul is telling you to do so. You really want to have that desire, that

drive to go to grad school. Don't do it because someone else is telling you to do it, don't do it because an external reason.

Azu Pacheco:

And the reason I actually say that is because, once you're in grad school, you're going to have moments of burnout. You're going to have moments where you're like, "Oh my God, what am I doing here? Was this even the right decision." Because it gets like that.

Azu Pacheco:

And so you want to be certain that it is you who wants to be in this program. And then that's another thing too. What program should you go into? And again for me I've always been interested in health and medicine. But part of the reason I decided to do an MPH first was because I was like, "Oh, I need to be practical." An MPH can get me a decent paying job, and that way I can help my family and things like that. Which at the moment, that was just a practical mindset.

Azu Pacheco:

But now that I'm in this PhD program, I feel like... Don't force yourself into degrees just because you feel like that's what you should do. I'm not saying I regret my MPH. I love the experience, but I think if I actually had to given myself time to really think through it, I probably would have figured out PhD programs earlier on, but that's okay. That was my journey.

Azu Pacheco:

So I feel like it's important to really want this because you want it. And go into a program that really calls you and that you feel passionate about. Because again, that will keep you there. That will keeping you motivated.

Azu Pacheco:

I remember at one point in the PhD, I was like, "Why am I even here?" And it was funny because I was like, "I can't blame anyone. No one forced me to sign up for a PhD." No one in my family honestly expected me to do grad school at all. So I didn't have that pressure. And I was like, "Oh yeah, I chose this." So I was just like, "Okay, well, I'm going to stick it out because obviously I wanted this enough to go through that long process of applying and making it here."

Manuel Galaviz:

I want to say, I love what you said, because you want it, it's something that you want, something that again you're passionate about because that passion really needs to be there because that passion is what'll get you down the line. That's what you're going to have to rely on when you haven't slept for 18 hours or it's just been days, you're running on like two hours of sleep a day because you're trying to submit your dissertation.

Manuel Galaviz:

Something that I also like to emphasize is that, whether you're getting a master's or a PhD, that's not the end of the process, that's somewhere in the middle.

Manuel Galaviz:

It's definitely thinking about it, applying, maybe it's that four in like an eight step process, because there is a life after graduate school and that includes seeking employment of some sort, or perhaps going into creating your own programming organization or whatever that your journey is.

Manuel Galaviz:

But again, it's only a step and it's better to look at it somewhere in the middle and it's a hard middle to get to. So definitely having that passion early on of a project or something that you're interested in, that burning desire, I think that's very important.

Azu Pacheco:

Yes. And then another thing, I share with my younger friends now, is that if you're considering grad school right after undergrad, don't feel pressured. Don't think that you need to go straight into a grad program from undergrad. I feel like actually taking time off and just working and figuring out your research interests or what drives you academically. Those things are really important.

Azu Pacheco:

For example for me, while I was doing the post back program, I was working at UC San Francisco in the medical school. And I was a health coach for people with type two diabetes. And I really loved working in that program and with the people that I was working with. And ultimately that's why I became interested in type two diabetes community based programming.

Azu Pacheco:

Through that experience, I had one-on-one meetings with people diagnosed with type two diabetes and they would share their everyday struggle, institutional struggle sometimes to even just get medications and to even have the services that they need.

Azu Pacheco:

And that was super enriching. I'm just so thankful for that experience. So don't feel like you have to rush into graduate school. I think having maybe some work experience or, "Real world experience," will only nourish what you're going to do in grad school.

Manuel Galaviz:

Yeah. Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give your former undergrad self, when you were considering applying to graduate programs?

Azu Pacheco:

Yeah. No, that's such a tender question. Just kind of thinking back to my 18 to 21 year old undergrad self. Let me see. So at the time I feel like this is an experience that a lot of first-gen working class students have, is that in undergrad, I was balancing a lot of family responsibilities, because I was the family translator. I was the one with the highest levels of formal education. So I feel like my time was definitely 60% family stuff and 40% university stuff.

Azu Pacheco:

So kind of thinking back, I feel like I would give myself the advice to have a bit more of a balance, because at the end of the day, of course our families are important, but your desires for grad school for a career that fulfills you. Those are also valid.

Azu Pacheco:

So having a balance and making sure that whatever you're passionate about, you give time to that as well. Because I feel like I was on survival mode, most of my undergrad, but knowing what I know now I feel like I would definitely tell myself like, "It's okay for you to enjoy being in this university and this institution and learning."

Azu Pacheco:

Because like you said Manny, I just have my mom and so she works at a chocolate factory. I always felt a responsibility towards her and my family in Guatemala. I feel like that took over instead of really acknowledging, also that it's okay to want to do research and to want to read and learn for a career.

Azu Pacheco:

It's okay to want to do academic work and research. I think that would be the biggest advice. And to not be afraid to ask for help. Like I said, to talk to different people, to seek out information about those things that you are passionate about, and to not underestimate yourself and your ability.

Azu Pacheco:

Because from our lived experience as first-gen maybe immigrants or children of immigrants, working class, those experiences are so enriching and they bring a very critical lens to these institutions that traditionally haven't had many of those perspectives. So I feel like that's definitely important to remember that our lived experiences will only make our academic work more important and more critical.

Manuel Galaviz:

Thank you for saying that. And thank you for giving us that advice. I think it'll help a lot of folks in their journey to graduate school.

Azu Pacheco:

Si, de nada Manny. I'm just so glad that we were able to have this conversation and just share the knowledge that we've accumulated from our experiences. So, que les sirva, may help other people out.

Manuel Galaviz:

Thank you also. And definitely thank you for joining us today. We need to catch up more. I think that's been the ongoing thing that definitely, but it's always great to talk to you and it's always great to see you. I know last time we saw each other was in 2018 San Jose. [crosstalk 00:55:08]. So it doesn't feel like it's been that long, but it has.

Azu Pacheco:

It has, wow.

Manuel Galaviz:

Which again was a wonderful time. We were on the same panel. For being a panel that was on at eight in the morning we had the room packed.



Azu Pacheco:

Right. I know. And we were more than a week. I feel like people actually stayed longer. They stayed past 9:30.

Manuel Galaviz:

We got kicked out. The next panel was coming in and they were like, "You guys got to go, okay."

Azu Pacheco:

That's right. Oh man. We were good, see.

Manuel Galaviz:

Yeah. So it's great. And these are the types of encounters, the types of things that I would have never dreamt up perhaps as an undergrad, that I would be at a national conference in San Jose with amazing people and presenting alongside just brilliant folks that I admire their work.

Manuel Galaviz:

And again, these are the types of things that are possible with grad school. And again, certainly Azu told us, everyone has a different journey, don't be afraid to ask for help. I think that's the one thing that we all learn is that it's okay to ask for help and that people are there to help.

Manuel Galaviz:

So definitely if you have any questions, feel free to email us at [scholarhollerpod@gmail.com](mailto:scholarhollerpod@gmail.com) or check us out @ LibroMobile on Instagram, on Twitter, and also [libromobile.com](http://libromobile.com). And thank you again Azu for joining us today, I'm looking forward to other conversations.

Azu Pacheco:

Si, de nada Manny. And again, thank you for inviting me and for reminding me that grad school is a journey and it's not just a journey with challenges, but it's also a journey with beautiful people and beautiful experiences that are enriching for a lifetime. So I'm really happy that we had this conversation.

Outro Music

Xochitl:

Scholar Holler podcast, a series by LibroMobile Arts Co-operative and LM Voices is hosted and edited by Manuel Galaviz PhD, produced and edited by Xochitl Vallez, features art by Carla Zárate and music by Gloria Estrada. For more on this series and other community resources, please visit [LibroMobile.com](http://LibroMobile.com).