AN INTERVIEW WITH JAVIER A. RODRÍGUEZ

An Oral History Conducted by Elsa Lopez

Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada
Oral History Project

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Produced by: The Oral History Research Center at UNLV – University Libraries
Director: Claytee D. White
Project Manager: Barbara Tabach
Transcribers: Kristin Hicks, Maribel Estrada Calderón, Nathalie Martinez, Rodrigo Vazquez, Elsa Lopez
Editors and Project Assistants: Laurents Bañuelos-Benitez, Maribel Estrada Calderón, Monserrath Hernández, Elsa Lopez, Nathalie Martinez, Marcela Rodriguez-Campo, Rodrigo Vazquez

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The transcript received minimal editing that includes the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews with permission of the narrator.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the *Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada*.

Claytee D. White
Director, Oral History Research Center
University Libraries
University of Nevada Las Vegas

PREFACE

Why study snakes?

Because it is a fun conversation starter with Javier A. Rodríguez, PhD.

Born in Puerto Rico, he was the studious only child of Carmen and Fidencio Rodríguez, a childcare provider and foreman of a furniture company respectively. His fascination with snakes may have puzzled his parents, but he pursued his dream to learn as much as possible about amphibians, reptiles, and snakes. He has brought that organized sensibility into the classroom, into his research, and into his administrative positions at UNLV.

Rodríguez joined UNLV in 2002 as an assistant professor in biology. Soon he soon took on leadership positions with the UNLV School of Life Sciences, including serving as assistant director and associate director from 2007 to 2010.

In 2019, after careful thought, Dr. Rodríguez happily accepted the Vice Provost for Academic Programs at University of Nevada, Las Nevada. He had to step away from his position as vice dean for the UNLV College of Sciences where he taught evolutionary biology as what he describes “a challenging” instructor.

Rodríguez received his doctoral degree in integrative biology from the University of California, Berkeley. He earned his bachelor and masters of Science degrees in biology from the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras.

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December 19, 2019
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Elsa Lopez

LATINX VOICES
OF SOUTHERN NEVADA
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Hello. The day is December 19th, 2019. My name is Elsa Lopez, and I am here in the Oral History Research Center. I am joined today with…

Barbara Tabach.

And…

Javier Rodriguez.

Javier, can you please spell and pronounce your name for us, please?

My first name is J-A-V-I-E-R. My last name is R-O-D-R-I-G-U-E-Z.

Thank you so much. Javier, how do you choose to identify?

Latino.

Latino, all right. Thank you. We're going to start with your childhood. Tell us about where you grew up.

I grew up in a section of San Juan, Puerto Rico's capital that is called Santurce. I spent all my childhood there, including my college years. I lived at home during my college years, both my bachelor's and my master's. Because our house was twenty minutes from the campus of the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras, there was no reason to leave the house, which made things a lot easier and affordable for me.

Tell us about your parents. What did they work in?

My father's name was Fedincio Rodriguez. He was a foreman of a furniture factory, private one, and he guided the day-to-day operations of the factory, and also he was a person who organized the projects. The orders that they got of new furniture sometimes to change the upholstery of the furniture, he was in charge of that and he would strategize what we need to do here to accomplish this task in the time that we have and what would be the approximate cost of that and, of course, how long it would take. He ran, as I said, the day-to-day operations of the factory.

He wasn't the owner or part owner. He was just the foreman of that. He started that work, he told me, when he was a teenager, and he retired on that job, so fifty-plus years doing that.

My mother never worked outside the house. She took care of kids from people that she knew, from people that were referred to her, and she was very, very good at doing that. That was how she contributed financially to the house. It was a very important contribution because my father's salary was not all that much, but they managed to buy a couple of houses. I never felt that I lacked something that I really needed for my life.

Do you have any siblings?

No. I'm an only child.

Who lived in the household?

My father, my mother, myself, and sometimes my grandmother, my mother's mother, was with us, not all the time, but she would come and stay maybe two years and then move out for one year, come back for one year, move out for another year, come back for a few months.

That sounds like my own family. What kind of food would your mom make in those times?

Typical Puerto Rican cuisine: Lots of rice, beans, and red meat.

What is the main dish in Puerto Rico?

White rice, beans of some sort; could be what we call red beans, black beans, garbanzos, frijoles, and meat; could be chicken, often; it could be beef; every once in a while, fish; shrimp; but it was mainly red meat.

What did your house look like? What do you remember?

Initially we live in a fairly small house, so it had three bedrooms, one restroom. It was a single-story house, but eventually my parents added a second story, and they rented that to people and they used the money to help pay the mortgage of the house and to fix some other things that we

had. Then when I was, I think, in sixth grade, my parents bought a larger house. It was about, I would say, a thousand to twelve hundred square feet larger house, one street over, so it was a very, very easy move logistically. That house had four bedrooms, but also a single restroom. It was a two-story house. Initially my parents also rented the second story. When I got married, my wife and I and eventually our daughter, we lived there for, I would say, almost a year before we went to California for me to go to grad school at Berkeley.

What do you remember about secondary or even primary school in Puerto Rico?

They public school system in Puerto Rico has room for improvement. My parents sent me to Catholic school. It was definitely for people of limited means. The monthly payments initially were ten dollars, if you can believe that. Then they continued to go up, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five. I think that when I left my senior year the monthly payment was seventy-five dollars, which sounds unbelievable right now the amount that it was.

In just that short time it increased.

Well, it started from first grade all the way to twelfth grade, so it took a while, but still it's a minimal amount of money for the education. The education was very high quality. The school system was run by, first, nuns on the school that I went from first grade to sixth grade, and then I switch school from seventh grade to twelfth grade, run by priests, and they were really committed to education. I had some fantastic teachers that even to this day I am amazed at how they managed to convey so much information to us. They definitely instilled in me the love for learning about any discipline, not just science. I happen to be a biologist, but I enjoy reading about art and poetry and architecture, essentially any discipline.

Do you remember any of their names?

Yes, I remember the names of several of them. They were different nationalities from Cuba, Chile, Spain, Italy, Puerto Rico also, and they had different specialties. One of the best teachers that I've ever had in my life, he was a Catholic priest from Chile. He taught English. He taught religion. He taught Spanish. He was a brilliant man. He spoke five languages. He knew about virtually anything that you asked him, and he did not make things up. He just knew all this information. He was a gifted teacher. His name was—I don't think he's died yet—Eduardo Benitez Enrich, truly a renaissance man.

Another fantastic teacher that I had was a priest, and we became very good friends. His name was Jose Luis Gomez. He was from Spain. I took from him chemistry, physics, religion, and one more class that I can't remember right now. Again, an extraordinary teacher. He had very commanding knowledge of all those disciplines, so the man did study a lot. More importantly for me, he was able to make the class fun, interesting. Some lectures were not as exciting as others, but he truly had love for education. He was a fantastic teacher. Sadly, he passed away two years ago. We became very good friends, and whenever I went back to Puerto Rico, I always went to see him. In fact, he was the priest that married me and my wife, and he also baptized our daughter. He truly became a personal friend and, also, even after we left Puerto Rico, he would every once in a while just stop by my house to check on my parents. He was a good friend.

What is the name of the school again?

The first one is Colegio Maria Auxiliadora in Santurce, Puerto Rico. And the second school that I went to was Colegio San Juan Bosco in Cantera, Puerto Rico.

Very high quality schools?

Indeed, indeed.

Did they make an assumption you were going on to college when you were young, or is this something that you just decided later?

No. I think my father only went to school through fourth grade. I think my mother may have finished fifth grade. There wasn't really an expectation that I was going to go to college, but we didn't really talk about that. For whatever reason, I was good at school. I got good grades. I did well. I love learning new things. When I got to high school, there was not that much there for me that I was going to go to college. Probably in Puerto Rico to study some scientific discipline, biology, physics. I studied some biology. But it was something that didn't surprise many people in the family because I spent most of my time studying. I did play with my friends and I got in trouble, when I was a teenager and even a boy. But my parents never had to beg me to study or check on whether I was going to class or not because it was something that just enjoyed doing.

Tell us about graduating high school, and then where did you go afterwards?

I finished high school in 1981, and then I went to the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras, which at the time was arguably the best institution in Puerto Rico. My first year there, there was a strike of the students because the credits used to be five dollars a credit, and then the institution hiked the price to fifteen dollars per credit, and the students went crazy because that was just unthinkable. Who the heck would pay fifteen dollars per credit back then? There was a strike, so my first semester in college was eventful. But eventually the strike ended and they managed to salvage the school year. We ended up in, I think, the second semester, what we call here the spring semester, finished in early August, I believe. But we didn't lose the year, which was by far the most important thing. Then after that school proceeded normally.

I also enjoyed a lot my education. The institution back then was very, very good. It had some programs that had recognition in the Caribbean and to a lesser extent in the States,

typically Florida and New York. I am very, very pleased with the education that I received at University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras.

I finished my bachelor's in four years, and then I went straight to my master's, at the same institution, in biology. Again, the master's program, I learned very quickly that grad school is very, very different from undergrad school. The rules are different. Expectations are much higher. Of course, you get to know the students that are part of your cohort very, very well, and you share ___and experiences with them, and you go through the challenges of grad school together. Again, I am very, very pleased and grateful for the education that I received at what we call UPR.

Are you friends with some of the members in your cohort still?

Yes. In fact, whenever we go to Puerto Rico, I always make time to see a couple of them. We go out to dinner or lunch and we just catch up on things. My high school was very, very small. There were thirty-five of us; something like that. It was very, very small.

What did you specialize in for your master's?

Biology. I studied snakes. My master's thesis was on feeding behavior of a snake species that occurs in Puerto Rico.

Why snakes? Make me like snakes.

I'm not sure I can do that because some people have this innate phobia for snakes and spiders, so I understand that. The study of reptiles and amphibians is called herpetology. When you talk to many professional herpetologists, they will tell you that they started keeping lizards, frogs, snakes in their bedrooms when they were little. I never did that. I came to the study of reptiles and amphibians much later in life, and it was because after I started my master's in Puerto Rico, I was looking for a project to do. Initially I thought that I was going to study aquatic insects

because they caught my attention when I took an entomology class as part of my bachelor's degree. But there was no one really at the institution that had an expertise in aquatic insects, so I tried to go at it by myself for a few months, and that just was not working out because I have no guidance. I didn't know what I was doing.

Then I took a class on herpetology from a faculty member in the department, and he instilled a living figure in the field. But he studied mainly the schematics; meaning how species relate to one another, and I wasn't all that interested in that. I wanted to do something that was more ecologically oriented, much more how the organisms interact with an environment. I loved the class that he taught. He wasn't the most exciting teacher, so the lectures were not all that much fun, but his knowledge is still amazing. He was one of those instructors that—again, the lectures are not particularly exciting. But if you make the time to go and talk to them, you get them going on what they do, and then you realize that you're talking to almost a different individual, one that is passionate about what he does and has so much information to convey to you, so many stories to tell you.

I was never afraid of going and talking to my professors. I did that with him and he was very receptive. Very quickly, I realized that we had a connection here; I admired his knowledge, his expertise, and I wanted to benefit from it. I'm in graduate school, so I'm looking for an advisor and a project, and he suggested to me a couple of projects, and I settled on this one, which is snakes. Again, it's not that I had this fascination with snakes. It's just the project that he described to me sounded to me the most interesting for the ones that he mentioned. I started working on it, doing my research, my reading, as people do, and then it grew from there. I continued working on it until it led to a thesis.

Can you tell us about what it's like to be a researcher especially in this field? What does that look like?

The first question that typically I get from people that hear that I'm a herpetologist is, why do you study snakes? The answer is the one that I just gave you. Essentially, it found me. I didn't seek to study snakes; it was one that was suggested to me and I liked it and I continued working on it.

The type of research that I have done in the past revolved around behavior, how an organism interacts with its environment. In this particular case, I focused on the feeding ecology, which is how snakes, which, of course, they're without limbs, how they go about finding prey in their environment. Once they find the prey, how can they subdue the prey? Again, because they have no limbs, and how can they digest the prey and, of course, derive nutrients from it? The first component of the research was to find the snakes in the wild, in the field. I went to different localities from Puerto Rico to find snakes. Sometimes you locate it; sometimes not. Once you collect the snakes, then we brought them to the lab. Then I studied their mechanics of feeding. How they go about catching the prey, subduing the prey, and ingesting the prey. Again, they were limited observations because they were done in captivity, so artificial situation. But still, you learn about some of the behavioral strategies that the animals follow to catch prey.

I did that for two years. I witnessed many, many predator events of different snakes on lizards. I was bitten a few times. But the snake that I worked only mildly venomous, so a little bit of pain, a tiny bit of bleeding, some irritation, joint pain maybe for one day, two days, but nothing major. I never went to the hospital or anything like that, so very, very mild.

It's funny because a couple of times I was bitten and it swells when you get bitten by a snake. I come home from school because I live at home, and my parents, especially my father,

would see my hand swollen and asked me what happened. I told him and he just freaked out. He could not handle even the thought of somebody being bitten by a snake. I do know that they never really understood why I work on snakes. They were very, very polite people, so they just asked me a couple of very nice questions and forget about it because they just couldn't understand it. "What do you do? What is it?" But they were always very, very supportive.

Then, as you know, you collect the data, analyze the data, and write a thesis. Then you publish the paper in a peer review journal, too.

Can you tell us about the graduation? Did your whole family come, and what was that like?

I did not go to any ceremony in Puerto Rico. I didn't go to my graduation from bachelor or from master's. I just didn't for some ignorant reason.

What did you do post your master's degree?

I knew even before I finished my master's that I wanted to continue on, on the PhD, not in Puerto Rico. I wanted to come to the States. But I got married and my wife at the time was working on her master's in special education. The deal that we made was that—we got married—I will wait for her to finish her master's and then we'll come to the States, somewhere in the States. We didn't know where back then. That's what we did. I worked as an instructor at the institution where I went for my bachelor's and master's. I taught biology for two years as an instructor while she finished her master's. She finished and I applied and got into a few schools, chose one, and we moved to the States.

Can you tell me why you wanted to move to the States instead of Puerto Rico?

Because in Puerto Rico I already had a very good idea of the knowledge that I could get from the institution. I knew all the professors there, almost all of them, and it was very, very clear that you need to avoid inbreeding in your education; you should switch institutions, preferably go to a

different one for a master's and a different one for a PhD. I had already done my bachelor's and master's at the same institution in Puerto Rico, so I definitely had to go somewhere else.

Where did you end up going?

I ended up going to Berkeley. I had done research on both snakes for my master's, but also I took a class from another faculty member in Puerto Rico who worked on orchids. He is another fantastic scientist. I was lucky because I was working in two very different areas within my master's for my thesis on snake physiology. But also as a side project on orchid pollination biology. I had a couple of publications after I finished my master's, so that makes you a more attractive candidate. You stand out because you have shown that you can publish. It happened to be in two very, very different fields, so it shows that you are much more question oriented than species oriented, which is an advantage. I applied to different programs. I believe that I applied to four schools to do a PhD in some discipline regarding plant biology. I applied to four schools to do research on animal, some sort of animal studies. I was rejected by all the schools that I applied to to work on plants, and I was accepted by all the schools that I applied to to work on animals. So the decision was made for me. Obviously, plants were not in my future; it was animals.

I was accepted at Stanford in California; Berkeley, California; Connecticut; and at the Washington University in St. Louis. I didn't do Connecticut because it was too cold for me. I was not going to be handle that and my wife doesn't like the cold at all. It was going to be not an ideal situation. Obviously that left Stanford and Berkeley and Washington University in St. Louis. I could have gone to either of them. They're fantastic schools, all three of them. I selected Berkeley because the name does carry, and I like very much the city, Berkeley, Albany and San Francisco. Stanford is, of course, a top ten university; there is no doubt about that. Stanford's

settings are very different from Berkeley. It's just a different vibe living in Palo Alto and living in Albany. Also, my advisor at Berkeley is an extraordinary person, also a huge name in the field, but genuinely a very, very nice human being.

What's his name?

Howard Green. He left Berkeley and he retired from Cornell University three years ago. My decision came down to Berkeley and Washington University in St. Louis because I was going to work at Washington University with a former student of Howard Green's who ended up being my advisor at Berkeley and another rising star in the field. In fact, he was elected to the National Academy of Sciences two years ago, so he is definitely one of the leading biologists of this generation. In the end, I ended up going to Berkeley.

What did Berkeley look like at the time? What year was this?

This was in 1992. I arrived at Berkeley in August of 1992. I love the campus. The campus is one of the nicest campuses that I have seen in the States. Berkeley can be frightening once you get there because the intellectual level is so darn high there. The faculty members are all extremely well respected in their fields and sometimes other fields. The students are among the very best in the nation. It can be a very humbling place to go to Berkeley.

I suffered the imposter syndrome when I got to Berkeley. You start going to classes and you start listening to people, and the students are as smart as the faculty members; at least that was the impression that I got in my first year there. I came from a small island. English is my second language. I have a very strong accent. I started to doubt myself. I said, "Maybe I don't belong at Berkeley." It's what they call the imposter syndrome. After a few weeks there, definitely during my first semester at Berkeley, I went and talked to my advisor, a fantastic human being. I told him, "I'm not sure that I can cope with this. You operate at such a high level

of intellect that I'm not sure that I belong here." And he looked at me and he smiled and he told me something that I will never, ever forget. He told me, "Javier, we receive hundreds of applications for our program every year from very, very smart, respected applicants. We do not make many mistakes in our admissions process." To me that was fascinating…I get emotional because he is really a good man and he was very, very supportive during tough times during grad school.

I want to ask about what the makeup of the school looked like. Were there other Latinos there at the time, or were there many?

Yes, there was a very strong Brazilian contingent there. I was in the Department of Integrative Biology at Berkeley, and it's one of the top departments of its class in the States. It has a couple of divisions; one is called the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology. It's a museum, so it has collections that are used for research and teaching. We were called "museum students" because it is a semiautonomous unit within the department. We are definitely in the department, but it's a unit within the department and it has this theory of cohesiveness that you know that you are a museum student versus students that are in the department, but are not in a museum, so it's different in that sense. Also, it has its particular location in the building, so entrance is restrictive; not anyone can go in. You have to have an office there or have an appointment to be able to go into the museum. It's a unit within the department.

One of the faculty members there is still a faculty member there, or they're retired now, and he was for many, many years that worst best herpetologist. He was working in Brazil in the Amazon in one of his many projects, so he was extremely well known in Brazil. When I arrived there he had four prestigious students working with him, and during my time there two more arrived. The museum had this big contingent of Brazilian students. All together there were

between four and six of them. It was me from Puerto Rico. There was another Hispanic student also from Puerto Rico who arrived later. It was diverse in that sense.

The department as a whole was more diverse. There were a couple of black students there, which isn't very common in grad school in sciences. There were several female grad students there, quite a few of them, actually. Then a Mexican student arrived, also. I would say that it was fairly diverse, the department, at the time while I was there.

Again, we were very cohesive. We did social activities together. We worked together. We helped each other on projects because some techniques you can apply to different organisms. You can learn them together even though you're working on different animals or species at the same time, so that was very, very helpful for us. It was a great time in my life being at Berkeley.

What did the social activities look like at the time?

We went out to lunch sometimes for special dates. Thanksgiving, Christmas we would get together at somebody's house. It was a potluck; people brought stuff typical of their countries to these get-togethers. Some people went dancing, the ones who were single and younger. I never went dancing. I don't drink much, either, so that wasn't very attractive to me. I was married and our little one was one and a half when we moved to Berkeley, so I had obligations at home. My social activities were somewhat restricted.

How did you and your wife preserve your cultural being in the States?

It was relatively easy because we both were born and grew up in Puerto Rico. We moved to California when we were twenty-six, so by that time you are already an adult, so you're fairly well set in your ways. We spoke Spanish at the house. I don't cook much, but my wife is a fairly decent cook. We continued eating the dishes that we used to eat in Puerto Rico. It wasn't

difficult for us to continue our ways. We went back to Puerto Rico almost yearly for at least a couple of weeks during the summer.

What's your daughter's name?

Yahiri. It's spelled Y-A-H-I-R-I. I made up the name, so I'm very proud of that.

How did you come up with it?

I thought about it for a while. It's a funny story. One of the names that I came up with for my daughter was (Asophies), a very, very unique name. Most people like it when they heard it, and they asked me, "How did you come up with it?" It happens to be the scientific name of the snake that I was working on at the time, but of course very few people know that. But as soon as they knew that they said, "No, no, no, no, you cannot name your daughter after a snake. That is just not going to happen." I understood their perspective, so I kept thinking and I came up with the name. My wife like it. Some other people in my family were curious about it, but no one objected vehemently, so we went with the idea.

Was there anything you needed to become adjusted to having moved to the States or California?

Absolutely, of course. The language, the culture. Berkeley is a very, very diverse place. Berkeley is a city that does appreciate diversity because they're home to—well, what I would call the best public institution in the States—Berkeley is, but I'm biased. People are very open-minded there. They listen. They like to voice their opinions, and some opinions are a little bit out in left field, but that's what I love about Berkeley. In that sense, the transitioning from Puerto Rico and the States was easier because, for example, if we would have gone to Palo Alto, I'm pretty sure the transition would have been much more challenging because Palo Alto is just a different type of environment compared to Berkeley. The environment in the museum was very, very supportive.

Virtually all the faculty members in the department had projects going on in Latin American, in Mexico, Costa Rica, Brazil, Colombia, so they genuinely appreciated dealing with Latino people because they deal with them every year when they go to the field. They're very, very sensitive to the cultural differences that exist between our countries and they were, importantly, very, very respectful of those. They did encourage us to continue our way of living. In the museum there were often conversations in Spanish that happened. At least two of the faculty members there, my advisor, Howard Green, and entomologist James Patton, they understand Spanish and they speak some Spanish, so it was just a very good working environment for Latinos to go to Berkeley at the time. I don't know how things are, probably the same nowadays.

Also, we lived in the university housing for both undergrad students and grad students. There happened to be two other Puerto Rican couples living there at the same time. One, he was an undergrad student in the Department of Chemistry. It is one of the best chemistry departments in the States, the one at Berkeley, at least it was back then. He was studying chemical engineering, I believe. We met them and, of course, that helped with that transition. There was another couple and she was a doctoral student in the Department of Spanish, if I remember correctly. We became very, very close friends. Even though we were living in the States, in California, we had almost a daily connection to Puerto Rico and our culture.

That sense of community is important. Were you still studying snakes for your PhD program?

I did my dissertation on snakes, also—so the answer is yes. Different species. I switched to study a species in the States for convenience reasons. But after I finished my dissertation, I expanded to work on lizards and frogs. My work on snakes has decreased, but my work on lizards and frogs has increased since I finished my dissertation in 1998.

Where in the States would you do your research?

It was mainly—well, the three components that I did was in a state park in California that has a large population of gopher snakes; that's the species that I worked on for my dissertation. That aspect of the research was about studying what we call special ecology, which is the movement patterns of snakes in the wild. I went to that park and I collected—how many animals—very few, four or five. Then we put radios in them, implanted them surgically. Then for eighteen months to twenty-four months, I went to that park three or four times per week to track those animals because they're very, very difficult to see. They're very cryptic. It is very easy to miss them. But after you catch them the first time and you put the radio in them, then you can locate the signal. We did that for several months and then that allowed me to learn more about how they move in their environment, and that is something that some biologists like to study, patterns of animal movement in the wild.

The rest of my dissertation was done in the lab because I developed an interest in studying the history of populations, and you do that by collecting data from individuals and then you analyze that data and make inferences about how does different species relate to one another, how they have evolved through time. But that part was done in the lab completely.

Were you involved in any other activities or clubs or associations at Berkeley?

No. My research kept me fairly busy, and also because I have a family, so I went from the lab to the house and back to the lab.

Was your wife working outside the home?

Yes. She is a special ed teacher by training, also an elementary teacher, and very high in demand for that discipline, so she was able to get a job very quickly. I think that within six months she was working in Berkeley. The answer is yes. That was a huge financial relief because I had

scholarships and I also was working in the museum in the collections as an assistant, but having somebody to contribute their salary made life much less stressful for us.

Can you tell us about your work curating for the museum?

Curating is an activity that involves collecting animals and preserving the animals so that they will persist for years to come in museums. I was trained to be a curatorial assistant at the museum. I started working at the museum during my first semester at Berkeley. I learned techniques to, again, preserve animals, to put them in the collection. You have to catalog them because an extremely important aspect of having a collection is to have the data associated with that collection, and that's true for any collection; it doesn't matter what we're talking about. In the case of animals, it's extremely important to have locality information, where that animal was collected, and it has to be as precise as possible that information because that is what's going to allow you to make inferences later on about changes through space and time. Having a space that has no collection data is almost useless. A significant part of the curator's work is to make sure that you have recorded correctly the collected information for the specimen and also the date of collection. The date is going to allow you to make inferences about temperature changes that can happen in populations through time. I learned that very early on.

Then there's many things that you have to do in a collection. The collection back then had, I think, two hundred thirty-five thousand-plus specimens, so you have to keep track of every one of them. They are arranged in a particular way. You have to treat them in a particular way. Also, collections are made to be used by other individuals. The Museum of Vertebrate Zoology is one of the best collections in the country, so almost every week they get requests for logs. [example] *We are working on this species from the tropics. Please send us the specimens you have from all these countries.* You have to do that; you have to provide the specimens in a

certain way, ship them, and also keep very detailed records of what you're shipping and when so that you can get it back later on.

How long were you working with the museum?

On and off I worked in that position for five years. Sometimes I switched to teaching a semester and then I went back to work in the collection the next semester. But after I finished my degree in December 1998, my advisor left for Cornell. He and his wife left for Cornell. I was hired to essentially replace him for a couple of years until they could hire a permanent replacement. I became the assistant curator of the collection, which was being in the right time and the right place because I had the knowledge already that I had gotten at the museum, so I knew how to curate that collection and that gave me a job for a couple of years. I taught a course with him while he was at Berkeley, so it worked out perfectly.

What courses were those?

I took the herpetology section of the course, natural history of the vertebrates, which is maybe the most famous course in Berkeley. It has a very, very long trajectory at Berkeley. What makes that class historic at Berkeley is that there are several professional biologists, very well known, who took that class when they were undergrads and they went on to have fascinating careers in biology.

So everyone wanted to take it.

It's a highly sought after class at Berkeley. Particularly they run all six because the demand is so high also. It has that fantastic reputation. It's a very hard class because there are fieldtrips virtually every single week. You go to lecture twice during the week and then on Fridays or Saturdays mornings the students go to fieldtrips, different parks around the Bay Area. The students have to conduct field projects, simplistic projects, but not always. It's a class that has a

fantastic reputation at Berkeley. The students have to work a lot, but they do enjoy the class, most of them do.

I got to teach the herpetology section of that class and also I got to teach herpetology by myself, which was a fantastic experience at Berkeley.

That's amazing. What did you do after you had finished at the museum?

I was contacted by a faculty member in the Department of Political Sciences at UNLV while I was working as the curator. This was probably in 2000, if not before. This faculty member told me that he had come across my webpage and the department was looking for somebody with my experience and qualification; would I be interested in coming to UNLV to give a talk? I said, "Of course I would be." I was applying for jobs, also, at the time.

I came to UNLV for the very first time in November 2000. I came and gave a talk. I met several faculty members. I met students. They took me around, not all over the city. We went on a fieldtrip on a Saturday if I remember correctly. I was very well impressed by the department.

Something that you learn at Berkeley very quickly is that unless you are one of these extremely small number of highly accomplished smart people, you're going to end up, if you decide to remain in academia, at an institution that is not the same as Berkeley because that's the way it is. I had prepared myself that I'm not going to Harvard; I'm not going to Stanford, because I just don't have the intellectual skills that you have to have to be at those places. I knew I was going to come to an institution of a different level than Berkeley, and UNLV was the place that I pictured myself at because it was a young university back then, but I would call it an ambitious university that had a plan of, where do we want to go? Where do we want to get in twenty years, for example?

Also, Carol Harter was the president back then and she decided, most likely in combination with her cabinet, her team that she was going to invest resources to make UNLV an institution that emphasizes research much more than it was emphasized at the time because this place was great as a teaching institution. It was called Nevada Southern back then. They did a very, very good job of explaining to us what the plan was for the university, and they were also very honest. They told us that mostly we would never become Berkeley because it's just a different type of institution, but we want to become much better known for our research. We will never abandon our commitment to education, never, because that is one of the main missions of a university is to provide education for the community. But we want to become more than what we are. I appreciated that very, very much, the honesty and the vision for the place.

I got a job offer to teach for a little bit and I accepted it. I got this job while I was still, of course, at Berkeley, but I had received a post-doctoral fellowship from the National Science Foundation [NSF] at Berkeley, and I told them, "I'm excited about the prospect of coming to UNLV, but I would like to finish my post-doc first." They agreed to do that. They waited for me a year and a half, which I appreciated very, very much.

Tell us about the work you did in that year and a half.

I was a post-doc supportive by NSF, so I had my own funding. Typically in the sciences when you're a post-doctoral researcher, you're working on somebody's projects because that somebody is the person who has the funding who is paying your salary, and it's expensive. I had this fantastic opportunity; I was paying myself, thanks to NSF, of course. But I did not depend on another person for my salary, so I got to do research. I decided to start working on a project that's still going on, trying to understand how the populations of different species of Puerto Rican frogs and lizards relate to one another. It's a field of study called phylogeography. What

you're trying to do is you collect genetic data on animals that you go out into the field and collect, and then you take that information to infer the history of the populations of time and space. That's what I've been doing for the past twenty years now. I spent a lot of time in Puerto Rico collecting various species of lizards and frogs and also working in the lab, gathering the data that I need to get.

I was also involved with one friend on some other projects involving what is called anti-predator behaviors. Puerto Rico has these beautiful lizards. They're colony lizards that are very, very easy to see when you go to the island. My friend had developed this interest in trying to document the behaviors of those lizards in the wild, not in captivity as I did for my thesis, but under very natural conditions. We were very good friends and we did this together. He preserved a snake and he did it in such a way…you've seen…a device—I'm forgetting the name right now—in which the preserved snake looked like this. It really was like that, so the head was here, the neck was here, and then the rest of the body. He set it up so that using a string you can pull that preserved snake and make it look like it is a real snake approaching a lizard, specifically perching on a tree. We would go to the forest and we find this lizard perching on a tree. Then very, very carefully, we set up the preserved snake on this device that he designed, and one of us will position himself behind the tree where the lizard was and start pulling very, very slowly the preserved snake towards the tree where the lizard is. Another person, typically me, would watch the lizard very, very carefully and describe its behaviors in as much detail as possible and record those behaviors. We did that for months. We went around the island and found different places. We were able to document natural behaviors in the field of these animals undisturbed by our presence. The paper was publishing a very, very good journal; it's called Animal Naturalist, the

best journal in the field and a testament to his ingenuity. He is truly a creative biologist. I spent some time doing that also and it was fun.

Can you tell us about your first impression of Las Vegas when you arrived? Was that the first time you had been here?

Yes. I had never been to Las Vegas before I came to interview for the first time because I thought Las Vegas is a place to gamble and a place to get drunk. I do not gamble. I drink very, very little alcohol. Four times per year, I may have a glass of wine and that's it for me. This city never appealed to me in the least. Many of my friends at the museum, particularly single, they would come to Las Vegas for at least one weekend and then they would tell all these stories of what they did in that forty-eight hours in Las Vegas. I found the stories entertaining, but, again, they did not appeal to me. Although I was very grateful for the invitation to come to Las Vegas, I had my doubts about would I be able, if offered the job, to live in this city.

Again, to their credit, the faculty who interviewed me, they were even apologetic for living in Las Vegas. They made the point very, very clear and repeatedly that UNLV is not the Strip. Before I came to UNLV, I didn't know the term *Strip*. I did not know what that is. Every person that I met with, the dean, the chair, the faculty members, they told me the same thing, "UNLV is not the Strip. The Strip is there. There is nothing we can do about that. But the Strip does not have to affect life." And they were quite right. I learned that within a couple of years living here that it is there, it is not going anywhere, but that you can live your life completely independent of what happens on the Strip. I have interviewed many doc candidates since I came here, many students also, and I tell them the same thing, "UNLV is not the Strip."

Now I appreciate it because it's nice to be able to go to the Strip, catch a show, go to some fine dining on special occasions, birthdays, anniversaries, but it's something that you

choose to do when you want to do it, not because you're forced to do it. I like it very much. I do enjoy having the Strip there because all the performers come to Las Vegas at some point. You don't have to fly anywhere to see a show by virtually anyone; they will come to you. Just wait one year and most likely that performer will come to Las Vegas.

As a biologist, what was it like coming to Nevada, to the Mojave Desert?

I like deserts. Puerto Rico is a tropical island and the southwest coast sits under a rain shadow and the forest area is very similar to—it has less vegetation than the Mojave Desert, but it's definitely a dry environment. I like it very much. I spent some time doing research in that part of the island and I enjoyed it very much.

Also, when I was a master's student in Puerto Rico, I took a class in Costa Rica, Organization for Tropical Stories, so tropical biology. We went to one locality called Palo Verde, which is also a tropical dry forest. I like it very, very much there.

I was not concerned about coming to the Mojave Desert. I was concerned about the Las Vegas environment initially. I actually appreciate deserts very much. I don't go hiking as much any longer, but I like to go hiking, just walking in the desert looking for herps. Of course, I'm looking for lizards and snakes, but I like deserts.

Tell us about your first few years at UNLV.

A learning experience. It is true that President Harter's vision for the institution was to make research a much more important aspect of the mission that we have, but I quickly learned that the institution was not prepared yet to deal with the needs of faculty for who research is very, very important. It was definitely the mentality of a teaching institution. You order boards, markers, books, paper, and you're doing fine. For research that doesn't do it. It cannot be like that. You have to be able to order big pieces of equipment. You have to be able to order equipment and

chemicals that you need overnight. Getting them in one month won't do because research cannot wait one month. You need that chemical yesterday, tomorrow morning. It was a challenge to get purchasing to understand that. They insist on the bidding process, which I understand if you're using public funds. You may have options in theory, but in reality you need one product from one company to do what you need to do for your research because it has the highest quality and it has the characteristics that you need to accomplish the goal that you're trying to accomplish. Things have improved significantly in my time here, but still every semester we deal with complaints from faculty members about purchasing at UNLV. Things have improved, but they still have a ways to go here. The institution has to continue maturing in that sense. The needs of researchers are more immediate than the needs of educators, and the needs need to be met promptly. It cannot be, we'll get to it when we get a chance. It just doesn't work like that in research.

Can you talk about some of the improvements you've seen over your time here?

Things are so much faster now that we have P card. A P card is a mixed blessing, but I like having a P card versus having to complete a purchase order for something. Having to fill out the pink form and the yellow form and the blue form and the white form, and, "No, we need the pink one; the blue one won't do," and you have to do it again. That was hell. The P card even though we complain, the consolation process is a significant improvement over the twenty different colored forms. That has improved.

Also, the institution is more mature in the sense that it now better understands the needs of researchers and the people in department administration that understand that, the vice president for research, for example, she is highly competent and she was working for the University of California system to UNLV, so she understands that we just need to become much

more efficient in meeting the needs of researchers. There are many different types of research, of course, equally valued, history, literature, and some fields don't need the sciences…because it's a different type of research, equally valuable but different type of research. But in the sciences you have to move very, very fast because everybody is moving fast, and if you don't move fast, you continue staying behind and behind and behind and that impacts the productivity of the institution.

Is that particularly true in biology, or is it also in other sciences?

It's sciences in general. The same for physics, chemistry, astronomy. Things move fast, very, very fast. You have to keep up with the state of the field. Nowadays there is this explosion in information. We're overwhelmed by information of all kinds. You need to stay current; otherwise, your research becomes very difficult.

When you first came to Las Vegas, what was your title?

Assistant professor of biology.

What courses did you teach?

I taught Evolution, which is the class that is maybe the most important class in biology because it is a class that is the most discipline within biology. Biology is guilty of emphasizing memorization too much and that's on us; that's on the instructors. But that's how we were taught and that's how most of us teach. Biology is important, of course; there's no doubt about that. But what is more important than the factual knowledge is how can you assess that knowledge; how can you critically evaluate that knowledge; how can you apply analytical techniques to that data and make inferences about the signal, the information that is encoded in those data? Evolution attempts to do that. Evolution attempts to draw from the knowledge that we gain in other courses

to try to help the students see the complexities of biological entities in the world. It is a class that is difficult to teach, but it's extremely enjoyable, or at least it can be.

Is it one of the first classes that science majors take?

No. It's typically the last class that students take in the major because, again, it requires a lot of basic knowledge. What you're trying to do is help the students make connections among different concepts, ideas and information that they learn in different classes becomes (something of studies), a challenge in education is to try to have the students see that even though we're taking the real courses in the real semester that everything connects to it. Making connections is intellectually difficult to do, but it's the most rewarding aspect of learning and of teaching, also, when you start to see the whole picture becoming a unity.

Yes, that lightbulb moment for students.

Exactly, exactly.

Did you find that your teaching style changed when you were at Berkeley versus here at UNLV?

Not really. I've always been called a demanding teacher even after I finished my thesis and taught for those two years in Puerto Rico. I pay a lot of attention to detail. I give challenging lectures for the students because I strongly believe that you need to help bring students to the level where you want them to be. Relaxing standards is not particularly advisable because it has bad consequences for everybody. I am called by virtually all my students a challenging teacher, but fair. I like to say that I'm fair.

That's a very good description, challenging.

It's a perspective that nobody everybody shares.

That was your title before. What is it now?

Professor of biology.

Are you teaching any herpetology courses?

I taught herpetology in spring. I also have a position in the administration at this institution. I have been assistant associate chair of my department, the School of Life Sciences. Then I was associate dean of the College of Sciences for eight years. Now I am vice provost for Academic Programs at UNLV. I like teaching. I believe that it's one of the most important aspects of the profession of a faculty member on any campus, on any university anywhere. I like to think that I am a decent instructor. I am not the best instructor on this campus; definitely I'm not that, but I'm not the worst one, either. I like to think that I'm in the top 20 percent of instructors on campus, with no data whatsoever; that's just what I tell myself.

For me it's important to keep connection with the students because administration can consume your life completely. The higher you go in administration, the more separation exists between what you do on a daily and the students. I don't want to lose that connection to the students. Even though I had a release when I was in the College of Sciences, associate dean, and now in my position, I teach because I like it. Most of the students tell me that they like it, so I go with that. But I think this position that I'm here now since January—I taught in January my herpetology class and it was extremely challenging because I was learning a new position on campus that has very, very high demands on your time, but I was also teaching. When you teach you have to go to lecture, period. It doesn't matter how important the meeting is with the provost or some other deans, you need to go to lecture. I also made myself available to students. If my students want to talk to me, I find the time to talk to the students because that's what faculty members do. It's not just me. We all do that. If I have an appointment with a student, I honor that appointment. It doesn't matter what's going on in other aspects of my job. I honor that

appointment because a student wants to talk to me and because I happen to be the instructor in the class.

This created limitations for me in my job because there were things that I needed to be doing on my job that I just wasn't able to do because I was doing some other aspect of my job. I was advised by very good colleagues. They asked me, "Are you sure you want to teach?" I said, "Yes." I had made a commitment, so I honored my commitment. "Are you sure you want to teach this class?" "Yes, I am." I quickly learned why they were asking me whether I really wanted to teach the class.

I taught the class. I'm not teaching the class in the spring because we have to do other aspects of my job that are very, very demanding and that are important for the institution. I didn't feel it was fair to essentially not do all the aspects of my job as well as I can because I had this other obligation. But I already miss it so much.

Are there other people who are in that similar situation that are in administration but also teach a class? Is that common?

I believe some deans teach, not all of them, but some teach. But the issue is that these positions are so demanding and you have to react to so many things that happen. If there is an incident involving a student or a faculty member, you have to address that. Sometimes there are requests that come from the Board of Regents and you have forty-eight hours to provide them with the answer; you have to address that. I fully understand how it is so difficult for people who have these positions in administration to also be in the classroom because it's a conflict.

Before I ask you about your current position, can you go back and tell us about what your responsibilities were as Associate Dean of College of Sciences?

Many people ask me that question, so my answer is I have two jobs as associate dean. I did everything that the dean asked me to do and I did everything that the dean did not want to do himself or herself. The associate dean supports the dean. On that job I was made in charge of the academic operations of the college. I coordinated with the academic departments in the College of Sciences on the simplest things. For example, making sure that we offer all the courses that the students in the college need to graduate in their respective degree programs, and that there are enough seats available for the students who want and need to take that class. If student issues happen, sometimes there are disagreements in life between a student and a faculty member, and when those disagreements cannot be solved at the department level, then they came to me. I tried to remediate the situation or the issue what's going on between the student or students and the faculty member. Sometimes there are disagreements between faculty members. When they couldn't be addressed at the department level, I also dealt with that.

I was involved in sciences college, making sure that we're using our resources in a manner that is strategic and that we can maximize the bang for the buck. Any new initiatives that came from the provost's office or the president's office and they needed to be developed and implemented, I assisted the dean in doing that and also in the strategy for the college. It's very, very important for any entity to have a strategy. Given the constraint in resources that we all have, what are the goals that we want to accomplish that allow us to become better at what we do? More efficient at what we do? Or adopt some other responsibilities that we would like to, but we haven't yet for whatever reason.

I like the job. I am fairly well organized and responsive also. I think I do a decent job of trying to focus on the facts of the situation and try to downplay the personal aspects of the situation. I was also part of the ombudsman at the campus level. The goal of the ombudsman is

to address differences that happen between different individuals. I have quite a bit of experience in conflict resolution. I like to think that I do a decent job of trying to help individuals that are in disagreement to try to find some sort of resolution. Compromise is a very, very important word. We try to address the issue as best as we can give in the circumstances. Sometimes it's very, very, very difficult because for some of us it's very, very hard to let go of things that have happened to us, very, very difficult, and that makes it more challenging. But at some point there has to be a resolution of the issue, because otherwise you carry this with you for years and that is not healthy at all. When you're in administration, you have to deal with those situations every once in a while.

I was involved a little bit in the (other) aspects of the college, operation, but not that much. That was definitely the part of the job that I spent the least amount of time working on. I think that covers it for the most part for this position.

How did you know you wanted to start working in administration?

I've always been very, very organized. I can say that; I'm very organized. Even in high school I organized several activities, I served in groups that provided guidance to the school. But my career in administration at UNLV is interesting because my first position was as assistant director of my own department, the School of Life Sciences. I did not apply for the job. I was approached about the job. I initially said, "No, thank you. I'll stay a professor." But then when the director approached me for a second time, I realized that it was not wise for me to say no twice, so I said yes the second time with some concern about what was going to happen. But the director, he's a fantastic human being. He made the job much easier than I thought it was going to be.

Then I served on committees at the college level, so I became a bit better known outside my department, and I also was involved in some activities that had a little bit of visibility, so people saw me doing things outside the department. Also, within the college we had a different dean from the outside, and I was advised to apply for the position of associate dean with the college. I had thought about it for maybe ten minutes and I said, "No, I don't want to do this." A couple of chairs of departments advised me to apply for the position. At some point, I realized that the universe is talking to you. I applied and they offered me the job and I took the job.

For this position that I have right now, the vice provost for Academic Programs, again when the position became available, I thought about it for maybe ten minutes and said, "It's too early for me, so I'm not going to apply." I received a phone call, then, from somebody in the upper administration advising me to apply, so I thought about it for twenty-four hours. I returned the phone call and told the person that I was very appreciative of the conversation, but I decided to not apply. Then the next day I got another phone call from an even more senior member of the administration asking me to apply for the position. Again, at that point I realized, the universe is talking to you; you should apply, so I applied and I interviewed and they offered me the position and I took it. That's how I came to where I'm at now.

I'm well organized. I can solve problems.

Talk to us about this past year in your new position and what that's been like.

It was very challenging. Even if they offered me the position, I was not sure I was going to take it because after eight years as associate dean of the College of Sciences, I was very, very comfortable in that position. Back then, because we had a new dean that had just arrived, I was the person who knew the college the best because the time I had in the position and because of all the activities that I had been involved in at the college level, so I felt very comfortable about

my level of knowledge about the college operations. Except for two individuals in the dean's office, I played a role in hiring everyone else. I either chaired the search committee or served on the committee that defined them as the people that we wanted to hire. We had a fantastic team; we still do. We got along very, very, very well. Whenever issues arose, we got together and we solved them fairly efficiently, I would say, most of the time. I was very, very comfortable in the position.

Then we hired another dean from UC Riverside, and he's a fantastic administrator. He is a gifted administrator. After I learned his philosophy and I got used to it, then…But we were a very good team. I enjoyed working with him very, very much.

Something that I like is to have autonomy. I am a very good employee, at least I think I am, in the sense that I can follow orders, and I do understand—what my philosophy is—that there is a time for discussion of ideas and there is a time for implementation. We can have all the debates and conversations that we want. But once my supervisor makes a final decision we're going that way, my job becomes to implement that decision regardless of whether or not I happen to agree with it personally. At that point my personal opinion becomes irrelevant because a supervisor expressed her or his preference of that's the route that we are going. I'm pretty good at following orders, and I'm very, very loyal to my supervisors.

I lost my track of thought. What did you ask me?

What you've done this past year with your new position.

Okay. So, autonomy. I had a lot of autonomy in the College of Sciences, a lot. There were decisions that the dean left up to me. I always told him, "I decided to go to this. Is that okay with you?" And he would agree. I appreciate that very, very much; that I know what my marching orders are, but I have quite a bit of latitude to implement those marching orders as I see fit.

I wasn't sure that I was going to have that in this position because now you're moving from the college to the university level and there are many more constituents at the campus level than on the college level. Of course, I didn't know the campus as well as I knew the college at all. There were some units that I knew a little bit better than others because I had worked with them on different jobs in the past. But some colleges I had never worked at all, so I didn't know anything about them.

This position here was very, very educational for me. I learned a lot about the institution and how it operates and how different colleges go about different things. I also have been granted quite a bit of latitude to operate. Of course, we all have our directives, these other things that we need to do and our deadlines. But my supervisors are not micromanagers. They tell me what they want me to do and I go about doing the job. Of course, I report to them on a pretty regular basis, or particularly as is needed, and they tell me yes; they tell me, *why do you think about modifying this approach this way? Why don't we go that way instead of the way that you prefer?* Which is perfectly fine. That has been very, very positive.

Also, this is a very influential group, the one that I belong to now because the academic decisions of the campus are made at that table. Of course, you get input from as many people as you can, and you assess what are the resources that you can devote to a certain goal or vision, and then you make a decision, what our positions are there. I have a voice and frequently a vote on those issues, and that's very, very personally satisfying that you can play a role in the institution.

I like to think that we don't make very many mistakes, but not everybody shares that perspective, I'm sure. But something that I appreciate very much is that the provost that I initially served with and the current provost, they do seek input from different parts of the

institution, and they do consider that input. It's impossible to do everything that somebody wants you to do for any number of reasons, but our provost, the two that I have served directly under, are not dogmatic. They do take information into account, different perspectives, and sometimes they go in ways that is not what they said they would like to go initially because they listen to the campus. I understand that some people may think that that's not the case, I understand why, but I can definitely state that they take input from different parts of the institution and then they make the decision that they believe is the best one given the constraints in time and resources, and, of course, money that we have.

I've learned a lot this year. I enjoy my colleagues. We get along fine. Of course, we have different perspectives, we have different experiences, and we don't always see eye to eye. Sometimes people have a different suggestion about whatever is the particular issue. But whenever that happens we get together fairly quickly, we talk about it, people listen carefully to other person's opinions, and then we try to get to a consensus or sometimes somebody is fair to someone else. It's a very, very democratic way of making decisions.

Are there unique challenges to UNLV?

I don't know about unique, but the obvious one is resources. Our budget for each biennium is about 750 million dollars, which may sound like a lot, but it's not for a place this size. Most of that money is set up in salaries, so you can't do anything with that because those are people's salaries. We don't have much flexibility to operate. There are very many great ideas that different people can have about things to do: financial aid, admissions. The people who are more concerned with education, those who want to expand our research capabilities, they have very, very good ideas, sometimes what I would call brilliant ideas. We just don't have the resources to implement those and that's frustrating because it is.

But, at the same time, when you have been charged with the task of leading the institution, you have to do it in a responsible manner that is sustainable. That is something that I emphasize that I don't want to hit a homerun and then have to retreat for two years. I want to be on this upward trajectory, which we get incrementally better with time. It happens much more slowly than anybody wants. I understand that. But I want to be able to say that we are in a positive slope; that we are getting better, not as fast as we want to, but we're getting better with time. That is sometimes a challenging message to get across because people, I understand, they have their own interests; they want to be more successful at what they do. But when you are at the high level, then you get a request from everybody, and there is just not enough resources to accommodate all the requests that you get, some of which, again, are very, very recent ones, (1:35:33) strategic, but we just cannot implement it. That's frustrating, but it's part of the challenge.

When you all come to the table to have these discussions, and you said everyone brings a different perspective, what perspectives do you feel you bring?

The one of a faculty member because—I think this is one of the reasons why I want to continue the connection to students for as long as I can—because when you teach senior students, for example, you see the institution from a different level. When you are sitting on the seventh floor of FDH making decisions, you see the institution from a different level. My perspective is very often: *How will a faculty member in the Department of Arts think about this when she hears about that?* Sometimes that is very, very different from what a dean will think about that because they just have different perspectives. I like to emphasize the faculty member's perspective on the issue.

Again, as scientists we're trained to deal with hard data; I also try to remove the more subjective considerations from the equation to the extent possible. It's impossible to be completely objective; that is impossible. But, as I mentioned some time ago, sometimes we get too caught up in my experience. *Five years ago we went through something similar and this happened. I don't want that to repeat itself*. But maybe that experience that you had is very valid, but it's not as relevant to this issue as you think it is. I try to be as objective as possible.

I also am a big believer in accountability, and I think that in our society we are losing that. *It is somebody else's fault, not mine*. I have very little patience for that. I make mistakes; I definitely do, and I acknowledge them. Sometimes it's very hard to do because you made a bad mistake that you should not have; you were just careless. But I believe that if you acknowledge it, it becomes a little bit more palatable for the people affected by it than if you try to blame someone else. There is a lot of finger pointing that goes on, a lot.

This next question I wanted to know—the reason I know your name, not because I'm in Life Sciences, but because I received the emails about the course name changes, new courses added and courses eliminated. How does that process work when it comes to maybe changing a name? For example, a really significant one for us, the name changed from Latino Studies to Latinx Studies. Do you know how that process works?

Yes. That is one of the functions of my office. We deal with program changes. The initiative starts with typically one faculty member or a group of faculty members who believe in the specific case of a name change that the name of that particular program no longer reflects the realities of the field because it is an antiquated name—for whatever reason. There is a form that has to be completed and my office processes that form. We work with the faculty members, particularly the chair of the unit that is proposing that change to make sure that we follow the

steps that are dictated by the Nevada System of Higher Education to request in changes. When the Board of Regents officially approves that name change, then my office sends what is called a Provost Alert to the campus, and that is the official announcement that in the example that you mentioned, the name of that degree program has been officially changed from A to B and that from this point on it will be called B.

It's not just bureaucracy or trying to keep up with the times because all those changes have to be communicated to our academic agency because it's part of the process. There has to be quality control over what an institution is doing to make sure the students are attending an institution that meets at least a minimum status of quality that they expect for the degree to have meaning when they go out and try to join the workforce, if they haven't yet. It's a bureaucratic process. I understand that. But it's important to follow that because otherwise if we have department that are changing things at will, then it becomes chaos. More importantly, the students will be penalized. Maybe the first rule that we have in our office is we protect the students because they are the most important parts of the institution.

I'm curious. Are some of these degree changes more typical than others?

It depends on the nature. If it is just a name change, it's fairly easy to do.

It seems like it is.

Assuming that the faculty supports it. It may be that faculty member X in department X wants to change the name of the degree program from D to G, but no one else wants that in the unit. That change is not going to come forward because whatever is the change has to be supported at the department level and at the college level and by the campus. Assuming that all those entities support a change, then it's a fairly easy thing to do.

Sometimes there are changes not just in name, but also in the nature of the degree program. If they want to expand the number of credits, for example, from 120 to 123 that is a big challenge because the system has decided that we want the bachelor's degree to be at 120 credits except in some select cases in which there is program accreditation. If a program decides that in order for us to prepare our students in the best possible way, we have to go from 120 to 123 that will take some work because we have to convince the regents that that change is worth it given the reality of that discipline. You have to come up with a very, very competent argument that the regents will appreciate.

Because of the title of our project here, I'd like you to talk more about the change to **Latinx.**

I cannot talk much about that because that is not my area of research. But I do belong to the Latino, now the Latinx Faculty Alliance on campus, and we sometimes are referred to as Hispanics, not Latino. I learned from them—I didn't know this—that some members of our community find that name somewhat offensive: Hispanic. So, it's been abandoned for the most part, I believe. Now Latino. In Spanish *Latino* is masculine, so it only applies to males. Of course, that is a sexist term. You could use Latino, slash, A, or Latino/Latina, but that's a little bit awkward, so Latinx is…It has more hype, more modern than Latino, slash, Latina, or Latino, slash, A; that is difficult to read for people who don't read Spanish. Latin is a term that is acceptable to most of us, to refer to ourselves, and X sounds better, more hype.

But that brings up another question. *Latinx* here is somewhat known, but what about, for example, in Puerto Rico? Do you think people use *Latinx* there?

I haven't heard that expression, but I only spend in Puerto Rico two weeks per year, so I am not the best judge of that.

The conversations we've had, it does tend to be an academic and more university type inspired word, more aware of that.

I wouldn't be surprised if it is.

That's part of the reason we ask our narrators what their thoughts on the term is. Something we've been doing at the end of the interviews is: What do you even think about the term *Latinx*? You're in this unique position where you're surrounded by academics, so they already know what the term means. Do all of them?

My colleagues are definitely using *Latinx* now. I don't recall having heard any of them say *Latino*, *Latina* in the past ten months; something like that.

That's interesting.

I think the name has caught up with our non-Latino.

Yes, because I use it. "What are you talking about?"

In your field.

No, just out in regular conversations with people. They say, "Latinx, what does that mean, and where did that come from?" But I've come to appreciate it as a modern term.

Yes. That's a very good expression. It does sound very modern and it's cool. It sounds better than Latino/Latina. Latinx sounds better, I think.

It's used for a lot of reasons. I'm curious. You said you were part of Latinx—I'm sorry. What is the full name of the alliance that's here at the university?

That would be the Latinx Faculty Alliance.

Latinx Faculty Alliance. Do you feel that your cultural background influences your work currently or maybe even as dean or even when you were a professor?

I am mindful of not using references to my culture that others may find offensive, so I don't think so.

I want to know a little bit more about the research you're doing now or the research you've been doing recently.

Not much. But my master's student just graduated. He filed his thesis on Monday, so I'm very happy about that. He worked on genetic differentiation of a frog that lives in Puerto Rico and some nearby islands. In summer '18, we went to Saint John, Tortola, Jost Van Dyke, in the Caribbean Sea, to collect frogs for his thesis. We preserved the animals we brought into the lab. He collected data and analyzed the data and he reported his findings. As I said, he filed his thesis on Monday. I'm very, very happy that he got his degree and now we're working on the manuscript for publication in a peer review journal.

I am working with my former doctoral student; I'm a member of her committee on the last manuscript from her thesis. It's a very esoteric topic. This was differences in body proportions in scorpions between male and female scorpions. It's very esoteric. It's a study that we didn't initially plan, but she encountered some difficulties with some part of her dissertation and this became an avenue for her to be able to add one chapter to her dissertation. It's based strictly on linear measurements of different parts of the body of male and female scorpions. The idea is that the males and the females of the species have different challenges in their biology and their body proportions allow the males and females to perform some aspects of their functions more efficiently. It's very, very esoteric, something that not that many people are going to read outside the field. But that's the work. We're hoping to be able to submit this for publication by February.

Are you still doing research in herpetology?

Yes. I have to finish a manuscript on differences in patterns, organic diversity between two lizards from Puerto Rico, two lizards that occur in the more humid parts of the island. I just need to find the time to revise it one more time to address the comments from reviewers and then it should be done. That's part of a project that a former student did with us in the lab five years ago. I just haven't finished it, so it's on me. I haven't devoted the time that I need to, to finish this.

I'm curious because you said that it's esoteric and it kind of is, but what is some of the very interesting research that's being done in this field right now, in the field of herpetology?

There are so many questions depending on which particular area you focus on. Global climate change is a reality despite the claims of some politicians. Global climate change is happening and is going to continue to happen for years to come and there's no doubt about that whatsoever. There is a very active area of research that deals with the effects on organisms, plants, animals, of global climate change, very, very active. Definitely some changes have happened. For example, summers are longer, spring starts earlier, then winter starts later, but ____changes in the timing of biological events; when plants flower, for example; how soon animals that migrate start their migratory routes. All this is happening right now and there are many, many people who are documenting all these changes and trying to make predictions given what has happened, what is happening, what's going to happen in the next twenty years or fifty years or one hundred years. It's very depressing, very, very depressing. But there are many people working on that. Lizards and frogs are a very common study system to address these types of questions.

Why is that?

They are relatively easy to work with. They're called ectotherms. We mammals generate enough heat internally in our bodies to maintain a fairly constant body temperature independent on what

happens on the outside. It doesn't matter that it is fifty right now, our bodies are pretty much the same temperature no matter what, in normal circumstances. But reptiles and amphibians are not like that. Their body temperature fluctuates with that of the environment. If you take the body temperature of a lizard now outside the library, it will be very, very similar to the ambient temperature, the air temperature. If you bring that same individual here and you let it acclimate for one hour, its body temperature will be very similar to that of the room; that's called ectothermic. Because reptiles and amphibians are ectotherms, then they're very good trackers of environmental temperatures and their behavior is impacted greatly by ambient temperatures; therefore, they become good model studies to see how these changes in climate change are impacting organisms.

People work on plants for that and they have detected that plants that are adapting to colder environments. They are migrating upwards the mountains because the temperature gets decreasing on the floor. To maintain a colder temperature you have to go further up. That's happening and it's called displacement in space. Also, definitely plants, those that flower, are flowering earlier in the year, and that means that they're responding to environmental changes, and that has implications for many other aspects. Our crops, for example. They are not immune to global climate change, and there have already been some disruptions in crop production in certain places; that will continue. Climate change, for example, a freeze comes and then it affects the industry in Florida, for example, and that has impacts for whether we can get oranges, for example, in December or January or February. In some other parts of the world, as you probably have read, there are big-time wildfires that are raging wild; that impacts crops in some cases and the floor. It impacts the stability of ____populations. The research is being done on those aspects right now.

There is one more question I want to ask. I want to end it on a happier note, but also something that I just wanted to know. I read through some of the titles of your publications. I noticed you do a lot of work on this type of lizard called the anole. I personally love anoles. I watch YouTube videos about them, but there are different types. I wanted to know why you have researched them so thoroughly.

When you go to forests in Puerto Rico, you see them very, very quickly and they're fairly easy to catch, so it's convenience and abundance. When you are a field biologist and you go out to the field, it's very, very important that the individual—it can be a plant; it can be an animal—that you want to study, it's relatively easy to find and that you find it in large enough numbers that you can gather enough data from them. Are you from Costa Rica?

I'm not from Costa Rica, but I'm going to be visiting soon.

When you go to Costa Rica, if you get a chance, try to go to a forest. Stand in one place and look around for five minutes without making much noise or moving around. At some point you will see some animals, maybe a bird, maybe a lizard. Frogs are more difficult to see during the daytime, but you can. The challenge in the mainland tropics is to find several individuals of the same type because their densities typically are lower than on islands, and that means that if you want to study, I don't know, the behavior of this lizard when it's trying to escape from this bird that is trying to eat it, you need more than one, as many as you can, because the more data you gather about a system, the more accurate inferences you will be able to make about that system. If you have to spend five days to find two individuals that is a challenge; that is a barrier to that work. In Puerto Rico, anoles lizards are fairly common in many places. For most species, once you find one you're very, very likely to find many others in _____ area fairly quickly, and that

makes deciding the study easier because you can get more data easier and faster. It's a very important consideration when you're planning a study that you can find your animal species.

I had a colleague at Berkeley; she was studying this particular type of amphibian. She was from Brazil and she went to Brazil for one summer and she came back and she told me, "I had to switch my project because I could not find it."

What a shame.

It's not that she was lazy. It's that they are that difficult to find because sometimes, very often, they just occur in very, very low densities. When you go to Puerto Rico or to Cuba, Española, Jamaica, it's the same, and you go to a forest, a relatively undisturbed area, it's almost a guarantee that you will see these lizards because they occur in high densities on the islands and, therefore, many, many people study them because they are fairly easy to find.

It's out of convenience, but not just convenience.

Convenience is definitely important, yes. I have done work with some snakes that you'll find one every other day; something like that. You have to spend many, many hours to find those two snakes. Where do you invest your time, trying to find the animal or gathering data? Most of us prefer to spend more time gathering data than trying to find the animal.

I'm just here thinking they're very nice-looking lizards.

It depends how you define nice.

Not all of them are nice-looking.

As I like to say that perspective is not shared by everyone.

Yes, that's true.

But I’m biased; I work with them. I find beauty in amphibians, reptiles and snakes. Some are very, very picturesque; some not so much. Some have coloration that it is just a brown lizard, but some are very, very nice-looking in my opinion.

Thank you so much, Dr. Rodriguez.

My pleasure.

Thank you for your time.

[End of recorded interview]

APPENDIX

Biographical Sketch

Javier A. Rodríguez

EDUCATION

Doctor of Philosophy in Integrative Biology (1998)
University of California, Berkeley

Master of Science in Biology (1990)
University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras

University of Costa Rica, San José (1988)
(Organization for Tropical Studies)

Bachelor of Science Diploma (*Magna cum laude*) (1986)
Major: Biology
University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Vice Provost for Academic Programs (2019-present)
Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Professor of Biology (2019-present)
School of Life Sciences
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Associate Dean (2011-2018)
College of Sciences
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Associate Director (2008-2010)
School of Life Sciences
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Associate Professor of Biology (2008-2019)
School of Life Sciences
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Publications
Javier A. Rodríguez-Robles
(ORCID ID: 0000-0003-4501-9875)

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