

WCU MSW Program's
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VOICES
on difference
a student-led journal focusing on issues of social justice

Dr. Meagan Corrado, Faculty Advisor
Kristen Lippolis, Student Editor

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VOICES - Editor's Note



Dear Readers,

We are making some changes to VOICES! In an effort to make VOICES more engaging and accessible, we are shifting from a print PDF format to a multimedia format. This change will allow us to bring you content that will help you stay connected with your fellow WCU MSW students and alumni.

VOICES will now feature a wide range of multimedia content, inclusive of just about every form of art or expression that you can think of! It is our hope that with these new, expansive formats, VOICES will reach more students than ever before, allowing you to explore the topic of social justice in new and innovative ways.

We hope this change will be welcomed by our readers and we look forward to continuing our mission of advancing social justice by amplifying the VOICES of WCU.

It is my pleasure to extend my heartfelt congratulations to all the MSW graduates of this academic year. You all have put in tireless efforts to achieve your goals and should be immensely proud of yourselves. As you enter the next phase of your career, I wish you all the very best for your future endeavors. Wherever you land, I encourage you to continue to foster existing and new relationships with openness and honesty, harnessing the power of community in the fight for social justice.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kristen Lippolis', written over a light blue horizontal line.

Kristen Lippolis, Student Editor



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My Odyssey to Graduate School

Maria Parra

When my journey started ten years ago, I was finishing my bachelors in psychology in my home country of Colombia. I realized that many of the papers that I was supposed to read for my final paper were in English. Students were required to read and cite scientific papers, but in reality, none of us were prepared to do that. Therefore, not being fluent in English became a barrier to write my final paper and obtain my degree.

Then, an opportunity arose to come to Philadelphia under an au pair program to work as a live-in special needs caregiver while taking English classes part time. The prospect of immersing myself in a different culture was very exciting. I remember I looked at Philadelphia's pictures online and I saw the colorful murals on the buildings, the children playing at the parks, and even watched the video of the powerful song “ Streets of Philadelphia.” I had never experienced this kind of diversity in my hometown, which is two hours away from Bogotá, where everyone is Colombian and there are few foreign-born people or people of color. So, I decided to leave my Colombian program unfinished to move to Philadelphia. I was so thrilled to live in that city that I couldn't sleep the few nights before my trip, thinking that in the next days I would be living in that wonderful city.

After two years the program came to an end; my English had improved, and it was time for me to go back to my home country. But I was already in love with Philadelphia. And one day while I was walking past a university campus, the idea came to my mind of pursuing a master's degree. Then I started volunteering for a community program in North Philly for Hispanic seniors. I began to realize that there was a large Latino community that needed better mental health care. I figured that a master's degree in Social Work would allow me to help not only the Latino community, but maybe other immigrants just like me.

My Odyssey to Graduate School

Maria Parra

In September 2020, I was supposed to start my master's program, but I could not—my student visa had not been approved yet. Under the Trump administration, most of the procedures related to visas for immigrants were extremely delayed. So, I became one of thousands of migrants that were denied the opportunity to study in the U.S. WCU was accepting international students, but they weren't providing assistance to help them navigate through the immigration system. I was disappointed and frustrated. After attempting to overcome various barriers, I was referred to the Assistant Director of International programs, who suggested that I should go back to my country and apply for my student Visa there, even though there was a smaller chance to get a Visa approved on time if I did this. Even worse, going back to my country with the zero-tolerance policy from the Trump administration in place could have meant never being able to enter the U.S. again.

At that moment I felt that I had no way out. On one hand, going back home could have put me in risk to not enter the U.S. again, and on the other hand, waiting for a visa in the U.S., outside of the stipulated time would have made me become an “unauthorized alien.” A part of me felt defeated. All my plans had failed, and I was between a rock and a hard place. Soon after, my status was taken care of and I was finally able to start the program with a qualifying status, asserting the benefits that come along. But once again I had to face the challenges of being an immigrant and became my own lawyer, navigating the legal system despite the language barrier.

I had never reflected on the difficult path I followed as an immigrant.

As hard as it was, I just did what I had to do at the time.

My Odyssey to Graduate School

Maria Parra

I am sharing my story because I think it is important for Social Workers to know, not only the history of their clients that are immigrants, but also the story of immigrant coworkers and classmates that share spaces with them on a daily basis. I'm hoping that, by hearing my odyssey, Social Workers will have a deeper knowledge of what immigrants have to do and how much strength we need to go through the system.

*If we can remember that everyone in the U.S. is an immigrant
or has relatives who were immigrants to begin with,
maybe we can open new pathways to
become better social workers,
and better people in the process.*



I created this art when I was burnt out from the social work field and was learning how/when to set boundaries for myself. The flowers represent the many opportunities that the MSW program offers, and the black paint represents burn out. As a first-year student, I was saying yes to every opportunity that was offered to me and I had trouble managing time for self-care. The amazing opportunities (flowers) that I took on were tarnished with the black paint, where I started to lose enjoyment from the work that I used to love. I quickly realized it was time to set some boundaries and add in time with friends, family, and the things that make me happy. This is what brought back my passion and motivation for social work. Having healthy boundaries between personal life and work is extremely important in this field because we cannot care for others if we are not caring for ourselves.

The Road

Dr. Meagan Corrado

I've gone a lot of places
I've seen a lot of things
I've traveled down a lot of roads
Through all life's happenings

I've seen sandy beaches, oceans
Turquoise waters. Tranquil waves.
I've seen grottos, fish, and dolphins
I've seen cliffs and I've seen caves.

I've seen pyramids and sunsets
I've seen mountains, hills, and slopes
I've seen fluffy clouds and rainbows
Comfort, freedom, joy and hope

I've seen villains turn to heroes
I've seen dark transform to light
I've seen wanderers get lost
Then find direction, vision, sight.

I've seen shackles, chains be broken
I've seen captive souls set free
I've seen goals and dreams
accomplished
I've seen wounded birds grow wings

I've seen beauty, kindness, calm
I've seen strength beyond belief
I've seen fear transform to peace
I've seen pain morph to relief.

But no matter where I go
No matter what I see
There's always this one road
That beckons and it calls to me

There's all these signs that tell me
It's not a good idea
But habit says I have to go
My destiny is here.

I know all its twists and turns
Perils to the right and left
I can find it with my eyes closed
Come back like I never left.

In rain, it's really muddy
In ice, it's really slick
The potholes there are extra deep
They hold you in their grip.

The gravel isn't fresh
The pavement isn't new
I know this street. I know this road.
I know what it will do.

The street is full of nightmares
And everything I fear.
Loneliness, abandonment.
Failure, shame, and loss and tears.

Today, the road it calls me.
And I have to decide
If I will journey down it
Or leave this street behind.

The road is so familiar
And when I hear its voice
I'm almost drawn back down it
As if I don't have a choice

The Road

Dr. Meagan Corrado

I pause for just a moment
Think of everywhere I've gone.
I've seen trauma. I've seen strength.
Traveled through the dark and dawn.

But still the road it whispers
Telling me that it has changed
But I heard that all before
Just to find out it's the same.

I take another moment
And with all the strength within
Turn my back and walk away from it
Don't want to give back in.

Since childhood it has trapped me
Every day it lured me back
Didn't know any better
Didn't know it was a trap

But now I do know better
My eyes are clear. I see
That although it is familiar
This old road isn't for me.

So this time, I turn my feet
And I take another street.



Give and Take

You take and take and
ask for more, if only you
understood the cost

Kristen Lippolis

Odyssey Interview

Upon reading Maria Parra's story depicting her journey to earn her MSW, Kristen Lippolis sat down with Maria to discuss her challenges and perseverance and how we, as social workers, can work to dismantle barriers faced by immigrant students.

KL: Okay, so this is for the Spring 2023 issue of the Voices Journal from the WCU MSW Program. I'm Kristen Lippolis (she/her), the student editor, and I am here today with Maria Parra to talk about a piece that she wrote. Maria, would you like to introduce yourself and your piece?

MP: Hi Kristen, thank you so much for having me. Yes, as you mentioned, my name is Maria. I am an MSW graduate student. I'm graduating this year, and what I share in this paper is a general view of my journey, achieving my master's degree.

KL: Thank you. Thank you for sharing that. Thank you for being willing to share your experience in the journal and talking about it for the interview as well. So I was really sort of captivated reading your piece. Your drive home point at the end talks about your experience of coming to Philadelphia and leaving your bachelor's program and running into challenges pretty consistently with your student visa. You take us through these challenges, and you end your piece with your purpose for sharing being creating an awareness amongst us social workers that, not only is this what our clients are facing, but our colleagues and classmates. That piece really spoke to me because I feel like that is so relatable. So many of us come to this field because we know intimately a challenge and we want to bring this to light. I have more specific questions, but I wanted to ask you, in your time at Westchester, how has that message been received by your fellow students? Have people been receptive, supportive?

MP: Okay, to be honest, I've been in the program for three years, and I feel welcome in every class. I feel like students and teachers make an effort to make me feel welcome, and that is fantastic, but I really don't think that I have been part of a space where they explore a little bit more about what specific challenges international students go through. It has been more, something like, "Hi! Where are you from? What brought you here?" and it pretty much stops right there. So I understand that the university has other spaces specifically for international students, and that is fantastic, but when it comes to just realizing that we, immigrants, make part of this field, we in the classroom should open that space to understand that little bit more as I mentioned in the article, what are we sitting next to and how the knowledge of that experience is going to impact our practice.

Odyssey Interview

KL: Yeah, those are really excellent points. I struggle with that because I think that is sort of a failure of us as colleagues and as the program to dig deeper on experience and to try to understand rather than keeping things at a surface level. And I'm really struck by your experience of navigating all of these different systems. You talk about the legal immigration system a bit and the systems of academia and sort of where the gaps are in their accepting international students but not helping them get visas or renew visas. If you could speak to your experience in these systems and the challenges you faced, and how we, as social workers, can take action on this.

MP: Yeah, well, navigating the immigration system is already challenging, regardless of what your intentions are, whether you want to become a student or just travel to the US as a tourist. It's always challenging. It is, of course, expensive, but more than that, I feel like there is a gap between what the universities or schools offer and whether international students are capable of achieving or get. When I was applying for my MSW, there were several things in the road. The first one was under a different administration, it was under the Trump administration, and for some reason any immigration application just went slower and slower, and it was pretty much impossible to get a visa. I feel like at that time having already been approved to be in the program but still waiting for my student visa, was a nightmare because I had worked so hard to be accepted in the program and the student visa never came. I feel like at that moment, the university, was just trying to attach to what the policies are. If you are a legal resident, or if you are an international student with a student visa, you can go for it, but I was in the middle of that, because of how that administration was delaying all the processes for immigrants. So in a certain way, I felt like the University did not really do anything to support international students. And not only that, when an international student gets accepted, we pay 3 times more than any other student. So for me, it's like, okay, we are paying a good amount of money for the program, but we don't have any benefit or a special benefit, to cover for any of our legal expenses, or anything. Further than that, the university does have a group of lawyers, but to my surprise, when I went to the lawyers trying to understand how was I gonna be able to get into the program without that student visa, they did not have experience in immigration issues. So I truly believe that the university could... it's not just a matter of taking international students and taking their payment, it's also a matter of supporting them and having a group of lawyers that support students with legal matters. You know, maybe have lawyers that have understanding of what we go through, and not just forgetting about us.

Odyssey Interview

KL: Yeah, I am so sorry that that was your experience, and probably the experience of so many international students. I had no idea the tuition was 3 times the amount. That's insane. I feel like an issue that and that I'm seeing in this is this sort of policy above people piece of it, and it's really, it should be more surprising coming from social workers, unfortunately. I feel like we're seeing this sort of time and time again. This sort of unwillingness to meet people where they're at, despite that being, sort of our mantra, and for me it comes across as like hypocrisy, and I see it in a lot of places, and it makes me so angry with the institution. And I'm thinking about, you know, support in a general sense, and it's clear the university wasn't really equipped to support the international students that they were presumably recruiting cause that's usually what schools are doing. I'm wondering if in any of this process you had any sort of legal support or advocacy-type support from the university or a local org, or anything like that.

MP: Not really, I pretty much did all the immigration documents that I was requested by myself. So somehow I kind of became an expert on how to apply, how to get everything together, all the documentation and send it to the office that reviews those issues. I do have a friend that is a lawyer, but his support was more towards you're doing things fine. Try to get these documents if you have any issue with pinning out a yeah forum, I will help you out. But yeah, luckily I was able to pretty much everything by myself. It wasn't more kind of the emotional support when you're when you're already accepted but you can really start studying. So it was that emotional support that helped me. But yeah, I pretty much did everything by myself, and having a lawyer is just extremely, extremely expensive. I remember I was over legal help but one of my friend's colleague that specifically deals with immigration issues, and knowing that I have been accepted, and I was still waiting for my student visa, we wanted to see what my options were just to try to get into the program. But it was expensive and at that time I was not even able to work, because you are when you are an immigrant, a tourist. So I was like I was between a rock and a hard place. I couldn't get out of that issue, and to be honest, I did not have the legal help that I needed, I navigated everything by myself.

KL: Wow, wow, I first wanna say that you are like a superstar. That is incredible. I've glanced at a legal document or two in the immigration realm, and my God, I can't understand two sentences of it. So to be able to figure that all out, and successfully get your visa. At this point, you're, in my opinion, like a lawyer and a social worker.

Odyssey Interview

MP: *I guess you become more like... once you have been dealing with with applying for visas and different types of visas for a long time, you become kind of an expert on your own case. And it's a matter of survival, too. If I don't do it myself, I just won't achieve it because I won't have any legal help that I need, lack of resources. So yeah, it's a matter of survival. We, and not only me, many international students have to kind of become some masters on their own navigating the system.*

KL: *Yeah, yeah, and I feel like you're so on it. And that's just true for so many, so many, immigrants who have to navigate the immigration system, or, you know, various employment systems, education systems. I appreciate that perspective. You become an expert in your own case. I think, as social workers, we have a responsibility to provide the resources to the people around us that we're saying that we're providing, bare minimum. So I really think that there's opportunity, for us as MSW students viewing, reading about your story and you know this interview, where you're talking more to ask West Chester for action, to, you know, organize and plan. That's what we do, we're social workers. We do community action. Like, let's get it together, let's get, and let's demand change from the people in power, from the systems in power. We are in such a mental health crisis in this country, we need to be more efficient with getting people in school and getting people through school. There could never be enough social workers, never be enough social workers who start as international students who bring a perspective and understanding that folks who, like me, were born in the US, cannot bring to their immigrant clients. So beyond a social worker, your unique experience, I think, is just so incredibly valuable to the field, and something that we need to listen to and to bring folks in and actually give them that resources and support.*

MP: *Thank you, Kristen. And yeah, I think you touched an important point, immigrants have a specific specific or a particular review about community and society, and Westchester is a university that places itself about being diverse and multicultural. But besides praising itself about it, I, as an international student, as an immigrant, I feel like I did not have support that I needed at that time. So I definitely believe that the office of international students was not prepared to - or I don't know if anything has changed - but back then, when I was dealing with so many issues to enter the program, they were not prepared to meet the needs of international students or immigrants. I feel like whenever I was seeing someone in that office, they had a very narrow view of how the process was, and who was going to be accepted, who didn't, and when was it just better to tell the person "go back to your country." So yes, I definitely believe that there should be a change in those matters if the university wants to continue the narrative of let's be multicultural, let's be diverse.*

Odyssey Interview

KL: Yeah, I really appreciate you saying that. And I think that's one of those like they're talking the talk and they're not walking with walk. They're not putting up where they're saying they are. And I feel like that is an experience that a lot of students coming from marginalized identity can relate to. Coming into this, thinking that you know things were anti-racism, diverse, anti-ableist and all of these things, and coming into a very different experience and navigating a very different experience for years. I unfortunately feel like this is a really accurate depiction of my issues with social work and the field right now is that so much of it is talking the talk and not walking the walk. And this is not to say that this is on the social work department solely, but we're social workers. Figure it out. That's what we do.

MP: When I'm in the classroom, and I look around, I definitely see sometimes myself as the only immigrant in the classroom, and no wonder why, it's just so difficult to access a program like not just social work, but many progress in many programs in the university and again, I can speak for my experience, but when I look around I I don't find that I ever see the diversity they are talking about mainly because they're making it so difficult.

KL: Yeah, that's a really, that's a really excellent point and I think that expands, you know, to higher education in general, and I've heard this from friends who went to colleges all across the country, that the college said one thing, and they got there, and it was another. They said it was diverse and they got there, and it wasn't, and they were, you know, the only person of color in their class, or in their dorm hall, or whatever it was. And yeah, that I can't think of many international students I've met in a program. So I think that is your so on it, it's not an accurate depiction, and I'm thinking of even how much support would be provided by something as simple as an advocacy program. Maybe of some of the GA hours that the department has goes towards having student advocates. Maybe students who have gone through the immigration process can go to these appointments and offices with folks who are navigating their visas to ensure that their options are explored and they're not just told to go back. That is just enraging and disgusting, honestly.

MP: It was definitely very disappointing. But I think that's a great idea if the school of social work could have, like a branch between what the international students office promotes and what the actual acceptance of students is in at least their own program., that would be wonderful. I feel like that was the main gap, the International Students Office and the program of social work, were not connected. So I feel like they did not know much about what my story was like, what the things I have gone through. They were just fixated in the fact that I did not have the document they needed, or the visa was not approved. But yeah, I think that would be great, the suggestion of an advocacy effort for immigrants.

Odyssey Interview

KL: *It's kind of astounding. It's shocking that the social work program and the immigration office at West Chester have no formal relationship with the immigration office. I feel like it's so simple to have someone in a liaison-type position that this is the person that sort of connects these two departments and knows these two worlds, and can communicate between them. It seems like there are just so many gaps in the system that we're recruiting international students and then just saying, figure it out, basically, and pay a ton to do it.*

MP: *Yes, yeah, absolutely. And to be honest with you, I don't think there was any single international student that I actually studied with in my classes. Maybe I heard a couple of people that perhaps had a different accent, but as we never had the chance to explore who we were, it was hard to know, right? But I did not see many of us, and that also speaks of the program itself maybe trying to open a little bit, more their doors to more diversity.*

KL: *Yeah, that's a really great point and you know I think we put so many barriers in place to keep things less diverse. We have the same people who are holding these barriers in place, shouting from the rooftops that they are the most diverse and accepting and all inclusive. So really, with all these barriers, and with the power to change it, it's not inclusive. It's not accepting.*

MP: *Yeah, yeah, I agree with that.*

KL: *I had this thought while I was reading your work, about the really ugly reality that you had to navigate for years versus what your expectation was before you came to Philly. You really painted this beautiful, colorful picture. Do you wanna speak to that at all? Sort of the expectation and the experience, how that was maybe similar or different.*

MP: *You mean, particularly for the experience in the program or the experience in general?*

KL: *Either, both! Whichever you want to speak to.*

Odyssey Interview

MP: Yeah, I mentioned in the article that I was in love with Philly, and I still am. I feel like Philly is just so much richness, diversity. I can find parts of the Latin community in North Philly, for example, where I can feel welcome, I feel almost like at home sometimes. But I can also find that, and perhaps this is the most problem thing, is that when you travel to these communities of immigrants, for example, the one the Latin one in Philadelphia, you will see that the lack of resources is evident, you will see that there is no access to mental health, you will see that people are experiencing more issues, like probably poverty, drug trafficking on the streets, lack of employment, and those were the things that pushed me to achieve the program because I was so interested in helping my community. But in general trying to help everyone in navigating, part of it was knowing how to navigate the systems and achieve what you need. It was beautiful, but it was also challenging when you explore what it means to be an immigrant. It means to have lack of mental health insurance, it means lack of in general, just health insurance, or having to take jobs yourself that you actually have more education but you can't access those jobs, for example, because you don't have the documents, or y the legal documents that you need. So that was our hard part. And then regarding the experience at the program, what was hardest was kind of finding myself alone in terms of diversity. I could find maybe a couple of people that spoke my language in the program, but I could not really find that space in which I could talk to classmates and say, Hey, I have a similar experience as you, because it was never that way. Most of my classmates, who are graduating with me and have a different background. Most of them have been born here and it really is a different experience than coming as an immigrant later in life. So yeah, it was this - we talk about it in social work - sense of not belonging and that was challenging. And as of now, it's still challenging, trying to achieve that sense of belonging.

KL: Yeah, yeah. Thank you for speaking to that, that experience, especially of not having other international students in the program to share the experience with and to be able to relate to in that way. I really hope for you that you have some relief in those feelings, and that you find people who make you feel belonging, and all of those good things.

MP: Thank you, Kristen, and this article is part of that catharsis that I'm making with that issue and hoping that the message goes to all of them. Remembering that, all of us, we're gonna have to face sessions with people who have different backgrounds or people from different cultures. We need to be curious about that. We need to know what's going on with them. Why they are behaving certain ways, or just be curious about it, their culture is super useful in trying to connect with them. So that's the idea of this article is trying to connect with your classmates also, but also with all the immigrants that are gonna come to your sessions.

Odyssey Interview

KL: Yeah, I love that, coming at it with curiosity, and I think that speaks to your earlier point of you know sort of digging deeper. Past those two questions, past where are you from? Oh, why'd you come? And moving on to understand and or try to understand. Be curious. I love that. I love that I wanna be respectful of your time, Maria, is there anything else that you would want to share with the West Chester community about your experience, as we're wrapping up?

MP: I guess the message that I would like to send is that, when we are not open to learn about those other cultures, we're losing an important opportunity to learn, and an important opportunity to be prepared to serve that community. So it's not about just being curious, but also about ethically behave in a way that allows us to incorporate more knowledge about people that is different from us. And for the University itself, and the administration, the message will be, we need some help. We cannot just say that the university is diverse, and they support multicultural issues and, on the other hand, just close the doors once we see that they are facing issues. That will be a message for students and for the university itself.

KL: Thank you for that. I truly have nothing I can say to wrap up that is even remotely close to as good as that. I so appreciate your Maria, for meeting with me, for writing this piece, for being willing to be vulnerable, and share your experience, and I hope, that the folks who are watching this interview or reading your article, knowing your experience or knowing about it as a West Chester student you know I hope people are inspired to act and to change things and to talk to their classmates.

MP: Right! Thank you so much, Kristen, for helping me amplify the message. And yeah, I hope it gets to the audience in a good and positive way.

KL: Thank you so much. And we connected. So the connections are already happening from this. You're doing your good work that you wanna be doing, and I love it. I love to see it and will support it anyway I can.

MP: Thank you so much.

WCU MSW Program's

VOICES

on difference

a student-led journal focusing on issues of social justice



is looking for student leaders enrolled in the MSW program to support future issues of the publication.

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