

Scholarly Personal Narratives: Pamela Luster

Well, good afternoon. I am so humbled and honored to be part of this wonderful vlog series and to be thanked. I'd like to thank Ebony and the crew from OCCRL for inviting me. My name is Dr. Pamela Luster and I am the proud president of San Diego Mesa College, and I hope you can see from the background here the wonderful way in which Mesa College is the leading college of equity and excellence. And talking about my journey to equity and excellence and where I am today is what I hope to be able to do today.



Let's start where we start. I grew up in beautiful San Jose, California, and grew up in what I would call an interesting step family situation. As a young child, I actually lost my mother in an accident and so I grew up without a mom for a few years, but with a very strong dad in the 1950s and '60s, who was all about making sure that I had what I needed to be a strong, powerful woman. I came from a strong college-going family and so I carry a great deal of privilege in my higher ed heroes. Both my grandparents and my parents went to college. My grandparents both went to University of Oregon in the 1920s. My grandmother got a bachelor's degree in social work and was a social worker during the depression after they moved to the L.A. area. I come from a humble background of helping people and being very people-centered.

One of the things that I'd like to do is frame who I am for all of you, and I would frame it in this way. Number one, I'm a mom. I'm a mother. I'm a teacher. I'm a coach, mentor, student, and grandmother. I say all of those things because that is the center of who I am and that is the center of how I do my work.

Let me go back into where I started around the teaching pieces. With having parents and grandparents who both very much had a focus on higher education, I knew I was headed to college. So, when it came time to do so, I was growing up in San Jose and very much wanted to stay home for college and chose San Jose State University. This was in 1974, so you can imagine that SJSU was a little different than it is today.

But in my growing up in a step family and my growing up with this higher ed background, I had done a number of things that I thought would prepare me well for college. I tried to be a good student. I was involved in student government. I was involved in the concert choir. I was a vocalist. I was very much involved in athletics, and athletics was the first time that I realized what a different world it was for women athletes. This was before Title IX. This was before we even got to have uniforms. Oh my gosh, the uniforms were just spectacular, dark maroon, striped, one number, one polyester number snaps on the top of your shoulders uniforms.

The guys got the gym, we got the outdoor courts with the metal nets, and it was a very different kind of world for female athletes. When I went to college, I didn't have any scholarship opportunities around athletics, although I did do some walking on of a couple of the teams, basketball and volleyball, but decided that I really couldn't focus on athletics if I was going to focus on academics at the time.

My first issue around equity came up pretty quickly. When I was in college, I wouldn't have called it equity, but it was around this idea of how one chooses their major and what they're allowed to be good at as scholars. We certainly didn't call ourselves scholars in the 1970s at San Jose State, but I would argue that most of what was happening in scholarship was very much white male, cis-oriented.

When I took my first music appreciation class, having been a vocalist, I thought for sure that would be an easy lift for me. And what I found was myself in a class that was designed primarily for athletes and designed so the athletes didn't have to go to class and sorry, SJSU, but in the '70s, that's the kind of experience that I had.

And, so, I experienced this very strange opportunity where I would be in class every time, very excited for what we were learning and then during the test, the football team would show up, circle their desks around us, and basically copy off of our tests. It didn't feel like a great experience. It probably wasn't the whole football team. It's not even centered around race, although I'm sure there is a race that's embedded in all of that.

But for me, it was a very difficult situation. I don't know that I had the words or the experiences, again, coming from an educational and academic privilege, of what that meant and why it was the way that it was, but it felt inequitable to me. It felt unfair at the time and it was an interesting experience in college.

When I finally found my major, which was speech pathology and audiology, I did my bachelor's degree, bachelor of arts degrees and speech pathology and audiology, and then did my master's degree in audiology, and at that point, really had the opportunity to dig deep into the world of persons with disabilities, into especially the field of working with people who are hearing impaired, who are deaf, who have speech language pathology and linguistic kinds of challenges.

It was then that I actually had my very first professor of color in my master's program, the first time I saw a professor of color and I will never forget Gloria Weddington at San Jose State University because she pushed me hard. And I don't know that she pushed me harder than anyone else, but she pushed me hard to see the world from a different place than the privilege I held.

And she also said to me ... I got done with my master's degree at the ripe old age of 23. I did it straight through six years. I started my graduate a little early from high school, went through six years, and Gloria said to me, "This is just your next degree. You'll have to go for your doctoral degree." And I never really imagined myself doing so. I never imagined myself particularly scholarly as I said earlier, always feeling as though I was just getting through based on the expectations of others in my life and not necessarily that I loved what I was doing, but I was doing what I was expected to do.

My next degree and my next world and my career began in 1980 when I got my master's degree. And I went to work for ear, nose and throat physicians as an audiologist. And it was at that time that I was introduced to the opportunity to teach part-time at a community college at West Valley College in beautiful Saratoga, California. And I was asked to teach some courses that supported students with learning disabilities, students with hearing impairments, who were deaf, students with acquired brain injuries and work with them to be successful in college level courses.

It was really the first time that I understood teaching and pedagogy and had to examine the ways that I had learned and looking at universal design. I also noted in the first couple of classes I was teaching the

over-inclusion of students of color in what were termed special education courses, a much higher proportion of students with acquired brain injuries, a much higher proportion of students with learning disabilities. And it's when I started to question whether or not, not that people have those disabilities, but looking at educational disadvantage in higher education as the way that people found themselves into special education and started looking at the research around the over-inclusion of persons of color.

It was about the same time that MALDEF and other groups looking at particularly black and brown students and their over-inclusion in special education really came to the fore in California and certainly shaped my work to make sure that as we were looking at how we worked with students in our support programs for students with disabilities that we weren't making assumptions about the educational achievements that the students brought to the classroom, but really looked at those as lack of opportunities to acquire those academic skills earlier on in school, because if you were put into a special education, you lack the opportunities to do some of the kinds of things that regular mainstream students could do.

I really started working at trying to get students out of our classrooms as quickly and to college classrooms as we could and it became very important that we do that along the way. I had the opportunity to teach at West Valley College for several years and during that time, again, really took a look at some wonderful things in terms of how I taught with the universal design and looking at trying to remove some of those systemic barriers that based a lot of the teaching that we were doing around the achievements that we perceive students brought to the classroom based on the high schools that they went to or based on some of the ways that they had been placed.

Along the way, I had the opportunity to be mentored by some fantastic people when I was at West Valley. Leo Chavez was our president at the time, I think the first Latino leader that we had at the college. Also, Marchelle Fox, who I believe was one of the first female presidents of the college. And I have to say the female mentors in my life were the ones who really pushed me to not sit in my privilege, but to find other ways to really expand my horizons around that.

But I was early on in my career and it was the 1980s and early 1990. And in the late '80s, I became a mom to my two kids and also a stepmother to my older son, got married and went through all those shifts. One of the things that you start to see as you have your own children or if you have other young people in your life as you start to look through the lens of the world through their eyes. My kids had special needs. My son in particular had pretty severe ADHD. And, so, I started to see my own work and revise my own mental models around what it takes to mainstream and what it takes to have that true educational experience through that world.

Professionally, what was happening for me is I was being encouraged a lot by others to jump into other arenas of leadership. And that's one of the places I'd like to zoom out for a minute, which is to think about the place that you are right now or people are right now around their own leadership, and I think leadership is distributed across our institutions and should be recognized early on.

I did not really think about when people would say, "Oh, you would be good at doing XYZ," or, "You would be doing well to do this or that." I always would say, "Oh, thanks very much," and move on. And I think especially for women, and this could also be true ... it's not my own world experience ... could also be for people from particular groups that you don't really take that seriously. You think someone's just pandering or saying something to be nice to you, but listen to people if they tell you and communicating to you. Ask questions. "Why do you think I would be good at that? What do you see in the

characteristics or the way that I do my work that would lead you to believe that I could be good at this or a leader in this or that I could bring value to this particular proposition?" Ask questions. I've learned that along the way and ask questions just not about you, but what about the other spaces that exist that you would be joining where your skills, knowledge and ability would be helpful to do that? Later in my world, I certainly started asking other kinds of questions which I'll get to, but I think early on, I just assumed people were being nice to me. And I think it does us a great disservice to assume that.

One of the opportunities I had when I was at West Valley College was to move into the role of division chair. And those were elected positions that were sort of like associate dean positions. And it's really where I got the grab into and get my teeth into enrollment management. I think in the higher ed space, and especially if you're in community college leadership, it's important to understand enrollment management and it's important to be able to do both the art and the science of enrollment management, because it's really student-based. It can be very faculty-based. It can be very based on old patterns of performance, but what it really needs to be is based on what the students' needs are, creating a comprehensive schedule so that students can get through.

One of the things that I didn't mention is when I was asked to do this video log, I actually reached out to some of my mentors and said, "What are the kinds of things that you can help me reflect on that you have seen in my own growth around equity, diversity and inclusion?" And one of the things that my very strong mentors, Dr. Estela Bensimon from USC, from the Center for Urban Education said is that I don't take things personally around issues of race, around issues of equity, and that I'm willing to dig in even if it looks bad. Even if there's dirt under the rug, we need to grab the rug, sweep it out and figure out what that looks like.

So, I think one of the things I was able to learn in some of these leadership positions and in some of these places like enrollment management is if you've done some things that aren't the right way to do them, then you need to correct them and move on with it, and pointing fingers only creates animosity. There are ways to correct situations at systemic places of oppression that exist in all of our academies. There are ways to get at that without hitting people in the head with a two by four, although I have done that a few times, not of course in real life, but there are ways to get people to interest convergence with you that entail asking really good questions, but also not being afraid to see if there's something that you own in it. And, so, that's another thing I would zoom out and say is what part of failure or success do you own and what part of failure or success would you really want to claim as the village's journey and not just your own?

Moving into the role of the dean world, becoming an actual administrator, I was really fortunate to be able to move into a role at the same college of doing dean of career education and workforce development. That was at about the time when we started formalizing our CalWORKs programs. So, I was able to expand from my world in terms of working with students with disabilities and really looking at this whole idea around poverty-informed impact on higher education, working with primarily single moms, but some single dads. And while the CalWORKs program wasn't perfect, it certainly got us to blend in more meaningful ways that idea around looking at careers and getting people focused in and exposed to the kinds of places where they could find their passion.

I also had the awesome opportunity to meet someone who is a real champion in the world. And that's Dr. Regina Stanback Stroud. She and I became deans of workforce development. She was at Mission College. I was at West Valley College at the time, and we literally came in together. And through her work, she really suffered through a lot of my white privilege. She helped open my eyes to the privilege

that I hold, the privilege that I held at the time and really shook my foundation around how awesome I thought I was in this arena. So, I appreciate Dr. Stanback Stroud, who's now the chancellor of the Peralta District for opening my eyes and for hanging in there with me when I said really stupid stuff. And really, it was complete ignorance. It wasn't from my heart. It was from places that I'd never been before, world views I didn't hold. And I appreciated that.

Also at the same time, I got to expand my knowledge working with our counselor at the time, Jenny Aragon, who is just an amazing woman and absolutely dedicated to, again, this poverty-informed work that we did around power and not assigning those attributes to our students, but to the situations in which they found themselves versus something that they had brought into their lives. And I think it was my first real exposure to basic needs. It was my first big notion around homelessness, around food insecurity, although certainly not at the same rate that we have it now. And so those were two things that really informed that.

At the time, my family and I moved about an hour away from West Valley College, and so I was really fortunate that a position came open in the East Bay, where we had moved at Las Pesetas College in beautiful Livermore, California. And I had the opportunity to work as a dean of academic services and then a vice president of student services and two amazing mentors, Dr. Susan Coda, who was the first Latina chancellor of Chabot Las Pesetas Community College District, but was my president at Las Pesetas at the time, and then Karen Holiday, who came after her, were amazing mentors to me when I first started as a dean. And in fact, it was Karen who brought me back into student services after being in instruction.

About that same time, I was being encouraged to think about a doctoral program. I want to zoom back out for a minute to talk a little bit about this whole idea around higher ed and continuing to learn. I thought very carefully because I did have children, had a special needs child and a full-time job, how that would impact my family. And this is a place that I'd like to zoom out a little bit and just talk about how in my leadership, I really believe that family is first and that if we are to truly be equitable leaders that we have to help create an environment so people feel comfortable knowing that they can take care of their families, that they can put a roof over their head, that they have sustainable childcare, that they have the kinds of things that they need to be truly engaged and all in when they are in our colleges and at our colleges. And so I felt it was very important to be able to model that.

I can say that over time, because I did see women working in higher ed and executive positions, it looked really hard to do all of those things. It looked like a lot of time away from family. And so thinking through that and then considering a doctoral program, didn't feel very family first at the time, but it ended up being okay.

I began my EDD journey at Fielding Graduate University, and I specifically chose Fielding because one of my mentors, Dr. Harriet, had completed that program, but also because when I went to some of the information sessions, it was so clear that this was a scholar practitioner program that was going to take advantage and leverage the kind of experiences I was able to have as a scholar practitioner at my institution, that it would recognize that I was doing action research in my role as a dean and then a vice president and that it would be flexible in terms of a distributed learning model.

And so I was excited about that, even more excited when I met my mentor faculty member, Dr. Kitty Kelly Epstein, who again, not unlike Regina, shook the foundation, the tree on which I stood around my privilege. I will never forget the meeting I had with her and she asked me what I wanted to write my

dissertation on. And I think I said something like technology in higher ed or something really boring and ubiquitous. Sorry, technology people. And this was in the early two 2000s at this point. And she just looked at me and said, "Then I don't think I'm going to be your mentor, because I can't imagine that that's going to lead to new knowledge and a place where social justice will be expanded."

And so I thought, "Okay, wow." And then she proceeded at a brunch at a beautiful restaurant in Berkeley to give me all the reasons why maybe Fielding wasn't for me and why she wasn't for me and that I needed to probably back up and take a good, hard look at why I was doing the doctoral program. I went home pretty dejected, but as you all know, failure is one of those places where you can really learn a lot.

And I went home and went back to some of the experiences that I had, some of the readings, started to call some of my mentors, some of the people that I've talked about here already, and started to think about what would it look like to truly look at a social justice, racial justice systemic look at the hegemony that existed in higher ed.

And so with all of that and my hat in my hand, I went back to Dr. Epstein and said, "I think I'm ready now," and had just an amazing experience. Unfortunately, I had to stop out of that program. I went through some significant loss in my own life at that point, and, so, I really had to readjust and I wasn't sure I'd be back for that program. But later on, in the mid 2000s, I was given the gift of being asked to lead our equity efforts at Los Pesetas College and join a group called California Tomorrow in a project called the Campus Change Network.

The Campus Change Network was a group of community colleges. It was a cohort-based program where we would engage in deep work around diversity, equity and inclusion. I met some amazing individuals through that process. It was about a two-year process. And it was when the state of California was bringing out the equity plans. They didn't bring out any resources for our equity plans, but they brought out equity plans and asked us to start doing assessments around the disaggregated data that looked at what we were doing in terms of the outcomes for our students.

And I met these two amazing people, Ireri Valenzuela, who is now a senior researcher with the Research and Planning Group in California, and who's now in the Office of the Chancellor at UC Berkeley, but they were our two primary researchers, scholar practitioners, and they dragged our motley group through equity 101, and we had these incredible convenings that were beautifully designed for action research in each of our institutions and had us really looking hard at what we were doing.

I was blessed again that there were colleges in this network. Skyline College was in the network. So, that meant I got to work with my wonderful friend, Regina Stanback Shroud again when she was at Skyline. San Diego City College was involved and I got to meet some of my future colleagues that I still know now that were at City College at the time. City College of San Francisco was involved, and so we had this wonderful group of individuals who were involved in this.

I'm going to zoom back out again and say that as a white cis woman of privilege, it was very interesting to be leading my group. Also at the time, Las Pesetas College was not as diverse as it is now in terms of faculty, staff, and students. So, we had to work very hard to make sure that people of color were part of our teams and were informing the narrative that we were creating around equity planning at Las Pesetas.

One of our pretty dramatic failures as we started practicing equity was after one of our workshops, we picked a practice that we would engage in. So, we decided to do the Peggy McIntosh, unpacking the knapsack of white privilege on our campus. And at the time ... This was about 2007, and I'm sure my friends that watch this will say, "No, it was 2000 whatever." It was in that timeframe, around that time, and so we planned a professional development brown bag session, as one does, invited people to come, sent out the article ahead of time, and then had people come to this wonderful convening, which in our minds was just the next step. We thought the next step was to uncover white privilege at our institution that wasn't all that diverse at the time.

I think we were in ... another zoom out ... we were in a bubble. We were in a professional development bubble where we had gone off and had these incredible cohort experiences. All the choir was singing together. And we came back to an opportunity that we had not seen. This particular opportunity really reflected the lack of investment that we had made in the college and professional development around racism, around privilege, around the constructs that continue to oppress our students and engendered some very negative feedback.

In fact, another lesson learned is around allyship and what it really means to be an ally. I like the word accomplice. I like other terms I've heard at wonderful conferences, but the allyship fell away very quickly. I actually had someone walk up to me and ask me why they had to consider their privilege, why it mattered in their work. And I said, "Well, why don't you come to the workshop and we'll talk about that? And he said, "I wouldn't be caught dead in that workshop."

This brought out for me the ways that we need to set the stage, that we need to create the context, so that we're not indicting people. Everyone's in a different part of their journey towards cultural competence. Everyone's in a different part of their journey. And you have to be very careful about how you cultivate that and the seeds that you sow to do that. So, I learned that important lesson.

I ended up doing my dissertation on what moves the needle for student equity in California community colleges. And I was able to do a wonderful triangulation of quantitative, qualitative and experiential research around the topic of student equity and had some great opportunities.

The next big learning part for me, and I would encourage folks to do this, was around NCORE. National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in Higher Ed was something that I engaged in early on. I got to go to a wonderful workshop that was being put on actually by a colleague that I'm very excited to still call a colleague, Frank Harris the third, who's now with San Diego State. But at the time he was with the Center for Urban Education at USC and was working on the equity scorecard. And again, the equity scorecard is another one of those places where I think we've been able to dig so much deeper around desegregating data, looking at the racial inequality around higher ed and what equitable outcomes actually look like.

Then I had the NCORE experience. I had finished my dissertation at this point. And then another mentor came into my life, which is Dr. DeRionne Pollard, who was the president at Las Pasetas College at the time, is now the president Montgomery College in Maryland, and this wonderful woman who, if you don't know who she is, you should, came into our institution as an out gay African American woman who is probably one of the wisest people I've ever met. And I didn't say intelligent ... she is intelligent ... but wise beyond her years and beyond her own experiences.

And she introduced me to this idea around radical inclusivity and really always looking at who's missing from the room, supporting women particularly, and having realistic expectations for leaders. There's a whole lot more to her than that. But I will say that I finally saw someone who was serving as a community college president who I thought could put their family first, but who could also be ... I hope it's okay to swear ... a bad-ass leader in their own right. And so that was a moment for me.

She encouraged me to become a college president. She encouraged me to act on those places and she encouraged me to do what I'm doing now, which was to ask the question, where could I make a difference? And I want to zoom back out a little bit because I feel like this is sounding very me, me, me, but it's the way that I'm trying to tell my equity journey.

When I looked at opportunities to become a college president, I really looked to leaders and I looked for places where I felt like I could be inspired to do my best work. And what I mean by that is in order for me to feel like I'm bringing equitable outcomes, I need be able to inspire others and I want to be inspired as well.

I looked and I found two places and I ended up here. One of the reasons I ended up at beautiful San Diego Mesa College is because of our chancellor, Dr. Constance Carroll, who is in her own right the epitome of someone who has been able to create bridges and opportunities for so many people. She's called the people's chancellor for a reason and I find myself here really being able to lead this equity and excellence journey.

The last piece of this is my journey at Mesa college. And it's been informed so much by this work that we've done with Estella Bensimon. I asked Center for Urban Ed to come in and work with us on contract. I understand from Estella we were one of the first colleges to do that. But also we were able to do an equity crosswalk. And zooming out again, if you are a leader, unless you embed equity, diversity inclusion in everything you do, you're not going to get there.

That started with my dissertation. But unless it's the questions you ask in program review, unless it's the questions you ask and how well your students are doing when you disaggregate that data, unless you put it in your master planning processes, unless you look at how every interaction with every student is embedded in equity and you give people the skills to do that work, then you're not truly doing the equity journey.

And so, zooming back in, we've been able to do that in many, many of our processes. I'm often known to say that the equity journey, no one is born culturally competent, culturally humble or equity-minded. You can get as far as you can by the end of your journey, but I truly believe that equity journeys are a marathon and so that you have to be able to do that over time.

Also, working with Dr. Luke Wood and Frank Harris through their Teaching Men of Color and Equity workshops, we asked them to come in and look deeply at the work that we were doing, especially around our black and brown men on our campus. We were noticing disparities there. I'm glad to say over the last four years, five years that we've been working with them, we have seen gains.

But, we've also been able to do a number of things around hiring people that look like our students. If there's a chief accomplishment I believe I will have a legacy that I will leave Mesa College, it's the people that we've hired. I've been able to, along with our college, along with the faculty and the staff of this

college, find people who wanted to come here and believe in this equity and excellence journey, and we've been able to diversify our faculty and our staff from a race perspective, from a gender perspective, from a number of different perspectives. And I think the important thing is we know who our students are, and we have tried to, as much as possible, bring people in.

A place where I think we can really do this best work as leaders is to be very brave about the hiring process. I think what one has to do is be able to say to committees that for whatever reason, if you have finalists and you have an all-white finalist pool or a pool of individuals who do not reflect the students and you know that there are scholars available in those pools or classified professionals that are in those pools that are available, that you have to go back out again.

I had to do that a number of times when I first came to Mesa and it wasn't because people were being ill-willed or trying to do anything that was underhanded. It was because the processes that we were using unconscious bias that existed was creating a problem for us. And so we've been able to challenge that along the way.

My role as a faculty member at San Diego State University in the EDD program has completely changed how I see the faculty role again. Being a faculty member is really important and learning from scholars that are in these programs. I've now had seven cohorts come through my classroom and every single time I learned so much from the students. I am absolutely excited about the opportunities I've had to learn from those students.

I think the way that I'd like to end is talking about where I see the work happening and going forward in terms of equity. I think we have to be very careful that we know that the systems of oppression are increasing. I would like to say that after a 30 plus year career that, "Gosh, isn't it great that we've got poverty on the run, or we have racism on the run?" We don't. What we do have is folks that are willing to come together with us and continue to do the work because every student matters, whether they're a doctoral student, a master's level student, bachelor's level student, getting a certificate in welding. What matters is that we are creating equitable outcomes for students so that they can proceed and persist and live the kinds of lives that they can live and be joyful and be self-sustaining. I think we have to mix basic needs, food insecurity, looking at homelessness, houselessness, lack of childcare, lack of transportation as a central core tenet of what we're doing in our equity work. It's so important.

In that work, I am so impressed with the work of the Hope Center with Sara Goldrick-Rab, so impressed with the work of my colleagues, Pam Edinger at Bunker Hill, Russell Lowery Hart at Amarillo College, DeRionne Pollard at Montgomery College, and so many more that are really working these issues of basic needs and poverty.

And I love the work of Bettina Love. She's done some amazing work. And the person that I most strongly work with right now is my equity avenger buddy, Dr. Keith Curry, the president at Compton College. Bettina Love talks about holding the pole and it's related to the work of white allies and people who are working together so that those of us who have privilege examine our privilege and move it through so that we are part and parcel making sure that our colleagues, our allies, our people of color that are with us or from other historically minoritized groups, we're holding the pole for them.

I say that we need to hold the pole for our students. We need to hold the pole for one another. And the work that we do is important, one foot in front of the other, one step at a time towards equity and

excellence. Thank you so much for this opportunity. I hope that through this story, you find your own pathway to diversity, equity and inclusion leadership. Thank you.