ASU CHPDP Spring Newsletter: Trainee Spotlight

Tara Bautista, graduate student in the College of Nursing and Health Innovation and mentee to CHPDP faculty member Dr. Felipe Castro, is focused on research in stress, coping and resilience, and drug abuse in underserved populations and ethnic minority group. She is the Western Node Project Coordinator for Dr. Castro’s project titled *Theoretical Congruence and Sustainability of Local Adaptation Activities: Analysis and Recommendations*. Tara is also a Hispanic Drug Abuse Research Fellow at the Interdisciplinary Research Training Institute funded by National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIH/NIDA). Her career goal is to become a Principal Investigator, professor, and mentor to graduate students in health research.

**Please tell us about your background (personal and professional) and how you arrived at ASU’s CHPDP.**

I was born and raised in Blythe, California, a very small town on the border of Arizona and California. I completed my undergraduate degree at San Diego State University. I knew I wanted to peruse a graduate degree and was told I would need to learn about research to do so. While I was an undergrad, I discovered a psychology research lab that was studying underserved, rural, and minority populations. The professor was Dr. Elizabeth Cordero, and I just knew that I had be a part of it! It was the first lab in which I worked, and it was all new to me.

After that, I did my honors thesis with professor Cordero my senior year. I wanted to study why some people get sick when they are stressed and why others can thrive with a similar exposure to stressors. I examined various cultural aspects, personality coping mechanisms, and influence factors, including the level of that person’s perceived control over their life situation. When I was engaged in many hours of literature review, I came across Dr. Felipe Castro’s work. My instructors had advised us to identify authors of journal articles we read, and to contact them to ask about working with them as a graduate student. Conducting research with such faculty could be a good match, since they would be conducting research of interest to you. Accordingly, I contacted over twenty authors and Dr. Castro was one of them. He responded to my email message right away.

I travelled to meet him while I was in El Paso on another trip and my mind was made up: I was going to El Paso to work with him. Then two years later when he received an offer to come to ASU’s College of Nursing and Health Innovation, he asked if I would transfer to ASU and help build his new research lab. I did so, knowing that I was taking a chance. Nonetheless, I trusted him as a mentor, reasoning that he knew it was a good move for me. Now, I am in my second year of the PhD program in the College of Nursing and Health Innovation.

**What project(s) are you currently focused on with Dr. Castro?**

I serve as Dr. Castro’s Project Coordinator on a research study funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. This project is titled, “Theoretical Congruence and Sustainability of Local Adaptation Activities: Analysis and Recommendations.” We are looking at 39 schools in Ohio and Pennsylvania that were part of a previous research study that was conducted five years ago where a drug prevention intervention called “Keepin’ It Real” was implemented. We are following-up with the principals on issues of sustainability, in order to examine whether they were able to keep the program going. If so, what challenges have they encounter and, if not, what prevented them from sustaining this program? We are also speaking with the teachers who taught/teach this drug prevention intervention and the changes they need to make to make the intervention interesting and relevant for these middle school students. We seek to know what teachers feel they need to do to modify the drug use prevention curriculum, and why? As an exciting side note, the “Keepin’ it REAL” prevention intervention has been endorsed under the Surgeon’s General’s report on drug abuse as one of very few drug prevention interventions that have been well accepted by many middle and high schools nationwide.

I am also a Fellow of the Interdisciplinary Research Training Institute (IRTI) which is a fellowship funded through the National Institute of Health’s (NIH) National Institute on Drug Abuse, and in collaboration with the National Hispanic Science Network. My cohort has 7 pre- and post-docs from across the country. We travel to the University of Southern California twice a year to receive
training on grant-writing and publishing on drug abuse in Latino and other racial/ethnic minority populations. For that, I have an additional mentor, Dr. Hortensia Amaro. Her project is titled, “Neuromechanisms in Women’s Treatment and Early Recovery.” This evidence-based program is exciting, because it incorporates lots of intervention concepts and activities that I have never known or used! Dr. Amaro and her team are studying the effectiveness of a mindfulness-based relapse prevention intervention that has been culturally adapted for low-income women with a history of trauma and drug abuse. This research team is also using fMRI scans, which is a brain assessment methodology. This study consists of a treatment group that receives the mindfulness intervention and an educational control group that solely learns about the neurobiology of addiction. I am also working on a sub-project within that project which is looking at the acceptability of this new culturally adapted program. For these study participants, I am examining whether participant characteristics or environmental characteristics predict high satisfaction, participation, and practice. That will hopefully serve as a study for my doctoral dissertation.

It is difficult choosing a PhD dissertation topic because I want to make sure that it’s a representation of the research that I see doing in the future. However, I also realizing that my research interests could shift along the way. Engaging in Dr. Amaro’s project is such great timing, given that this data collection is currently taking place so I am able to be a part of the project from start to finish.

**Have you always wanted to pursue a PhD and a career in research? If so, why? If not, did anything specific happen to lead you toward this career path?**

In high school, I used to ask questions of people in town about what resources and services they thought that the city of Blythe needed. Originally, I thought I would be a clinician because there are no mental health services in Blythe. So, I thought, “Oh, then I will do that for us! Give me scholarship money and I will go get my degree and come back to serve this town as a psychotherapist.” I think toward the end of high school is when I started engaging in “research/scientific” thinking although I didn’t define it as such. At that time, the word “research” meant something different to me, and it didn’t actually include the process of research. I probably made that connection when I started working in a research lab in Calexico with Dr. Cordero.

I found a clinical internship my junior year at the American Cancer Society. What I noticed from my time at the American Cancer Society was that when talking to the clients for follow-up regarding their needs, I noticed certain patterns in their requests. For example, men did not seem to talk to their families as much as women do, when speaking about their health and feelings. That’s when I noticed myself analyzing the data. This discovery propelled me towards wanting to conduct research.

**What would your ideal research career be? Interested in a specific school or location?**

I love the word “ideal”! I am very passionate about my research and think I want to be able to have a really great product to disseminate to people. This is what would give me the most satisfaction in a career. As much as I want to dream big, I also want to keep my sanity and not feel the competition that could drain my desire to do research. I would love to eventually mentor graduate students. I know that all of this is a very ambitious goal. Not everyone who obtains a PhD is able to accomplish such lofty goals. As far as location in which to live and work, I’d like to think I am very mobile and open. I have always been in the Southwest, so am accustomed to this weather. However, where the research and training opportunities take me, that’s probably where I will go!

**Most researchers are very passionate about the topic they research. What is it about your research that motivates you?**

One of my psychology professors used to say, “A lot of research is me-search.” I think that’s true, especially in psychology! I believe a lot of research is motivated by real life. In my hometown, there is a large substance abuse problem and I think it’s a completely preventable problem. I think that is where my passion comes from for this topic!

I’m also interested in resilience. Ever since I was a young child I was told I was stubborn. Then a high school teacher told me that I was, “resilient,” not stubborn! That sounded so much better. I guess I just don’t give up and if I get knocked down I get back up. I have always wondered why am I this way, and why others are not? This leads me back to my research interest, which asks, “Why does stress affect some people adversely, and not others?” I feel that I am a person who thrives from such stress. Why? I don’t know yet! And because I was raised by a combination of cultures, I am always curious as to why one culture reacts differently to issues when compared with another. Integrating all of these aspects into my work portends an interesting combination and that motivates me even more.

**What advice would you give future mentees of research?**

I usually show the undergraduate students my time-management charts and spreadsheets and I encourage them to use these so their life feels fulfilling in all aspects. Time-management is difficult but once you have a good system your whole life works better. My best advice is to gain time-management skills. There are only 168 hours in the week, 112 after sleep, about 84 after necessities such as showering, errands, cooking, driving, eating, and cleaning. If you take two hours of free time a day you’re down to 70 hours
left for school, work, and studying. You have to use your time wisely. I have time-management resources I am happy to share with anyone interested.

My second-best piece of advice to mentees is work on research that you are passionate about. Do not choose your program based solely based on location or convenience. There must be a good fit with your research passion. Nonetheless, do not feel bad if you are not passionate about research or if you figure out that you don’t like graduate school. Getting a PhD is definitely not for everyone. It doesn’t mean that you won’t make a significant contribution in the world. It just means this isn’t your calling and there is no shame in discovering that. Getting a PhD is hard enough for individuals who love every moment of it. It must be nearly impossible for those who are not happy doing it.

**What do you like to do outside of school and research?**

This is so hard! If you love your research, it IS what you like to do! The joke is that PhD students aren’t supposed to have lives outside of the four walls of the lab! Thankfully we all do though. I keep a very strict time-management schedule because early in my research years, I wasn’t getting “me” time and that wore me and my body out, making me physically ill! I have a better system now. I think a lot of it involves guilt management. I used to feel guilty about leaving the office to go to the gym or cooking and cleaning, when I should be studying. I had to tell myself that “I am worth it.” And, I can’t be a great researcher if I am not healthy. This means taking hours each week to do laundry, go to the gym, cook meals, and even to shower- without feeling guilty.

There can be time to go to dinner with friends or see a movie, although this has to come after my work and my personal “musts” like sleep, meal prep, the gym, showering, and so on. In my true “free time” I love going to the spa, relaxing at home, or traveling! Usually this involves travel somewhere close, just to get away.