

Podcast: Denisse Dolma

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JANET WEBER: This is journeys of learning where we talk to students that have taken unconventional pathways to reach their educational goals. I'm Janet Weber and I'm your host and a counselor at De Anza College. And I created this podcast so that students will feel less alone on their own journeys of learning.

I am here with Denisse Dolma. And I start out each episode by telling the audience how we met. I don't know if I remember the first time we met but I definitely remember you were my student at Foothill College and we met many times. And you were struggling a little bit in your classes and we worked with you to help you get back on track. And then you started working in the Disability Resource Center with us and worked there for a while and maybe a year or two?

DENISSE DOLMA: A year.

JANET WEBER: And we've stayed connected since

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then and I often get lovely updates about you. And with that I'm going to turn it over to you and ask you to tell us a little bit about yourself and your background.

DENISSE DOLMA: Yes, that's how we met. I was a student at Foothill College and I needed some help so I found it and I think I went to the right person. And prove of that is that we are still connected. So a little bit about myself I was born and raised in Honduras, Central America and I moved to the United States when I was 18 years old. And I moved here with my mom. Both my parents but I've been living in California since then and you know I ran to this area and one of the things I was always told by my family members especially my parents, you know is that you oh, you have to go to school, you have to go to school.

Well, at first I didn't know that much English as soon as I arrived so one of first things I did I would go to adult school. So I did that for a whole year and then I signed up myself to go to Foothill College. And during that first year here in the U.S.

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it was just like a goal like I had to learn English. Like you know I have to learn how to communicate with people here. It was hard because I had an accent, I mean I have an accent still but like back then, it was a little bit more noticeable.

And now it's just some people still don't believe me that I learned English here but by the time I went to Foothill I was really like shy and not because that's my personal identity but because I didn't want people to like hear my accent or like how I would pronounce things and it was probably different or totally something else. The point is, when I made it to Foothill College I was presented with these opportunities to work and the volunteer center there like the ambassadors you know. And that totally gave me like a full push to actually like be there for other students and show other students that hey, like I'm in the same situation as you. Like don't worry about it. You know like I'm making it like you can totally make it too.

JANET WEBER: Wait can we stop there for a minute? Because I think that's a really good point. Because

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I often tell students the more you get involved on campus the better you're going to do in school.

Studies show that.

DENISSE DOLMA: Yes.

JANET WEBER: And so I want to point that out that you joined the Ambassador Program at Foothill College and that's where you met a lot of other students and started to feel more comfortable on campus, and started getting connected with different resources on campus.

DENISSE DOLMA: Yes, that was definitely something that gave me like confidence like okay I can do this. You know and it was like easier to manage school while being a student worker too because one of the most important things a student worker is like okay your school comes first. Then also you get the opportunity to like learn and interact with others and just learn some skills like front office skills you know, like I would be that first point of contact when people come to the office or something like that.

And then I made connections not only with other

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students like I still have friends that I met at that program. And we are still friends to this day you know like and we still very close friends. I also made connections with the staff until this day I can put them as a reference when I'm applying to jobs and things like that. And I think that was really important because also it just gave me like more confidence and like you know moving around campus and learning about the services.

So I think it was my third year at Foothill that I started working at the Disability Resource Center, and I may be part of the program and working there I think it just help me when someone would come first time to get an appointment and things like that it was like okay do you need this? You know like I already knew what they were looking for and it was easier to make that connection with people. And just help them and point them where they needed to go. And then I worked at San Jose State for 2 other years. But Foothill went for 4 years and I went to San Jose State two years --

JANET WEBER: Can we talk about your time at

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Foothill a little bit more?

DENISSE DOLMA: Yes. I mean it feels like it was forever because it was something that my first college experience in the U.S. and I take advantage of a lot of the resources from the school, the opportunities that I was presented there and I think I made something awesome out of it. I always talk about when we first met, I was struggling and I remember one of my English classes and that was the college level English or my requirement to transfer, and I love being in the class. My thing is like I love learning. I love being at Foothill but at that point I felt like I -- I love it in the classroom I would not miss a class. I would not skip class. I love my professors but it was a point where I could not figure out why I was not doing well in my classes. And I was like why is it that I can't do it like everyone else? Like was it that I can't just go home read this, write this, and turn it in like everyone else?

So then I had to talk for myself and I went to my professor and I said hey, like I love your class, I

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love what we're doing I just want to be able to turn in my work and do quality work. And I just don't know why I can't do it when I'm at home. I work fine here but when I'm at home I just can't.

And most of the time it was like I have to do homework. She referred me she said you know what? You should talk to someone at the DRC at Foothill, and then she's like have you ever talked to them? And I was like, kind of but not really you know because I just didn't have the proper guidance I guess at the beginning so I didn't know what it was exactly for. And it end up that I did needed services. But when I went I got tested yeah I just got all of this test done on me. Like is it your retention? Is it like where are the issues that you know like -- so it end up I do have a learning difference and it is just like I just process things slower and it just takes me more time. But for that I need to find a way how to work with it.

JANET WEBER: I want to highlight what you did because I would say the majority of students would have at that point just kind of suffered alone, quit

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college, felt really depressed about not being able to do the work.

DENISSE DOLMA: Exactly.

JANET WEBER: But instead, you went and talked to your professor. What was it inside of you that made you choose that path rather than giving up?

DENISSE DOLMA: Well first, is that the bar has been raised really high in my family; right. Like my mom, she was older when she got her bachelor's degree back in Honduras. So coming here was like okay I don't expect less from you, you have to make things work. You have to get it done. You know you are here go get your education. So for me it was like I don't have any other option I'm going to go to college. I'm going to get this education. And by the way, I understand college is not for everyone, people can go to like vocational school and stuff like that. But for me, I wanted to go to college too. I wanted to do something. And it was like okay I have to do it. First, it was like an English class and for me that was like one of my biggest motivations. I want to be able to speak, to read, and to write English as a



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native for example. That was my motivation. And I know it worked out. I'm not saying this is good but it worked out.

JANET WEBER: And I want to point out that the professor did they yell at you? She didn't kick you out of the classroom; right? She knew you were sincere, you were trying and she talked to you and then she referred you to where you needed to be.

DENISSE DOLMA: Exactly. You know I think since then you could totally see my grades changing. I would always try my best and after I started receiving services from the DRC, which I think I got extended time, I was able to like record my lessons, I was able to take notes or someone could take notes for me. You know, like test in a different environment, and at this point when I got all of this services, I was just taking English courses and I was taking like some of the elective classes that I needed to. But I didn't take math until after finishing my English. And that's another point because it got a little harder by then. But I was so glad that I was still part of the DRC and getting all

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of the services because math came and that was another year of math my way. And it was like you know you had modules. I don't remember how many modules were they, but point is I got stuck in the middle. Like a year and I spent a year in that program and it was quite frustrating because I just couldn't process numbers the same way as other people.

So I made it I think I've found really good teachers there you know that like tell me like it's okay you know like they didn't make me feel like it was totally wrong that I was spending so much time in the program. So I made it but one of the things I wanted to highlight is that I wanted to make it so the way that it happened is not just by other people are just saying yes, go do it. I went to tutoring, I think I was going to tutoring every single day. I was meeting one of my coaches at the DRC, I was trying to get this routine going because I was struggling not only with self-advocacy but also trying to get my schedule together. I was working 20 hours or less at the DRC or at the other program at

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school, and then I was still going to school full time. So I had to be organized. So I learned how to write things down, how to create a calendar and agenda you know. Whatever works for you but it was something that it really helped because I don't think I would have been able to get passed math. By the time I was taking math I was also taking kind of harder classes because that's how like Janet and I plan it. But it was hard. And I remember Algebra 1, there was a point and I don't know yeah if you remember this, I was in that class and I remember sometimes just leaving the class. I would go to the class but I would go to the restroom or just go outside because I was so lost in the class. Like I did not know where to go what was that content. Even though I was doing tutoring and all of this things, there was a point where I just felt lost. And I was crying I didn't know what to do. I remember calling my boyfriend and be like I'm outside of the class I don't want to go to class I don't want to be in the class because I don't know what is going on. I think I am just going to take a quarter off. Which never

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happened, because I always made it happen. You know like I always made it work. Then something normal by the way feeling like you can't continue. That you need a break, it is something normal that I think every student faces you know like no matter what. And I remember going to -- I think I met with Janet and then I told her like I leave the class Janet I don't know what to do? And I also had to tell my professor. I'm sorry, I like your class I just don't know what is going on, I'm lost. So I leave the class because I am overwhelmed. I'm going to admit it like at the moment it was embarrassing but I had to tell someone otherwise, how they going to figure out you know like communication for me was like if I don't tell them I'm going to fail. If I fail it's going to be another semester -- another quarter here I'm going to delay my plans and all these things. I was just trying to make it work that's --

JANET WEBER: How did the professor respond?

DENISSE DOLMA: She was really nice. I remember she said you know what? You -- try your best you're going to pass this class and you're going to sign up

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for my next class which was Algebra 2, and it was still with her.

JANET WEBER: Who was the professor?

DENISSE DOLMA: Her name is Kathy Perino, I think she still work at -- you know.

JANET WEBER: She does, she's the best. I should say one of the best math professors.

DENISSE DOLMA: Every time I -- at my current job every time I have to help a kid I just remember like it's okay if your brain works different. If you don't understand because I was the type of kid that would like say I don't like math. I'm not a math person. I don't -- I don't -- you know it's like, no. Everyone is but until you find the teacher that will like teach you and will make you feel like you got this, you will stop feeling that way. You know because it was until that point that I felt like wait a minute? It is not that hard and I can make it work. So she said, okay can you get caught up with this can you go to tutoring? Can you find like all of these like ways to like make me you know like still be in the class and not drop it. Because at

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that point I was dropping the class, I had already like had my meltdowns you know like multiple times. I went to Janet and I said, Janet can we figure out what to do like I want to take a quarter off? So if I take this quarter off I'm just going to continue working. Which by the way, I was working at retail at that time and that was a different story.

JANET WEBER: I remember that.

DENISSE DOLMA: Yeah, pretty much I would cry every time I would go to work. And this is not a joke by the way.

JANET WEBER: Can I also point out that you had a hard time at that job and you would tell me about it and then that's why we ended up getting you a job at the DRC; right?

DENISSE DOLMA: Exactly.

JANET WEBER: Well I mean we needed someone and you did such a good job there. But again, that was you talking to people and --

DENISSE DOLMA: Exactly. Like reaching out. Like you know --

JANET WEBER: Yeah.

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DENISSE DOLMA: You have a support system. And if you feel like you don't then you find people who are there to help you. That's why self-advocacy, that's like a main thing right? So if I would of have gone and talked to my professor and be like hey, I don't -- I'm dropping the class, I don't want to do this. I'm taking a break, taking next semester. She is like, I only teach this class one semester and next semester is next class. And I think that was the case. Because next semester she was teaching Algebra 2, and I was like oh but I want to take it with you again.

JANET WEBER: And then I remember in the last class that you had to take, I remember you in my office and we called Kathy Perino and she said you were passing and --

DENISSE DOLMA: Yeah.

JANET WEBER: And all 3 of us did a happy dance.

DENISSE DOLMA: I think I was overwhelmed by like so much I had to do. At that point I was working more than 20 hours at the retail job, and I was going to school full time for 4 days and I was working

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pretty much 4 days too. So my schedule was saturated. I was overwhelmed and I didn't have a social life by way. I don't know how my relationship survived but yes, at that point it was really hard to just like keep up with like so many things. So my routine was pretty much work, school, home, work, school, home. And that was it you know. I think you have to find a balance too for yourself. You have to like -- I feel like at that point I didn't know what self-care was. I was just trying to go and go and get money is important, education is important.

But I think you cannot work from an empty cup which is yourself. And you cannot just do a hundred percent of those things if you don't take care of yourself. After that I learned that less is better sometimes because you know you have more time to focus on things. And short story -- long story short I did pass that math class and I did sign up for the next one. And I did pass that second math class as well. And I'm moving to stats. Once I got into statistics which I took a social sciences applied statistics or you know I think it is called like



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that, it was completely different.

JANET WEBER: Statistics for psychology majors.

DENISSE DOLMA: Yeah for social science major.

JANET WEBER: For social sciences, yes.

DENISSE DOLMA: And I think that was like I had the best time in statistics and research methods. Though I felt like I gained that confidence and I don't think I would have gone through statistics like that if it was not for that professor which I sent her all my best wishes and always like remember her every time. Now that I work in that location I feel like all kids deserve to find a professor or a teacher that like will help them feel confidence about their math skills, you know like no matter what. I just wish that all of the kids that I work with find someone that will help them feel confidence and instead of like shutting down. And it's like no, instead let's try this way instead.

I think at Foothill I went through like so many things. But my best thing is that I always had my support system. And your support system sometimes you think that it's oh I just have to be people that

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know me well. No, it has to be -- for some students support system means just going and speaking up for yourself to someone that is there to help you.

JANET WEBER: And I still remember seeing you at graduation at Foothill, dressed up in your cap and gown. I have photos maybe that's the photo I'll use for this podcast.

DENISSE DOLMA: Oh my God.

JANET WEBER: And then you went on to San Jose State even. So you didn't only just graduate from Foothill but you were able to transfer to San Jose State. And tell us about that experience?

DENISSE DOLMA: So I'm actually very glad that I got to enjoy my Foothill graduation so much because due to the pandemic I didn't enjoy my San Jose State University graduation. But once I got to transfer to San Jose State, it felt like another challenge you know but it felt like easier because I already knew how to like advocate for myself. And what were the things that I needed. And I try at San Jose State to create that balance too in between like oh kind of like the social part being in college and your

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academics.

Unfortunately, it didn't work out for me because I was commuting every day. It was not a long commute like probably like an hour in the mornings. But I was taking public transportation and it was not that bad. I don't think it was that bad I just -- I mean in the mornings it is hard to make it out of the house. But it was not bad it was just like a lot of time consuming. And it felt like always you know like you always have to do something -- it was like my routine. You know every morning wake up, have to go to school, then come back home, have to go to work. So it didn't work out. Like social life at San Jose State it did not. I think their groups their clubs is kind of more for students who like stay on campus. Which I think is great because I would not imagine being away from home and you know not having like that socialization part which is really important.

So when I went to San Jose State my first semester was a little overwhelming because it was not as easy as Foothill. Like for example, like to drop

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a class. I remember I had this class that required me to do kind of like community hours and it was really hard for me because I had to work. So I had to drop the class. I was already not doing well. And my first thing they told me is like yeah you can drop the class absolutely, but you have to get a signature from your professor. And I'm like I'm trying not to see my professor. I just want to drop the class.

But those are things you have to face you know. And you have to do it. There was no other way so of course I had to go and be like you know what? I'm just working too much. I cannot take time off of work. Unfortunately, this was not working for me. I would love to but it's not working for me. So I mean I apologized but at the same time I have to do this for myself too. And he was very understanding. It was great. And after that I mean, I made connections again with my professors and it was just easier to keep going and that routine of like I'm just getting my degree here.

JANET WEBER: So you kept that momentum going

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working, school, and then you graduated.

DENISSE DOLMA: I did.

JANET WEBER: -- recently.

DENISSE DOLMA: It was exciting it was overwhelming too and pretty emotional because it was like oh my gosh, I made it! I made it. I think I was caught up in that momentum of like school, school, school, and when it happened it just felt like okay what now? You know. But I'm proud of like my accomplishments but at the same time I'm very thankful for all of the people that were in my path when I was in college. Because I don't think I could have done it if like those people wouldn't have been there.

JANET WEBER: Wow! what a journey.

DENISSE DOLMA: It has been.

JANET WEBER: I was so proud of you when I knew you were graduating from San Jose State. It was just a journey of you believing in yourself, working hard, asking for help, creating a community around you.

DENISSE DOLMA: Yes, that is very important. I think those were like my main three things that kept

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me going because you have to create a community otherwise you will feel lonely. And you feel like that's only happening to you and no one else understands that. There is a lot of people out there that like are going through the same thing. You know creating those relationships with the people around you is so important.

It also keeps you motivated you know at some point because people are rooting for you and even if you don't notice that people are like there to help you out, you know. And I think advocating for yourself it's so important too. Otherwise you're just going to like give up. You have to show up for yourself every day and you have to just do it for yourself nobody else is going to do it for you. And I think that at the end you will feel it like it was so rewarding. Every time you went to those like counseling appointments like oh you met with like your professor or you sent an e-mail like hey like what about this? Can I rewrite it or something like that. It's showing up for yourself. Every one of those actions that you take you showing up for

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yourself. So I think it's really important to like give yourself that credit that you are doing it, you are going to make it. I know sometimes it is hard but you'll make it and it's going to be very rewarding at the end.

JANET WEBER: I love that that's great advice for all of the students. Thank you Denisse for joining me today. I loved hearing -- even though I was a part of it and watching, it was really fun to hear about it in one sitting.

DENISSE DOLMA: Thank you, yes. It's been a journey but I'm glad I made it and I'm glad I had people like Janet in my path. You know and there are other amazing people that were part of it. And encouraged me even after I finished San Jose State which is the reason why I plan on continuing on higher education too but for now I'm taking a break and you know enjoying life.

JANET WEBER: Um-hmm.

DENISSE DOLMA: But I will continue and I plan to continue.

JANET WEBER: Great, thank you Denisse.

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DENISSE DOLMA: Thank you Janet for this opportunity.