

California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Podcast Episode 55

The California Community College Experience with Alumni Rafael Agustin

Chancellor Daisy Gonzales, PhD: Welcome back everyone. This is Dr. Daisy Gonzalez, interim chancellor for California's community colleges. You're listening to another episode of the California community colleges. Chancellor's office podcast. Today is a very special podcast for me. It is my first podcast as interim chancellor. And this episode marks the launch of our podcast with a very intentional theme inspired by what we are seeing in a post pandemic reality for higher education and the incredible people that I get to meet when I visit California's 116 community colleges, this podcast will be dedicated to documenting the California community college experience in the middle of this pandemic, many Californians experience, job displacement loss in wages and disruptions in their educational journeys. As a result nationally, and here in California, we have been seeing declines in enrollment while our students are resilient. We have much work to do to ensure that Californians continue to believe that their dreams are possible and that they can become a reality by enrolling at a California community college. Through this podcast, we will uplift California community college alums with extraordinary journeys and more importantly share the impact that they are making in California and beyond their stories inspire me. And I hope that they will inspire you. My first guest is Rafael LA Gustine, author TV writer, CEO, and a proud community college alum. Welcome Rafael. Daisy.

Rafael Agustin: Thank you. I mean, chancellor, thank you so much for having me <laugh>

Gonzales: I wanna share a little bit more about your background and then get us started. This is our first podcast under this new theme. So no pressure <laugh>

Agustin: None, none

Gonzales: Taken. Well, let me share a little bit about your background. Rafael, a Augustine attended mountain Antonio citrus college Fullerton college, where he discovered two passions, theater, and speech born in ECU. He moved with his family to Southern California when he was a child and for years was unaware of his undocumented status. After community college, he went on to receive a BA and master's degree from UCLA's school of theater, film and television Raphael was a writer on the award-winning show, Jane the Virgin. I'm a huge fan by the way. <laugh> thank you. And is a Sundance fellow for the TV family comedy illegal based on his life as a formerly undocumented American. He serves as CEO of the Latino film Institute where he oversees the youth cinema project, their project based learning educational film program, the annual Los Angeles, Latino international film festival, and the Latinx and animation in 2018, right around the time that we met, he was selected as LA weekly's 50 most essential people in Los Angeles and the same year, the United nations invited Rafael to speak at their 70th anniversary celebration of the universal declaration of human rights. Thanks to the nomination by Congressman Joaquin Castro in 2021, Rafael was appointed to the national film preservation board at the library of Congress. And this has been a huge

year for Rafael. So I am honored to have him here this year. Rafael published his memoir titled illegally yours, and I'm excited to launch this podcast with his story. So welcome back. How are you?

Agustin: Uh, thank you so much for having me, you know, that was, that was way too long. Need to cut down that bio

Gonzales: <laugh> well, let's head to our first question. Yeah, the last time I saw you, you were a keynote speaker for our systems first diversity summit back in 2019. Wow. When we were seeing people in person. So thank you for joining me again and congratulations on your memoir. I know you mentioned a bit of your story at that event with our system. I'm excited for this podcast recording though. And I wanna really focus today on the very beginning. Tell us a little bit about your journey at Mount San Antonio. How did you know how to enroll pay for college? What was your favorite spot on campus? Oh my God. What do you wanna share? <laugh>

Agustin: If we go back to the beginning, I have to point out that I was born in Ecuador, south America, which most people in Southern California always assume was a state in Mexico. <laugh> I've been in Los Angeles county in Southern California since I was seven. So I am more Mexican than I am Ecuadorian <laugh> we moved a lot. You know, we moved into my Anthes as garage and like Walnut California when we first arrived. And then I went to seven different schools before I got to high school. Mm. I didn't know why we moved so much at the time, but now I understand that we were undocumented and I didn't know, and my parents would get jobs wherever they could until they figured out their immigration statuses. And then we had to pack up and move, but it wasn't until high school. When I applied for like my driver's license and started applying to go to college, that I discovered that we were undocumented. Like my parents had held this information from me. Wow. It was crushing. Right. My all American life came crashing down on me. And I asked my mom, you told me everything. Why don't you tell me this one thing? And what she said really changed my life. She said, your dad, and I didn't want you to grow up feeling different because dreams should not have borders. Mm. So I took that line. I put it in the book. I will not give her royalties for that

Gonzales: <laugh>

Agustin: But it truly inspired me to continue and not have my legalities hold me back. And that's why in high school, I became an overachiever. You know, I became the class president, the prom king, top 10% of my class, mostly because it was before the dreamer movement. It was the late nineties. It was before this whole undocumented and unafraid movement. And back then I thought I was the only one in the world. And I was very afraid. So I figured if I became the most popular kid at school, no one would ever in a million years think that I was undocumented, but with no financial aid, with no direction, with no support, I ended up at the only place I could afford out of pocket, which is community college. And

Gonzales: What was that experience like?

Agustin: It was <laugh>, it was tough. It was tough because, you know, just to take your prerequisite tests, you need your social security number, which I didn't have. Mm. So I would go take my English prerequisite test and I made up a social security number. Then I went to go take my math prerequisite test and I forgot the number made up. So I made up another number <laugh>. So then what I accidentally did was create two Rafaels at Mount San Antonio college. One that was good at English, but bad at math. The other one that was good at math, but bad at English <laugh> and it took me like more than a semester to figure out what I had done. I was like, oh my God. I divided all by my schooling in two different ways accidentally. Wow. And that's around the time when I first needed to tell my professors about my status, but was still not comfortable about it.

Agustin: I remember I went to speak to my counselor or the counselor that was assigned to me. And she was like, wait, what you don't, why don't you have social security number? And I was like, well, I don't know <laugh> that must have lost it. So she was so confused because she saw my transcripts and she saw that I did my high school. She saw all my accomplishments. So instead of like questioning me or pulling me out or anything, she was like, oh, that's weird. But here, let me give you a Mount sec ID number. Mm. And just use this. And that. That's how I was able to unify all the rough I had created. And more importantly, anytime someone asked me for my social security number, I just showed my mom's ID. And people were like, oh, okay. Mm. And it, and it was getting my school ID at one college that then allowed me to go to other community colleges, because I felt like I was behind on my schooling cuz of this problem, a mess I created for myself. So I went to citrus college, citrus community college, which was close to Mount SAC to take some more classes there. And then I drove down to Fullerton community college and I took more classes there. So I think at that time you couldn't surpass certain amount of class credits. I think like 18 was the max like 18 major full-time student for

Gonzales: A full load.

Agustin: Mm-hmm <affirmative> yeah. For a full load. So I took 18 at Mount SAC and then I took like an additional 10 at citrus. I did eight more full at 10. So I was taking like 20 something CR like class credits, which was crazy. No one should ever do that to themselves.

Gonzales: But is that how you, I mean, I hear how community colleges gave you access. You went to multiple colleges and then you fell in love with theater. Is that where you fell in love with theater and speech?

Agustin: Yeah. I could honestly tell you that. Uh, it was my immigration problems that led me to the arts and it's what led me to, to the, the career I have today because I come from a long line of kinda like doctors and lawyers see my story more important, more importantly, my parents immigration journey to America. My dad was a pediatric surgeon in Ecuador who came to work at a car wash and the United States. And my mom was anesthesiologist who came to work at a Kmart. You know, they were medical doctors that came to work at menial jobs just to survive as they took classes in community college to learn English. Wow. So by the time I get in high school, I thought I

would be something else. But when I get to community college and I, I don't, I don't know what I can and cannot do.

Agustin: And I don't know how long my immigration limbo would last. I grabbed the college course catalog and I just started taking every class. And I literally went like an alpha better quarter. I was like a, for anthropology, B for biology, C for chemistry, I should have never taken chemistry. And then I went all the way down. Imagine how many classes I had to take before I got to tea for theater. Wow. Or ask for speech. Right. It's a lot. And by the time I got to those classes, that's when things started changing for me in particular theater. That's where I started to feel like I found self-esteem. And my, my self-worth my self respect, you know, as an undocumented immigrant, I, I didn't know. I didn't know this dent, but looking back, I go, wow. All I really wanted was like the love and admiration of my community and my country and being on stage was how I was getting it. Mm. So that, that's why it spoke so much to me. Plus I had been acting American my whole life. Like they acting things in <laugh> like, I know brighter. If it felt natural

Gonzales: To me, it came natural.

Agustin: <laugh>, that's how I got into theater. And I really have to thank community college for that, because it was a place where I could explore. It was a place that had no borders, none whatsoever. I can freely and wildly imagine anything for myself. It was at community college that

Gonzales: Would give you an ID rather that would you an ID ID in a number to give you

Agustin: Access and to not make me feel like I don't belong. Wow. Yeah. It, that all happened to me at Mount San Antonio college.

Gonzales: Wow. That's amazing. You know, I meet a lot of colleagues, faculty stopped who are committed to the system up and down the state. And every time we have a conversation, we hear about the stigma of being a California community college student, the stigma of even being able to say you're a graduate. So thank you for sharing that with me. And for sharing that even your parents acts as California's community colleges to learn English. Once they came here,

Agustin: My God, my TIAs and TIAs, my Ninas and Ninos, my mom and dad, like my grandparents, everyone I know, went to community college <laugh> cause it's accessible, it's cost effective. And it's just as powerful. I would say by the time you transfer out to the UC system or the Cal state system or where we go to get your bachelor's and masters, then you're focused on your expertise. But the core of my knowledge, the foundation of everything I know I got at community college. Mm

Gonzales: That's really powerful. You know, you now get to work with youth in LA. Yeah. And I hear, and I see your work. And also when I first met you, that really inspired me. How do you bring this journey, this experience when you now work with youth. And I guess

what it makes me think about is what is your hope for them? Like what do you, every day when you see them, what is your hope for them?

Agustin: Yeah. You, it, it's funny how I came to, to run the youth cinema project because Edward James, almost the founder of this program, which is essentially like a, the best way to explain it is as a graduate film school program. But we put it in public schools. Mm we're. Teaching elementary school students, middle school students, high school students, the art of filmmaking, not to become filmmakers, but to hopefully get everyone to college and more importantly, to teach in a different manner. Right. It's project based, learning the ideas of communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, pillars of our education system. You find in filmmaking. Yeah. So that, that's why this program has expanded throughout the state. Um, but anyway, like what he, when Mr almost first asked me to help run this, I was like, are you kidding B <laugh> I'm trying to be a Hollywood writer. And I'm trying to be a producer and I'm trying to do my own thing.

Agustin: And he was like, just go to one class. I want you to go to one class and see what we're doing. And I remember I went to Santana unified and I walked into an elementary school class and I saw nine and 10 year olds do the work that I didn't get to do till I got to UCLA. And I nearly started crying. I was like, oh my God, what would my career be if I started that early? Or what would my self-esteem be if I started that early? Um, so I, I decided to do this, to go down this path with MROs because I think outside of the educational outcomes that the program gets outside of being able to send every student we touch to college, it is my secret way of creating the pipeline to bring color into Hollywood. So it, it works on many different levels and that's why I'm so proud of doing it. But every filmmaking mentor that works with us, the youth center project, they will always say the same thing. They get more from the students than the students get from them. Mm.

Gonzales: I love that. It reminds me of, you know, how you started sharing the pipelines that you got once you arrived at community colleges, right. That access and how you're bringing it now to your day to day work. Yeah. You know, we've been doing a lot of that work at community colleges over the last five years, we call it guided pathways. We create guided pathways, not a cafeteria model. So to your story of like going down the list and going, I'm gonna take classes in every letter. It really is about providing a student a clear pathway, right. They can explore, but a clear pathway to their end goal. But as we continue down this route, this work, we're still seeing a lot of students, particularly during this pandemic who need a little bit more support. And so it gives me hope to hear that you're developing pipelines to a passion. And then thinking through, for example, the individuals that you engage, how they inspire others. Because I think that's really the work that we get to do every day is we learn from students and it inspires us to be even better professionals day to day, as well as being nourished from seeing our own journey come around in full circle. Right.

Agustin: You know, what's funny, you mentioned the stigma of community college. I felt that stigma, cuz I'm like, oh, I'm not worthy enough to go to these big institutions. So I ended up here and I gotta tell you, by the time I transfer in to the university system, it was the transfer students that ran labs around the students who had been there since freshman

year. And my stigma went away <laugh> and it went from, oh my God, I wasn't worthy enough to, oh my God, you're the idiot for spending that much money. And you could have saved two years at a community college <laugh> because we're over here, the transfer students running on apps around all of y'all who've been here since freshman year.

Gonzales: Absolutely. That was my journey too. There's so many studies that show that our transfer students hit the ground running more advance, particularly if they get to enter as a junior and all their credits are accepted at the transfer institution. But I'm glad that was your experience. That was mine as well.

Agustin: Oh 100%.

Gonzales: Well, you know, in your story, I hear a lot of the same themes. When I meet students on the road, I hear resiliency, the optimism, what could be for California, for the other students that we serve. And more importantly, your contributions to society, to the lives of many, many LA youth. And I grew up in foster care in LA. So thank you for the volunteer work and the me that you bring together for me, mentorship was really important. It's the reason why I am where I am. Oh

Agustin: My God. Thank you for being the example that especially students who come from the foster care system, like we need to see you in positions of power to know that it's attainable. Right?

Gonzales: Thank you.

Agustin: That it's so important because growing up, and this is what my work in Hollywood is about. Like growing up, up, I didn't see myself on screen TV, journalism book publishing theater. So I didn't feel like I was part of the fabric of this nation. Mm. So that's what we're trying to do. We're trying to set the example, trying to let people know that you too can attain this. Whether you're a foster youth or an undocumented American, you too can attain this.

Gonzales: Absolutely. You know, for me and the work that I get to do every day, I interact with state and federal legislators, policy makers, all the employees, faculty, staff, administrators at our colleges. And one of the things that I always think about and I gain inspiration from these conversations is I try to bring in the stories of the people that have gone through our entire system, right? So you went to three different community colleges. I meet individuals like you all the time. What would be your top talking point that you would want me to share with state elected officials, federal leaders about the talents of community college students and what they bring to our economy, to our society. Oh,

Agustin: Wow. I think, you know, what's funny. We just have to do a better job at telling the stories of our community college alum, because I meet people like, oh, you also went a community college that are like at the top echelons of the industry,

Gonzales: That immediate bond. Huh? How many did you go to

Agustin: Forget Harvard? Which community college did you go to? <laugh>

Agustin: You know what I would love? And I'm starting to see this change a little bit is every time we talk about public school, we talk about K through 12, but we don't go beyond 12. And that's what I think we have to do. We need to go all the way to the community college system to be able to support like, especially students from marginalized communities where higher education is just unreachable because of how expensive it is. And it's always people of color who end up in bankruptcy because of trying to pay for higher education, especially black women. I mean, the data's out there mm-hmm <affirmative> and how impossible it is for us to attain higher education. So I think community college is the solution to that. Mm.

Gonzales: So that would be your message. Yes. Making sure that if we want to see more successful stories, college affordability needs to be a top priority.

Agustin: A hundred percent. A hundred percent.

Gonzales: Yeah. You know, I think we're often very proud to say we're the front door. Mm. The front door community colleges are the front door to higher education. And the new thing as we are moving forward is for many of the low income, you know, first generation college students, students of color in our system and in California, right. Those that need to find us particularly now, more than ever, we need to be the front door in their home. Right. And so we're very lucky now, as we're thinking about creating a sense of belonging at community colleges creating even affordable housing at community colleges. Wow. <laugh> I don't know when you were in community college, did you still live at home

Agustin: Community college? I was still at home when I went to UCLA. <laugh> mostly because I was so scared. I mean, my immigrant parents didn't understand student loans and I was, was like, they were offering me all this money. I was like, no, no, no, no, I don't wanna take all that money. I, I just wanna take enough to pay for my tuition, nothing more. So then it was up to me to figure out how I was gonna live or at the very least how I was gonna commute to college. So I would take public transportation to UCLA back and forth every day from west Covina to San Gabriel valley. Wow. Yeah. Cuz I didn't wanna take out more student loans that I needed. That

Gonzales: Is quite a route. Yeah. You know, I had, I'd been sharing this story a lot more often lately and it's been the first time I've ever stepped foot on a community college. I was so lost. I sat in a table. I didn't even know where to go to enroll. It was actually the landscaper. So the gardener who came up to me after watching me sit there for two hours and was like, do you need help? Oh, like, are you lost? And he walked me all the way to the

admissions office and he gave me names of other counselors, all mainly Latinos. And he basically said, you need to meet with these three people. And they're gonna ask you to apply for financial aid. Be careful don't take out loans. But I didn't even know that I had to enroll. I didn't know that I had to pay for school.

Gonzales: I mean, I was a 16 year old in foster care. I was an adult since I was 13. Right. Making decisions about where I would live, but going to a community college, I didn't have that immediate, you know, knowledge that handoff, there was no one there, but the people that were there were the people that worked on the campus like that gardener who said, are you lost? And here's who you need to talk to. And that was really powerful for me. And it's a story that I've been sharing a lot more often lately as people see me in this role, that

Agustin: Is so beautiful.

Gonzales: It makes me think about, you know, as we come to a close in our podcast, who are those people in your journey? Uh, I wanna make sure that we end with gratitude, right? It's been a journey for you attending different colleges, seeing your own parents and family members be served by this system who is, you know, first name, only that person at your community college, any one of them that you would wanna thank publicly and why? Mm.

Agustin: Without a doubt, it would have to be Lisa. And I don't mind saying her last name, Lisa Reinhardt. She was my speech and debate coach. She was my speech teacher and professor. And I remember it was the first time that as a immigrant, I had traveled to represent my community college at other speech and debate tournaments around the United States. And I could only do that cause I had my sack ID <laugh> but our team was really good and we were winning. We were constantly winning. And then I got selected to go represent the school at a international tournament in Prague. So Lisa called me into the office and said, congratulations, you're going to Prague. And my heart just dropped because I knew that if I left the country, I couldn't come back and I was undocumented and I had never told anybody of my legality outside of my family and my very, very close friends who were also like Latinos and Latinas.

Agustin: But here was, you know, a white lady who had <laugh>, who had become a great mentor, great professor slowly becoming a great friend. And I'm just looking at her eyes with all this. Like, she was just so happy to give you this news. And I didn't know how to like tell her no. And then I just decided, I was like, I can't go. And she was like, why? And I was like, cuz if I go, I can't come back. Mm. And I told her I was undocumented. And the way she reacted to me truly changed my life because she could have been disgusted or concerned or Jesus Christ. She could have called admissions or anybody at the college. And it would've derailed me, you know? But instead she was so loving, so caring, she leaned in and was like, we're gonna figure this out together. Made me feel like I wasn't different. Made me feel like I belonged. It was after that interaction that I stopped being scared about my legality. It was after that interaction that I started feeling more, more American, like, yeah, this is just a hiccup that I'll address later on. I'm gonna continue being me and I'm gonna continue being successful. And I have to thank Lisa for

Gonzales: That. That's an amazing story. It makes me think about how we're in the middle of celebrating undocumented student action week as our system, as we head into October and the tremendous work that we have, but reminds me of the faculty and staff in our colleges that play such a critical role. So thank you for sharing that with us. Thank

Agustin: You for sharing your story about the landscape artists. <laugh> that was so amazing. <laugh> I had the same experience at UCLA. You did like, it was always the janitorial staff that were supportive or were open the doors for me to let me like sleep inside the building. If I got there too early, cuz I was taking the Metro link to the bus and beat everyone to school.

Gonzales: Yeah. Who see you, right? Yeah.

Agustin: Yeah. And more important. We see them like they go unnoticed by all those other kids.

Gonzales: Absolutely. Well, thank you. Rafa. Anything else you'd like to share with our students, future students about your book, about our colleges, final thoughts?

Agustin: Oh no. Nothing. Just that anything in this world is truly attainable. If you're gonna work hard for it. I mean, nothing is easy. I feel like <laugh>, I feel because of our social media and everything, it's like, oh, I can beat that in two seconds. I was like, you don't understand the amount of hard work that it took me to get here, but it is possible. That's why I'm here. So as long as you're willing to put the work and, and your education, I just wanted to say that everything I wanted to achieve in my life, I first started implementing in community college. Mm it's. That simple. I knew I wanted to work in the entertainment industry and it took me this long to do it. That's okay. You know, Latinos are late for everything, but I got here <laugh> but it all began and properly planning and setting a path for myself at community college.

Gonzales: Oh thank you, rabbi. That was beautiful. That is a wonderful ending to our podcast. I wanna thank you you for being my first guest. Thank you for having, for sharing your story. Everyone. Thank you for joining us. I hope that you enjoyed learning about Rapha, Augustine, and that you are inspired by his journey. You can learn more about him by picking up his memoir titled illegally yours. I think you can purchase it now. Please do. Thank you for joining me for another episode of the California community colleges chancellor's office podcast. We'll see you next time.

Speaker 3: Be sure to join us for the next California community colleges podcast. This has been a California community colleges presentation.