

Jaree Barnwell

Hi everyone. Welcome back to our Rebound podcast. My name is Jaree Barnwell. I am currently a graduate student in the clinical mental health program. And I will be facilitating this podcast today with one of my mentees for Valley Scholars. Her name is Alexia, and Alexia, thanks for being here! Can you introduce yourself?

Alexia Munoz

Yeah, of course. Thank you guys so much for having me. My name is Alexia Munoz. I am currently a junior at JMU majoring in psychology. I have two minors right now, one in honors, and one in Latinx community engagement. I was born and raised in Harrisonburg. So I'm a townie and right now I'm mainly involved in "TORCH," which is a first gen student led org supporting first gen and low income students. I'm co-president of that. And then I also work at CMSS right now, the Center for Multicultural Student Services, through federal work study. And I am also the assistant director this year of the Latinx Leadership Academy, which is a three-day program/camp/summer program that hosts sophomores in junior high schoolers, from the Latinx community all over Virginia, and brings them to JMU to kind of build their leadership skills and confidence.

Jaree Barnwell

So I thank you for sharing all of that. Just to kind of get going, what did you find was the central to your success and sense of belonging on this campus?

Alexia Munoz

That's really hard to answer with just like, one answer. I would say that coming here, I find that like everyone has a different journey in terms of like, their sense of belonging. For me personally... like I said, I grew up in Harrisonburg, and so going to Harrisburg High School, and like just living in this community, it's a very, very diverse community. There were like over 50 languages spoken at my high school, like, everyone came from a different background and everyone worked together like so *seamlessly* and it was like, very organized. And so I never felt necessarily out of place or a certain type of like way, when I was in high school and growing up in Harrisonburg. However, going to JMU, because it is a predominately white institution, like almost like *immediately* felt a sense of exclusion... or just like not fitting in the way that I thought I would fit in. And that's something that I didn't expect, and maybe other students similar to me didn't expect either. But it was a very hard transition for me, like I said, coming from a very diverse community, to JMU's community.

Because of that, I tried to seek as much of an inclusive community as I could on JMU's campus. But that was also kind of like, an up and down journey for myself as well. Because not only did it allow me to kind of self-reflect and figure out "wait, like, who am I?" I had a lot of identity like crossroads, up until this point throughout high school, but also like my freshman year, sophomore year of college, just trying to figure out who I am. And where I see... I fit in the most. One thing that I like, mainly struggled with, as like a Latina woman, both of my parents are Mexican. And they immigrated here. And so I was born here. However, like growing up in America, I never felt that I was part of like, either community. You hear the saying all the time.

But basically, you know, I was... I didn't feel like Mexican enough. And I didn't feel like American enough. And so like in high school, like, it was very hard for me to identify with my culture, because a lot of people around me were not necessarily Hispanic-Latino. But at the same time, coming to JMU, I also felt like no one around me was Latino. And I couldn't necessarily relate to anyone. But that made me embrace my culture even *more*. I realized that I was different. I realized that, you know, I had this, like, richness and like heritage, and so much history behind me and my family and my origin. So I really, really did try to embrace that. And so I think a big part of my journey to a sense of belonging was my support systems around me. And that came from not only friends but mentors that I found. Honestly, some classes that I took really impacted my sense of belonging and then, like, spaces on campus and "orgs" on campus, that I felt that I could be truly myself.

Jaree Barnwell

I remember we had a ton of conversations about your transition the first couple years, and I was just like, "it's gonna be okay, you're gonna you're gonna make it work." And so I'm happy to hear that on that journey, we're able to gather an even stronger sense of belonging. I'm wondering as well, during this journey... when you were probably, let's say, in some of your "lower" parts of it, right? Talk to me about like, what was helpful? And like, what were you going through and what was reassuring? What didn't work for you? Because you mentioned you were part of a bunch of organizations in your support system, so just got to speak more to that for me.

Alexia Munoz

So I would say right off the bat, again, like I was- like I said, I was feeling feelings of like exclusivity. I would enter some of my classes my freshman year, and I felt like... group projects, and I felt like I was being talked over, or I was being like, ignored, in like a subtle way. Things like socio-economic differences, also, like were notable. So like my freshman year, you know, there are people in my hall that would order DoorDash, or like GrubHub, every day, on top of them having their meal plan. So there were a lot of differences around me, very close to me, where I just felt like I was less than. But early on, I made a really strong connection and relationship with the Associate Dean of the Honors College, Dr. Montoya. She really, really helped me- we were kind of going through the same thing of transitioning to JMU, because it was her first year at the university as well. And so we really helped each other and, you know, she helped me a lot, just from her experience of being a Latina woman, you know, and her journey to getting to her position and going to like getting a PhD, and all the things that higher education has to offer. And so I would say her, and I's relationship really, really did help me my first year. And even until now, she just gave me a lot of advice, a lot of wisdom, and like pushed me to do things that I didn't think I was like capable of doing, like at all. And so having that support system, there was very helpful.

Something else I want to mention is my roommate my freshman year, who I'm still friends with now. She is also Latina. And so that was a really meaningful experience for me to have such a close friend and to live with someone who shared the same background as I did, and who was going through the same exact like, struggles that I was going through. Having her there and talking through everything and, you know, reassuring me that I'm not alone, and that I'm also

enough to be on this campus. That was very, very— like I said, reassuring. And I'm still friends with her today. So that bond is really very special to me.

And then lastly, I would say that it wasn't until my like sophomore, end of sophomore, and the beginning of junior year that I discovered CMSS, and clubs like LSA. Those spaces, and those organizations really, really do give a foundation for students like me who are maybe lost or maybe don't know where exactly they fit in or identify. There are so many different types of people in those orgs in those spaces that you're bound to find people that you connect with. And you're bound to engage in activities that are meaningful to you and make you feel comfortable on a campus that you might feel... like I said, excluded from or a bit uncomfortable.

Jaree Barnwell

That's good to hear that JMU offers these organizations and spaces, and that you found people. Because I can imagine your roommate was random. And then this professor, or the dean rather, was there. I think one thing I also want to wonder about is like, what have you thrived in? I know, we've talked about some of your struggles, like belonging, but like where are you finding your niche? And like, what... what gets you going in the morning?

Alexia Munoz

Yeah, I think that's something that we don't talk about enough. And that's something I also overlook. I never reflect on like, "what am I doing well?" Like, why am I actually thriving? And like you said, it's often focusing on like, what can I improve on? So I'm glad that you asked that. I think that right now, I've definitely found my passion here at JMU. Again, through relationships that I've made and through classes that I've taken, I really want to serve and help the Latinx community wherever I am. And because I'm a psych major, in terms of mental health, that's very, very important to me. Breaking the stigma is breaking, like, the generational stigma that we hold in our families and in our culture and kind of going against the status quo in terms of what's right and what's wrong in terms of mental health. And just like culture in general. I am also very passionate about helping the first generation college community. I was part of the Vice Scholars Program. So thankfully, because of them, I'm here at JMU with a scholarship and you know, able to do everything that I'm doing. And because of my journey through that five year program, I really am passionate of helping students who are younger than me, and who are going through the same journey and might be, you know, a bit confused, a bit lost, a bit nervous, anything that they're feeling. I know that I went through that. And so if I can be somewhat of an example, a role model, or just there to like, you know, give advice, I really, really am passionate about that, and going to college and being in higher education has really given me a lot of lessons and taught me like the value of many things that I wasn't aware of. And so I just think it's really important for everyone to be able to at least have the option and feel confident enough to step foot on campus, even if their parents didn't go to college. So those are kind of like my passions right now. And things I'm working towards.

Jaree Barnwell

I like that answer, the opportunity just to like step foot, even if someone else didn't get to in your family. I think that's super important. And I can hear your passion and it's just like you get

excited about it. I think another thing I'm wondering about before, you know, we transition towards our end of our time, what would— what would be something that you tell someone in a similar situation? And how did you learn to manage all of these things that you're doing?

Alexia Munoz

One piece of advice that I think I would give to someone who's possibly going through the same transitions and through the same workload as I am, is to make sure to create boundaries, between your opportunities and your responsibilities. I have never heard that, like, saying or piece of advice before, but it really did stick with me. And it's basically implying that, you know, as I feel like, as a first-gen student, we get all of these opportunities handed to us. And we get all these opportunities to do all these great things, and speak at these events, or volunteer for these things and serve in these communities, which is amazing, and great. But sometimes, something that we forget is that we're not necessarily *obligated* to do these opportunities. And we really, really have to take care of ourselves first. That's something that I struggled with the beginning of my years, because I was like, I need to take every opportunity that I get, because they're being handed to me. And these are really special opportunities. And you know, I'm here on a scholarship, like, I have to make my mom proud, like stuff like that. And so I was like, "I can't pass this up." However, doing that made me forget about the important things in my life, like my schoolwork, or my health, my mental health, my physical health, like time for myself, self care... So that's a piece of advice that I would give to any student that is maybe transitioning into college or getting busier with their workload. You know, make sure that you're taking care of yourself first. And then putting everything else second.

Jaree Barnwell

That's important. Because like, especially you mentioned, you know, you're on a scholarship and you're like, you're I want to make people happy. And I wanted to do x, y and z... it can be really easy to be... it's like almost like a culture shock, right? Because you're coming from high school and like, you know, you wake up at 7:30 in the morning, and you're finished by 2:00 and you go play sports, or whatever you do. But here, it's like you can do anything. And they kind of don't tell you about that when you get here. And so to hear that, "hey, you still matter, no matter how many opportunities that you're given, because you can't do the opportunities if you're like, burned out from them," right? And so yeah, I think that's really good advice to pass along to someone. But I'm wondering if there's anything else that is crossing your mind that I didn't get to ask you or that you want to share that you feel is pertinent?

Alexia Munoz

Maybe this is another piece of advice, but just something that crossed my mind is also something I learned in my years here at JMU is to just like be your authentic self. Like I said before, I had a lot of identity crossroads growing up. And I feel like I'm finally on the right path to, you know, solidifying my identity and every day. I really, really choose to be my most authentic self, especially on campus. I think it's really important to kind of honor where you came from, especially like, in my case, as a Latina woman, I do want to embrace my culture. And I do want to kind of give that nod to like my parents who sacrificed so much for me to be here. And so I really... you know, I've had struggles with codeswitching in the past, and you know, that feeling

was kind of weird for me. I've had instances where I wanted to, like, you know, dress like everyone else, be like everyone else, have the same interest as everyone else. But that wasn't me. And I'm way more comfortable now, knowing who I am and embracing my true identity and also learning as I go. So learning what that identity means to me, and how that's like, reshaping who I am, as the years continue. So, another takeaway I would say is just be authentic and be yourself, wherever you are.

Jaree Barnwell

Thank you so much for that. Every day in every competition that we've ever had, you've always showed up and so that's, that's really special to hear that that's another piece of advice is just to be... be your authentic self. But I think you again, Alexia, for being here today. That's all we have for today. And until next time, *what's your Rebound story?*