Q&A With Andrea Romero, Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs

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As vice provost for faculty affairs, Andrea Romero is involved in matters related to professional development, career advancement, leadership development and diversity initiatives for tenure-track, career-track, continuing status professionals and academic administrators.

Romero [1] joined the UA in 2000 as a faculty member in the Department of Mexican American Studies. In 2015, she became director of the Frances McClelland Institute for Children, Youth and Families. Her appointment as vice provost was announced in January.

Romero earned a doctorate in social psychology and a master's in psychology from the University of Houston, where her emphasis was quantitative methodology, Latino/a psychology and adolescent health. Prior to that, she earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry from Texas A&M University. She worked at Stanford University's School of Medicine in the Prevention Research Center before coming to the UA.

In this Q&A, Romero discusses her new position and some of the initiatives her office is pursuing.

Why did you choose to join the UA?

I chose to join the UA in 2000 because it was the best place to conduct my research on Latinx youth health disparities. It was the best place in part because of the location – the region has a high percentage of Latinx and specifically Mexican American youth. Also, I was excited to join the Mexican American studies program, which was very supportive of my research with youth in the local community.

Why were you interested in the position of vice provost for faculty affairs?

I enjoy helping people, and over the past 18 years at the UA I have spent a lot of time coaching and mentoring faculty through the promotion and tenure process. I have also heard many concerns from faculty from across campus when they are struggling in difficult moments. I am excited to be in this position, where I can have more impact to improve support and resources for faculty.

What are your primary responsibilities?

My primary responsibility is centered around promotion and tenure for all faculty. This means reviewing all dossiers submitted for promotion and tenure, but also assisting faculty before they submit their dossier. In our office we provide workshops to help faculty prepare their dossiers. We also provide several positive professional development opportunities for faculty through our office. These include leadership programs and university-level awards for research, teaching and outreach. I also provide coaching to faculty and assist them with the
grievance process.

Some of the themes that came up during the search for your position were the development of faculty and support for department heads. What do you see as the challenges and opportunities in these areas?

In terms of faculty development, I believe we can do a lot more in this office to link faculty with existing resources on campus, and also to link them with mentors on campus and nationally who can provide specific kinds of support and insight for their publications, grants, teaching and linkages with national professional organizations. I would love to spend some time in the next couple years to build this type of program that can be sustainable to support faculty. One challenge is that we need more support within our office to develop and implement new programs, so I have been asking to build our office with more financial support.

In terms of support for department heads, there were already some steps being put into place to create a continuing education program for department heads. I am happy to step into this process and work with Dr. Rob Miller (director of the School of Architecture) and Dr. Diane Brennan (director of leadership and organizational effectiveness in Human Resources). Department heads collected information through a survey and discussion. Our next step is a retreat with a small group to assist us in putting together the education program in more detail. We hope to launch it next year. Our goal is to provide support with skill development for all department heads so that they can effectively handle the day-to-day challenges within their units. Department heads are truly essential to the organizational health of the university.

Another theme that emerged was the need for the person in this position to have conflict management skills. Why is that important, and what is your approach to conflict management?

Yes, this is a very critical skill for this role, because we receive grievances. I have learned in the past couple months already that I spend quite a bit of time meeting with individuals and small groups to assist when issues arise. My approach is first to listen, ask questions, and then work with the individual to identify next steps that seem viable. It is important for faculty to feel that they have agency in solving problems and to understand their rights and the resources that they have available through the Office of the Provost and through shared governance. I tend to be a pretty calm person, and I am good at listening and problem solving, so I feel like this job is a good match for my strengths. I enjoy helping people and it is rewarding to see when people find resolution and can participate in creating a healthy and productive work environment for themselves and others.

The need for diversity and inclusion also came up a lot. What does that mean to you?

Social justice is fundamental to all the work that I have done, and it remains key in my current role. I am very excited to be in this position, where I can bring this lens to discussions and decisions. Certainly there is a need for more diversity among our faculty, with greater representation among women and underrepresented minority groups. Our most recent data indicate that 73% of faculty are white, 9% Latino, 10% Asian, 2% African American, 1% Native American, 4% international and 1% are two or more races. We can do better on representation of underrepresented ethnic groups. Inclusion is about making sure everyone is being heard, so there is a need to make sure that we are engaging in common practices to involve all voices. Beyond diversity and inclusion, we need to also discuss equity and social justice in order to take us beyond representation and including all voices, but also asking why
some groups are having trouble being represented or whose presence is not visible or not permanent. Moreover, social justice moves us to inquire further about whether all voices are being taken as credible and seriously considered, especially if they are not the majority. To me, a lot of this is what lies beneath campus climate.

What is the UA doing well when it comes to diversity and inclusion, and where can we do better?

It is very exciting that we have become a Hispanic-Serving Institution. This means we have federal designation for the representation of our undergraduate student body. However, only 9% of our faculty are Latino, so we have farther to go with representation on that side.

In 2017, you were given the Shirley O’Brien Diversity Award from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences in recognition of the impact you have made on increasing diversity among faculty and students. Can you give some specifics on those efforts?

I was chair of the Association of Women Faculty and worked with that group to bring attention and understanding about issues of salary equity across campus. I was also co-chair of the Women of Color Faculty group for several years, during which time I worked to create programs, support and mentoring for the promotion and tenure process. I have taught undergraduate and graduate courses about issues of social justice, equity, diversity and inclusivity in family studies and human development and Mexican American studies. Also, the majority of my research has investigated Latinx youth health disparities that are related to cultural and community factors. Not to mention, my community-based research and community involvement have revolved around working with underrepresented groups to make positive changes.

You have expressed a strong belief in the value of mentoring. Who have been some of your mentors, and what impact did they make on you professionally or personally?

I feel so lucky to have so many amazing mentors who have helped me navigate my career through many different stages. It helps so much to get perspective and insight from someone else who has already been through the process and who understands the way that the system works. They have been the people who have cheered me on and they are some of the first people I call to share good news. Some of my mentors include Dr. Robert Roberts, who was my dissertation chair and who gave me resources and autonomy to work on my dissertation concept. Also, Toni Griego-Jones, Richard Ruiz, Maria Teresa Velez and Rebecca Tsosie have been some of the people here at the UA who reached out to me, who answered my questions, who invited me to join groups, and who helped me by being wonderful role models. I am grateful to all of these people and even the longer list of all those who have helped me at various stages as collaborators. I have also found that some of the mentees who have found me and who have worked with me over the years, they have also taught me how to be a better mentee and how to develop and sustain positive relationships with colleagues and mentors to make our interactions mutually beneficial. I am very excited to be working on developing resources and support for a mentoring network across campus in the Office of Faculty Affairs.

What's one thing happening in your office that people should know about?

One thing happening in the Office of Faculty Affairs is that we are doing an open process to
look at vendors that can handle our annual review and promotion and tenure process. Most faculty are familiar with UAVitae, and because the contract is ending this spring with that company, we are looking to see who has the best, most current product that can best serve faculty needs.

What's a fun fact most people don't know about you?

My house is full of animals and reptiles. It is mostly my children that made this change, but we have three dogs, one snake, one reptile, and one bird. So, things can get pretty crazy and noisy at my house!

Another fun fact is that most of my students and community members call me 'Dr. Drea' like Dr. Dre? because of the hip-hop youth substance use projects that I used to lead in the community. And, yes, I do know how to break dance, but no, I am not a good rapper.

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