

**DARLENE XIOMARA RODRIGUEZ, PHD, MSW, MPA**  
**JEDI STATEMENT**

---

For those who know me, they have encountered me as Dr. Rodriguez and Darlene from Down the Street. Dr. Rodriguez is orthodox, Darlene is not. Here I present my perspective on diversity, equity, and inclusion from the latter.

A JEDI is a person who shows extraordinary skill or expertise in a specified field or endeavor. Although the phrase is most commonly associated with the Star Wars franchise, I want to challenge you to embrace being a JEDI for justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion.

We all have a “lightsaber” – a laser sword – which is used for both offense and defense that could cut through virtually anything. As such, it requires skill and training on how to use it effectively and is greatly enhanced when used in conjunction with “the Force.” To quote Obi Wan Kenobi to Luke Skywalker, “The Force is what gives a JEDI their power. It’s an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us; it binds the galaxy together.”

Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion are invaluable to the Force to execute its power and influence in innumerable ways. Throughout my life, due to my own experiences of being a bi-racial, bi-cultural, bi-lingual, first-generation minority, immigrant, youth in the U.S. I have experienced The Force first hand. In fact, I have been shaped and reshaped by The Force, as well as played an active role in shaping and reshaping The Force for others. This has taken place through the push and pull factors between the Dark Side and the Light Side.

Fortunately, as a “force sensitive being”, my personal disposition and moral constitution has been one, to advocate for the Light Side, even while embracing my own ignorance and inadequacies. You see, my decision to study marginalized communities and the role of the nonprofit sector in facilitating and/or hindering their integration is directly related to my own formative experiences in the U.S. When one migrates from one country to another all one truly has is the love of family, what one can physically carry, the memories tucked within their heart, and the spiritual fortitude that fills their soul. Therefore, when one seeks guidance and assistance and these few possessions are pulled apart, it weakens one’s well being, their support structure, and the community as a whole. Consequently, I have spent over two decades in doing research with and on minority and immigrant-serving organizations and how they seek to facilitate immigrant integration so that newcomers can retain their identity and integrity.

To do this, I have tried to learn the inherent value of those from the established community as well as those who are newcomers, knowing that with greater understanding and appreciation of one another's strengths, we can create opportunities for welcoming and incorporation that allows our communities to live, work, and thrive – together.

**DARLENE XIOMARA RODRIGUEZ, PHD, MSW, MPA**  
**JEDI STATEMENT**

---

Consequently, in my courses I bring JEDI-related principles in how we serve others through human services, social work, public policy, and nonprofit administration. I engage students in examining the intractable problems of society and aid them in gaining varying perspectives on why these issues have emerged and what role *they* can play in addressing them. Likewise, I engage students in my research projects and actively mentor marginalized and under-represented students on my research teams so they can later leverage their own and growing skillset to tackle these issues head on. My public and professional service has also been anchored in learning from and with those communities most impacted. I have done this in practice circles with area nonprofit organizations, but also with being intentional to not “talk about” communities but have communities speak for themselves and share their lived experience to inform theory and practice.

I have been blessed that my steadfast and strategic efforts have strengthened the Light Side and have yielded positive changes. This has included the creation and leadership of the Georgia Immigration Research Network, which pairs up researchers with community-organizations to address and conduct applied research to work on varying aspects of immigrant integration in the state. This has also included working with a national community partner, like the Welcoming America Network in the development of the One Region Initiative for greater policies, procedures, and practices for immigrant inclusion and receptivity in eight cities throughout Georgia. Within KSU, this has included working with the Presidential Commission of Racial and Ethnic Diversity to conduct research and to successfully advocate for the Department of Human Resources to hire a dedicated staff member to work with the varying issues immigrant and foreign-born faculty must contend with as they get hired on and are retained at the institution. Likewise, as an active member of the Presidential Commission for Gender and Work Life Issues I have been part of developing support structures that assist student, staff, and faculty caregivers on two-generation initiatives to improve their life-work balance and retention at KSU. These are just some of the outcomes and impacts my teaching, research, and service have yielded after nearly a decade at the institution, knowing that there are many other efforts prior to KSU.

These strategic initiatives require time, transparency, trust, and truth telling, which are the hallmarks to how I approach overcoming the Dark Side as I humbly and humanely work towards becoming a JEDI Master. My hope is that just as JEDI Masters have trained me, I use my own privilege and knowledge to give voice to others and equip a new generation of force sensitive beings and that they in turn will do the same for others. Admittedly, these successes have required a community of people who are equally committed to The Force. And although there are many battles whereby the Dark Side has prevailed ... for the moment ... I do believe my battle scars enable me to teach and train others to use their own light saber to continue this noble, needed, and enduring fight. A fight, I believe that the destiny of our country, our world, and our very galaxy depend on it.

May The Force be with you!