

Marcelo Vinces



By Victoria Albacete, Co-Editor in Chief

Illustrated by Lily Jones

A native of Ecuador, Marcelo Vinces is primarily the director of CLEAR, the Center for Learning, Education, and Research in the Sciences, at Oberlin College. He also serves as the Associate Director of the Center for Teaching Innovation and Excellence (CTIE) and retains a position as a Visiting Assistant Professor in Oberlin's Biology department. Growing up in New York City, he attended Brooklyn Tech High School and proceeded to earn his undergraduate degree from Cornell University in Ithaca, NY. He received his Ph.D. in Microbiology from Tufts University in Boston, MA and continued his postdoctoral studies at Harvard University, later moving to Belgium with the Harvard laboratory. Vinces has been a part of the Oberlin community for nearly half a decade, and will be departing to pursue other opportunities in Chicago at the end of the fall 2017 semester. We at The Synapse thank him for his constant support for the magazine throughout his time in Oberlin—in fact, he was previously interviewed by The Synapse about his work with the CLEAR Center—and wish him all the best in his future endeavors!

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

We last interviewed you for *The Synapse* in May of 2015, so it's been about two and a half years. That interview was mostly about the CLEAR Center, which was only about two years old at that point. So how has CLEAR changed and grown in the past two and a half years?

It's changed so much, and it's so interesting because one of the ways it's changed is that it's grown. It's basically me as a full-time person and we have a part-time administrative assistant, but now I have a colleague—Nicolette Mitchell, who's a STEM Fellow—so now there's the two of us!

Some unexpected things about starting a science center at Oberlin is that even though it had a very focused mission of supporting quantitative skills and interdisciplinary learning, and specific programs like OWLs and the Quantitative Skills Center, we ended up being the go-to office for a lot of collaborations with the [Allen Memorial] Art Museum; with the Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies department (GSFS); with the Multicultural Resource Center (MRC), and that has been great, especially now that we have a new grant because this new grant's mission is diversity in STEM. It's no longer this side project, this is what the center is about, and now we have more money, we have a different position—and that makes a big difference. Nicolette and I were talking about it, and she was saying that CLEAR is an appropriate [acronym] in that we are kind of like a clearinghouse for things, for connections—we're like a connector for things beyond just the science classroom.

I think that's become much more established. For example, this semester we've been getting a lot of emails asking "When's Lab Crawl, when's Lab Crawl?" We moved it to the spring, but people are already used to it every fall, so I think that's a sign that people have come to expect it and it's part of the culture here, so that's great for a brand-new office. It's only been around for four years, and it's become part of the fabric of Oberlin.

Having looked back at the past two years, how do you see the CLEAR

Center moving forward without you?

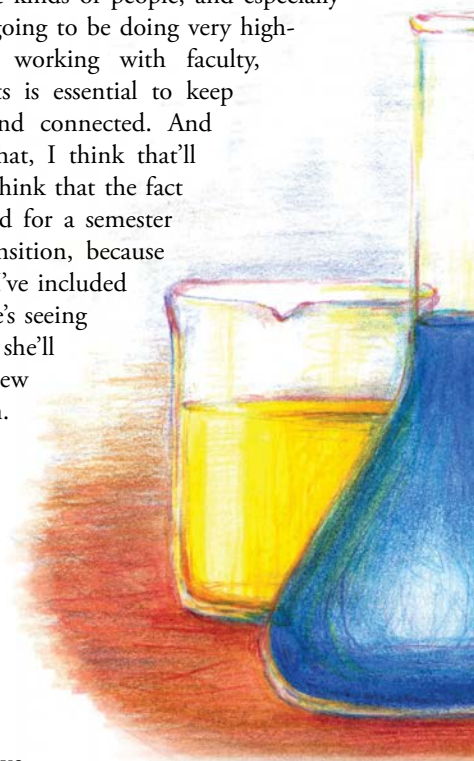
So right now we're actually in the search for the new director, and one of the things that I told the search committee is that this is an opportunity to—that they shouldn't try to find a Marcelo replacement—that really it's an opportunity to look at and reflect on what we've accomplished in the first four years and where we are now, and what would be good to move things forward. It's an opportunity to be able to bring someone with a skill set that maybe I didn't have; they may be able to take things up to a different level.

Having said that, I also asked them—and I've been asking students this too—what are the things that, at minimum, you want a director, regardless of their skill set and experience and knowledge, to have? I think one of the things that has come out loud and clear is the ability to engage with different kinds of people, and especially with students. Even if they're going to be doing very high-level administrative stuff or working with faculty, that engagement with students is essential to keep everything student-centered and connected. And I wholeheartedly agree with that, I think that'll come out in the interviews. I think that the fact that Nicolette and I overlapped for a semester is going to help with the transition, because she's my junior colleague and I've included her in as much as possible. She's seeing how everything operates, and so she'll actually be able to help the new person come into the transition. That's something I would also look for, someone that could work with Nicolette as—and future STEM fellows—a junior colleague, and as a mentor.

So, you're leaving! What are your plans for after Oberlin as of now?

The only plan is to move to Chicago! My partner has moved for me many times for my career, including to Ohio; he was personally reluctant, and I was super excited because of Oberlin, but after four years, he felt like it was time for him to move. I'm excited about being in Chicago, especially because so many students I know here are from there, or they end up there! Every time I go to Chicago, I run into an Obie. Every single time! Or sometimes I plan it, like the last time I was in Chicago I met up with Mina [Huerta, OC '17]. So there are a lot of connections with Obies and I kind of want to continue that—I've actually told the Oberlin Latino Alumni Association (OLAA), "I'm not officially an Obie, but please consider me one, I will always do anything for current or former Oberlin students, I'm there for you in Chicago, I can help make connections, I have two guest rooms!" So I hope people visit, and I will definitely be back here for every commencement for the next however many years—there are freshmen that I've gotten to get to know really well and I want to be there for when they walk across the stage.

Speaking of knowing students and having a relationship with students, you've been really involved with the Latinx community on campus, and I was wondering how you see the presence and support for POC students in STEM growing—if that's happened—over the



past four years and how that's gotten better or stayed the same?

That's a really great and pertinent question right now for me because we collect a lot of data. And the data is something I would like to show to a much greater audience, because there's some good news: Over the last four years, the graduation of STEM majors who are from underrepresented groups has been steadily increasing to the point that we're almost above what you would expect from the demographics of the College.

So then the next thing to ask is why, right? What are the changes? Was it hiring, was it teaching practices, was it shifts in some processes that happened? Anecdotally, I just hear from different people about little things that are done; a faculty member in [the Mathematics department] was telling me that they've been more active in the way that they've been recruiting for Honors—it's not just an email saying "Apply for Honors!" and end-of-story, it's: "Hey, I've noticed that you haven't applied for Honors, and yet, you have the grades for it; why don't you try it?" And it has results!

You get people that might otherwise say, "That's not for me, I'm not that student"—you need that encouragement, especially if societal messages are kind of telling you that you don't belong there. So I'm very interested in getting into the sociology and social psychology of these numbers that we're seeing—that's way beyond my expertise, it's something that Xavier Tirado [OC '17] kind of studied as both a Sociology and Biology major for his Sociology Honors thesis. I think it's a lot of rich information that we can dig into to understand what's going on.

Specifically with the Latinx community, I think there's a lot more activism with the different groups of students: the Black Scientists' Guild (BSG) is active again, they took a group of students to the

Black Physicists' Society meeting; I know that the Computer Science [department], a lot of women went to a women in computer science conference. We're actually planning a social info session event where people talk about these conferences because it's important for even first years to know that those are opportunities, and they kind of nucleate community, even when they come back here. BSG got reactivated after one of these conferences; they came back and were just like, "Let's bring that group back."

You immigrated to the US from Ecuador as a child; do you still feel a strong connection to Ecuador? How do you think immigrating and being undocumented has shaped your experience in the US education system and particularly your experience in the sciences?

It's so complicated, and that relationship has changed over time. I'm very proud to be Ecuadorian American. I feel like I'm at a stage in my life both professionally and personally where I'm very comfortable in my skin, and I enjoy going to Ecuador even more now. I think there were periods in my youth where going to Ecuador was very disorienting, because I felt like neither here nor there, in the US I didn't feel American enough, and when I went to Ecuador I didn't feel Ecuadorian enough.

Now, I feel closer than ever to Ecuador; every time I go I

reconnect with people I hadn't talked to in awhile—it's just great to know that I have family there. I think as a child and as an adolescent, I had complicated relationships with my identity and my education because I saw a lot of kids from my ethnicity devalue school; I was made fun of for getting good grades, I wasn't encouraged. So I kind of had this phase of rejecting my identity to the point where in college—I remember now with a lot of shame—someone trying to learn Spanish and asking me to help them and I was like: "No. I don't want to speak Spanish; no." To me it sounds so crazy now, because I love speaking Spanish and with a lot of my best friends, we just talk in Spanish; but I had that phase. And then to flip back, I had moments in high school where there were white people questioning my desire to want to be in science. Number one, my dentist! He was just like, "Oh you're going to go to college? That's interesting..." "Oh, biology? I don't know if you should do biology, it's very difficult." And I was just like, what is wrong with this man? He should be encouraging me and he's trying to talk me out of it!

So there were moments like that, but then for every one of those people, I had people who believed in me. I remember there was this nun, and she was white too, but first of all, in helping my family as undocumented people—she was a saint. With me and my brothers, [she'd say,] "You can do whatever you want," and was just very encouraging that way.

What do you hope to leave here behind at Oberlin?

I'm hoping [partnerships] will be sustained—like the Celebration of Undergraduate Research, a very tight partnership between the Office of Undergraduate Research and CLEAR. A lot of the science and society kind of events that have happened in collaboration with the MRC, or GSFS, or the art museum, I think that that should continue. The grant we got—obviously it was a very collaborative effort, but that is something I'm very proud of, and it's going to be here for the next five years. The idea is that it's going to have an impact on the college beyond the length of the grant, so the goal of it is to create sustainable institutional change and it'll be interesting, as I come back every commencement, to catch up with students. So yeah, I would hope that one day, Oberlin will be known, just as it's known for the Conservatory, just as it's known for environmental sustainability, as a place that students of diverse identities thrive in the sciences and go on to do great things. ●

