

PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE – October 2020

**New Provost's collaborative style key to elevating student success, research, DEI and community engagement**

Dr. Britt Rios-Ellis begins Jan. 4

Dear OU community members,

Please join me in welcoming Britt Rios-Ellis, Ph.D. as Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost to Oakland University. She is currently Dean of the College of Health Science and Human Services at California State University, Monterey Bay.

The selection of Dr. Rios-Ellis comes after the departure in June of former Provost James Lentini, who left Oakland to assume the president's position at Molloy College in New York. Dr. Michelle Piskulich has been serving as Interim Provost since June.

The appointment of Dr. Rios-Ellis is the result of an extensive and rigorous national search supported by the search firm Isaacson Miller that considered 150 prospects from public and private universities. She begins her appointment on January 4.

From her first interaction with the search committee, Dr. Rios-Ellis distinguished herself by her collaborative approach and impressive preparedness for the position. During many hours of interviews with the search committee, faculty, OU leadership, staff and students, she remained remarkably poised, sensitive and strikingly clear about her motivation for seeking the provost position.

Among Dr. Rios-Ellis' impressive qualities are her compelling vision for further elevating the academics of our university, passion for serving underrepresented minority (URM) communities, commitment to research, and determination for OU to significantly enhance the lives of students, faculty, staff and the broader region.

Her initial impression and immediate connection to Oakland revealed what we may expect from Dr. Rios-Ellis. She observed:

“Despite the virtual nature of my interview, I felt a strong sense of connection with the OU community and the mission-driven way in which leadership, faculty and staff seek to transform students' lives through quality education. OU's focus on diversity and inclusive excellence is a great match and well-aligned with my personal philosophy, life's work, and career focus.”

**Special appreciation**

The search for OU's chief academic officer began in December, but had to be modified due to the emergency restrictions imposed by the spread of COVID-19. I am extremely

grateful to the 18-member search committee under the outstanding leadership of Senior Vice President of Student Affairs and Chief Diversity Officer Glenn McIntosh who demonstrated a relentless sense of purpose and commitment to finding the best possible candidates and who served with great distinction.

The entire Oakland University community is deeply appreciative of Interim Provost Michelle Piskulich. She has demonstrated exceptional leadership in guiding Oakland's academic affairs team during the intense transition to online learning, and has played a critical leadership role in implementing the "Grizzlies Protect Grizzlies: Healthy Together" safety plan.

All of us owe Michelle our deepest gratitude for her passion, expertise, professionalism, and determination to make Oakland the best it can be. I have found it personally rewarding to work directly with Michelle and I highly value her candor and collegiality.

#### **More about Britt Rios-Ellis, Ph.D.**

Dr. Rios-Ellis is the founding dean of the College of Health Sciences and Human Services at California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB). From 1994-2014, she served as professor at CSULB, and founding director of the National Council of La Raza (now UnidosUS)/CSULB Center for Latino Community Health, Evaluation and Leadership Training. She earned her doctorate in community health and Master's Degree of Science in health and fitness management from the University of Oregon (UO). She also holds a bachelor's degree in political science and Spanish from UO.

Dr. Rios-Ellis' vision and track record as a builder has been clearly demonstrated by her creation of academic and community programs. At CSULB, where she received the institution's highest award of Outstanding Professor, she built numerous programs that continue to positively impact Latino and underrepresented minority student populations.

As Dean she was co-founder of the first Master of Science Physician Assistant Program in the entire 23-campus CSU system and established two additional academic departments. She built her own funding and established the Diversity Celebration Series, making inclusive excellence a top priority for the College of Health Sciences and Human Services and growing and diversifying both faculty and staff.

Her ability to translate cultural and linguistic student and community assets into university health and education programming is impressive and has resulted in over \$55 million in funding to her respective institutions.

Most recently, Dr. Rios-Ellis has taken on the issue of homelessness and has established Community Health Engagement or (CHE), an integrated wellness center wherein students are trained to support clients receiving health and wellness services, housing navigation, and general support.

Dr. Rios-Ellis has authored a range of peer-reviewed manuscripts, white papers, and reports on Latino and URM-focused education, HIV/AIDS, maternal child health and nutrition and has continued to publish throughout her work as Dean. She has received numerous awards and has been featured in both English and Spanish language radio and television.

**Supporting faculty and students**

Dr. Rios-Ellis' approach to leading academic affairs at Oakland will focus on student success, supporting faculty research, creating a robust curriculum and fostering traits in students for lifelong learning. In her words:

“Student success is the legacy and lifeblood of an academic institution. Through an assets-based lens that values and highlights resilience, cultural and linguistic capital, and the self-efficacy to be gained by overcoming obstacles, universities today have the opportunity to help students transform their life trajectories.

“By supporting faculty and students in early research efforts, creating a robust and multifaceted curriculum, and enhancing a strong understanding of the link between freedom and responsibility, we facilitate the development of highly educated adults who will model professionalism and cultural humility throughout their lives.”

These times of great challenges in higher education demand innovative and bold leadership. In Dr. Rios-Ellis, we have a creative, collaborative and dedicated leader who will play a pivotal role in navigating Oakland; a leader who understands the realities of today's students, and the needs and interests of faculty, whose vital connection with students ultimately determines our success.

On behalf of the Oakland University community, please open your arms and hearts and give Dr. Rios-Ellis a warm Grizzlies welcome.

Sincerely,

Ora