Oral History Interview of Carolina Garcia

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Interview Summary

Carolina Garcia, the director of S.O.U.L.S. (Suffolk Organization for Uplifting Lives Through Service) Center for Community Engagement, discusses her involvement with service, service learning, and the development of her department at Suffolk University. Originally from Venezuela, Garcia talks about her educational background and the beginnings of her interest in community service. She explains the various forms of service that take place on the Suffolk campus including volunteering, service learning and the integration of community service activities into Suffolk University’s undergraduate curriculum. The interview also covers the importance of community partnerships as well as the impact of experiential learning on undergraduate students. Garcia concludes with thoughts on the evolution of her department and her vision for its future.

Subject Headings

Garcia, Carolina
Service learning
Suffolk University
Voluntarism
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Interview Transcript

CLAIRE PRICE: I am Claire Price interviewing Carolina Garcia on February 25, 2009. How are you?

CAROLINA GARCIA: Good, how are you doing?

PRICE: Good. First off, Carolina, where are you from?

GARCIA: I’m from Venezuela. Specifically, Maracaibo. I came to the United States – well you didn’t ask me that but if you want to know. [laughs]

PRICE: [laughs]

GARCIA: My mother came for grad school and I kind of came with her, and then stayed for college; she went back though.

PRICE: How did you end up in Boston?

GARCIA: I had lived in California beforehand with my husband who was going to grad school. And it was time to move, and to decide where we were going to go. He worked in Spain, in Madrid, in an office with his company. And when he finished his MBA it was time to decide where we wanted to go next, if we wanted to go back to Spain, or if we wanted to have a different experience. So we decided to stay in the States. But California was too far away from our families. My family was in Venezuela; his whole family was in Spain. Going anywhere took way too many hours. So we decided Boston would be a good place for both of us to be. I had lived here before so I liked this city and there are so many schools and we were closer to both continents.

PRICE: Where did you get your degrees?
GARCIA: I have an undergrad in communication management from Mississippi State University, the same school my mother came for grad school. It’s kind of a funny story because she is a vet [veterinarian] and there were three programs in the country that had what she wanted to do. Two were in the north. And the only one in the south was Mississippi. We come from one of the cities with really hot weather, in Venezuela. And my mother said, “I cannot handle snow.” So we ended up in Mississippi. So anyway, I went to school there because it would be the only place she would let me stay because she knew friends there and stuff like that. So I went to Mississippi State for my undergrad and did my first Master’s in student affairs. It’s counseling with an emphasis in higher ed[ucation] and student development. After that, I went and got a second Master’s at Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh in public management.

PRICE: How did you end up at Suffolk?

GARCIA: Again, when we decided that Boston was the place we wanted to come, I started looking at jobs in the area and ended up applying to Suffolk and getting the job.

PRICE: What is your position at Suffolk?

GARCIA: Director of Service Learning.

PRICE: How long have you been here?

GARCIA: Almost four years. I started in July of 2005.

PRICE: Could you explain service learning to me?

GARCIA: Yes. Service learning is a pedagogy of teaching. I guess I should say it’s a tool to teach the theory of different learning objectives they [faculty members] have. They use service as a vehicle to fulfill those learning objectives. The way I always explain it is instead of having a book to read to emphasize some of the theories or points they want to get across in the class,
students go out and do service and have that experiential piece that complements their learning. Because the learning really happens in the classroom there are critical elements that need to be present for something to be called service learning. One is community voice; another is reflection, and again being tied to the learning objective of the class. In a nutshell, it is community work, community service work, that’s linked to the academic curriculum.

**PRICE:** How long has service learning been a part of Suffolk?

**GARCIA:** On and off, for probably the last nine years. The way S.O.U.L.S. was created was because a group of faculty, students, and staff that wanted to have this type of civic engagement work at Suffolk. It wasn’t an office, it didn’t have a home. It was just a group of people. They then applied for some grants from different institutions and were given resources and later on applied for my VISTA [position], which is an AmeriCorps position that started S.O.U.L.S. I became sort of a bigger and higher professional person and service learning became some of the things that they wanted to do and reach out to some faculty members. However, it started with few courses and the last few years we’ve seen a big increase in service learning to the point where just last year alone we were serving thirty classes. This year we’re serving about sixty-four classes. So the increase has been incredible because of many reasons. There’s been a curriculum changes in the Business School as well as the College [of Arts and Sciences]. So I think that’s supported and validated some of the service learning work that we were doing and helped increase the service learning work. And I went all over the place to answer your question about how long. [Laughs]

**PRICE:** [laughs] That’s fine. How many organizations does S.O.U.L.S. work with?

**GARCIA:** I will say… it depends.

**PRICE:** Just a rough estimate.

**GARCIA:** I would say between thirty and forty.
PRICE: Thirty and forty? What different kinds of organizations are there?

GARCIA: I think we hit a lot of different groups. We work with environment and doing some creative work in Boston and raising some awareness. We work with children in many ways. But one of the biggest partners we have with that is Jumpstart, which we host here at the center. And they work with literacy, improving children’s literacy. We work with elderly in different community organizations. We’re good partners with ABCD [Action for Boston Community Development], which is a poorly fighting organization here in Boston. We work with high school aged students in a lot of college access type of work that we do. We have a program called Prison Book Project where we work with inmates in prisons all over the country, sending books. These organization works with them and we partner with them in doing that kind of work. Habitat for Humanity, through some of the ASB, Alternative Spring Break programs that we do. We also partner internationally with some organizations in El Salvador and do that type of work. That’s just some general highlights of the type of work that we do.

PRICE: Are there any organizations that you’d want to work with? Anything different other than what we already have?

GARCIA: We’re always open to new partners and always exploring different ways that we can partner with Suffolk. When we look at partnership we look at it as a sort of two-way street. We want to help fulfill a need that’s out there in the community and we want to expose our students to learn something that they otherwise wouldn’t learn just by being at Suffolk. Some of the areas that I think we’d probably want to explore more, and where we have an interest, is the whole criminal justice experience. We have so many students at Suffolk that are criminal justice majors and the need for that type of experience--there’s an interest out there, from both faculty and students. So I think that we want to look more into. We currently work with the department of corrections; however, the amount of training that is needed to do any type of volunteering is so extensive that we don’t do much with them. But definitely that’s an area that I feel like we need to work on a little more.
PRICE: What sparked your interest in service learning?

GARCIA: If I had to link it back to any time in my life, I would say the first time I went on an Alternative Spring Break. It sort of changed my whole perspective of service and taught me that this is what I wanted to do for a living. And specifically around service-learning issues was because it’s a way to get those students that might be reluctant to do service and might think that service is not for them. When you put it in an academic setting, it validates the importance of that type of work. It exposes them to the experience of service that they wouldn’t necessarily be exposed to if they were not almost forced to do so. And force is a strong word but given the opportunity right then, in their hands. Our center is called Community Service and Service Learning and when we talk about community service we talk about the work that students do on their own time. Because they believe in it, because they think it’s great. And we love the students. They are the project leaders and initiators. But we are preaching to the choir if we are only talking to those types of students.

Our overall mission is to create civically engaged individuals to make sure that they know how important it is to give back to their own communities. So, through service learning you have the opportunity to capture all the students that you otherwise might have not captured because they would have never come to the community service center because that’s not for them. But then they go through this class, they go through this experience and they think, “Wow. It is for me.” How incredible and how powerful is this experience that helps them in so many levels. Not only to sort of identify their own desires in terms of the community if they want to give back. Professionally, it is a great way to get experience and explore different fields without being tied to a job. There are so many benefits of students doing service and trying things out. Anyway, service learning captures that.

PRICE: Could you tell me more about your first Alternative Spring Break? When you went on it and where you went?
GARCIA: Yes. My first exposure to service week, I was a sophomore, a sophomore or a junior. I think I was a sophomore.

PRICE: In your undergrad?

GARCIA: In my undergrad, yes. We went to Mexico, Saltillo, Mexico for a week. And it was through a church. It was a part of the Catholic Student Association; and we went there and spent a whole week doing a lot: talking to the families, working with the children. It wasn’t like preaching, it was more like giving them playtime and helping with different community projects that they had and things like that. So that was sort of my first introduction to service for a full week. I think the one that really had an impact on me was later on it was in my senior year. It was environmentally focused. We went to a state park in North Carolina to clean some trails and to work on the whole park for the first part. And for the second part we worked with the Nature Conservancy and did a lot of work around environmental awareness and creating educational pieces for the kids in the community. And that was just very powerful.

Mississippi State didn’t have that program. I went through another university to have it -- it’s called Alternative Spring Break and I couldn’t believe why we didn’t have it at my school. And I stayed for grad school and as part of my grad program I had to do a practicum and I decided I’m going to bring Alternative Spring Break to Mississippi State because they need it. Back then, that’s what I thought. So I did and in sort of initiating the program I worked with an AmeriCorps member that was housed at the school during that first year. And then that’s how we got that started and I got to create the days. And the first one I put together was very similar to my first experience with the environmental piece, which I thought it was great. And then from then on I fell in love with it.

PRICE: What have you accomplished in service learning at Suffolk? What have you personally done?

GARCIA: That’s a big question. [Laughs]
[Laughter]

**GARCIA:** Well let me tell you—maybe this will be a good place to be—it’s sort of a good story to tell. There was a big gap of leadership before I came. There was a director that had to leave for personal health reasons. And there was a year and half of sort of, not a lot of leadership within S.O.U.L.S. There was a grad student that sort of took over but there were a lot of changes and things that happened. And I think through that time service learning really suffered. There wasn’t a lot of involvement, there wasn’t a lot buy in from the faculty and that’s always been a struggle, to get faculty to understand and validate that this is an incredible teaching tool.

Anyway, from the moment I started here one of the things we tried to do was prime ourselves as a resource for faculty; doing a lot of aggressive marketing and advertising. You know, “We’re here. We’re here to support you; this is what we could do for you”. Put different things into place to help us and support that, including our faculty fellowship program which we invited faculty to apply for our fellowship and part of what they had to do was advocate for service learning and talk to their peers about ways in which they could implement this into their classrooms and how powerful this could be.

Because of all those pieces we saw, instead of an increase in service learning. Things that also help us along the way, was that the College of Arts and Sciences went from a three credit curriculum to a four credit structure. A lot of faculty had to look at their classes and include that one extra credit. How were they going to fulfill that; that extra work for students to gain that extra credit? Some people chose to do it through service learning, which was an easy way and they had all the support that our center could give them to do that type of work. The ECR also helped us, which is the Expanded Classroom Requirement for the college students entering since last year they had to fulfill this requirement. They have different options to do that, one of which is service learning. I’m saying this just to put it into….

**PRICE:** Perspective.
GARCIA: Perspective. I guess, just continuing to advocate for our program. When I started we had maybe three or four classes. And starting out this year we have sixty-four classes. So I think, it’s not just what I’ve done. It’s many things that have lined up to support this program and the incredible amount of work we’ve seen is just very encouraging. And just the initiatives that faculty are doing, I wouldn’t take all the credit because that’s just not me. [Laughs]

PRICE: Yeah. Do you think that service learning could change for the better? Are there any ways that you think it could change right now?

GARCIA: Absolutely. When people ask me all the time, “What’s your goal for service learning? What’s your ideal?” My idea is that I want to institutionalize service learning at Suffolk and my vision is that there is no student at this university that will graduate without taking a service learning course and being exposed to doing service in the community where civic engagement that is not just something that some people do, but that’s part of our culture. And there’s so much tied in to our mission at the university that it just makes sense. So how could service learning be better, or how could it improve? I think we could reach out to more departments and more faculty members and make it a university-wide experience. Also, when I look at service learning and how we’re doing things, I look at our community organizations and the type of partnerships that we have to make sure it’s a partnership that makes sense for them and makes sense for us. And that we’re really fulfilling a need in the community. And that we’re committed to their organization beyond just a one-semester thing. That semester after semester, year after year, we’re there. They can count on us as much as we can count on them. Those are sort of two of the things that I would say.

PRICE: Great. Thank you. What are some new ideas that you have? Do you have anything new that you’re working on?

GARCIA: No…. Sorry.

PRICE: It’s okay.
GARCIA: Yes. In terms of service learning, one of the things that we started this year was the service-learning advisory board. Where students – sorry--Where we’ve invited some key faculty members to sit at the board to help us look at what we’re doing with service learning and to help us look at some of the practices that we’re having and to look at how we can improve it. How can our message be more efficient? How do we, together, work towards the goal of institutionalizing service learning? Currently, the board is working on putting a service-learning definition together. That’s something that’s embraced by the entire Suffolk community. What we found from out time here is that faculty are doing a lot of reaching out to the community and a lot of community work but they are not calling this service learning. It doesn’t have to be called service learning. If we impact the community, if there’s a reflection and learning associated with it, it is service learning. But for us to better serve the community both in Suffolk and out of Suffolk we would like to know what that is and we want to give credit to the people that are doing this type of work. So creating a definition that is embraced that can capture the type of work that’s been done throughout the school both in the college and in the business school it’s important in the advancement of this at Suffolk. So we are working on putting together our service-learning definition for Suffolk in unison.

PRICE: How do you think that students -- What could students do to improve service learning at Suffolk?

GARCIA: They could take service learning classes. [Laughs] In many service learning classes, sometime it’s an option. Students could decide to do the service-learning piece of the class or they could do a research paper, a final, whatever. It’s formatted in many different ways. I think students need to be open to the experience. And it’s hard to say specifically what can they do. In many ways… [phone ringing in the background] Sorry about that.

[Pause]

GARCIA: To go back to what the students can do. One of the things that is important, is that if a student takes a service learning class, if they had a good experience, if it’s changed their life
and we all hope it does but there’s every case and not everybody has a positive experience. But they could not only choose another service learning class but advocate for that type of work. They could talk to a faculty member and say, “This class would be great for service learning. This class is perfect for a service learning component. Have you thought of that?” And to give a plug here, I know that this is for an oral history class, this interview that we’re doing. That’s the perfect class in many ways for a service-learning component. We have a lot of community members, especially groups of immigrants that want to tell their story about how they came to this country and the struggles for first generation immigrants. And even tell the stories to people back in their countries. And I’m just using that as an example because we’re working with a lot of the community from El Salvador here and we go to that country every year. But things like that, there’s so much community need in every field out there that we need advocates in not only the faculty but also in the students that could advocate for our service learning classes.

PRICE: Leaning more towards the service learning classes, could you explain how they use service learning and community service as a part of their curriculum? Maybe more of a concrete example rather than one from the history class?

GARCIA: Yes. Because that’s more of a….

PRICE: Not a real one. [Laughs]

GARCIA: [Laughs] Yes. Service learning looks very different depending on the format of the class. So, I will give you two examples of that. There is one class housed in the psychology department, it’s called Community Psychology. This is a class where students have to do sixty hours of community service throughout the semester. This is a lot of hours and sort of daunting in all honesty sometimes for students. But the powerful thing about that class is that because they have to do some many hours, they get the opportunity to really get an in-depth experience of the community that they are working with, some of their needs and some of the impact of their own service. In this particular class, students have to go in the community and work with a community that’s different from who they are or how they grew up. Regardless of where they’re
coming from, they have to identify a different other – that’s how the faculty puts it. They do an assessment of that community, look at what are some of the things that are lacking and they are in need. And they do this in collaboration with the community partners and the people at that non-profit. And they come up with a proposal or something that they think the school or organization needs and they get part of the second half of the semester to implement that.

We had a group of students who went into an alternative high school. This was a high school where students were kicked out of regular high schools because of detention, or because they were failing year after year, they were put into this alternative high school. They went in there to talk to the principal, talked to the teachers and realized that they needed a mentoring program that would include some tutoring but just the mentorship of some college students. These students then came back, advertised, and recruited some volunteers, worked with their faculty member to put together a curriculum as to what they were going to tutor. Along with the teachers at the alternative high school and started a tutoring program that kept on semester after semester.

From the same class we had students start art classes at a home where there were a lot of elderly individuals and individuals with disability. They looked, they talked to the community, they figured that this was an area that’s lacking and they went ahead and created these art classes. They were able to do all of that because they had sixty hours. So that’s a lot of hours to fulfill. So that is a way in which the students did that work and put that together. We have other classes where students only have to do ten hours of community service. We have a sociology class that’s a social problems class. The students will be looking at different problems that society faces throughout the year, throughout the semester. The students were given some options to pick from. [Price coughs]

One was with children; one was working with the elderly, working with an educational system. And they had to pick one of those and they had to do ten hours of volunteering. Ideally spread over five to six weeks. Some did one hour a week, spread out of ten weeks. And how it was linked to the class, it was during the week a topic was taught they become active teachers or almost college instructors in this element because they get to share that experience. So it’s sort of a different tool on how the students were given this.
There’re other classes where it’s an option. The one key thing about service learning is that the service is always related to the topic of the class. Because again, it’s tied in to what the teacher or faculty or professor wants to teach the students. So it always has to be linked. Even when it’s an optional piece, it has to somehow be integrated back into the main area of the class. [The tape is paused for a short while after this question is read, and then resumed immediately after]

**PRICE:** You said earlier that there were sixty-four service learning classes. Do you think that this is enough, or should there be more?

**GARCIA:** There definitely should be more. But the question now comes, how much more can we support with our current level of resources? And I should mention that this past year we have a new staff member, full-time staff member. For the last three years prior to this past year we had an AmeriCorps VISTA that’s helped us push some of this work forward. Finally, the university finally gave us a full-time employee, who is Shirley Consuegra now. So she’s doing a lot of logistical pieces about service learning and it’s really what’s helped us be able to support all these types of classes. It’s a lot of work, and we’re sort of overwhelmed with the amount of classes. But we’re very happy to have all of them but it’s an overwhelming number. Yes, there needs to be more. The question is we need to really look at the way we are supporting faculty through this process and to really look at our capacity. Are we at capacity or not? Do we need more resources to continue to support this type of work at the university? These are all questions that we’re looking at.

**PRICE:** How do you think you convince professors to participate in taking service learning into their classrooms?

**GARCIA:** I think that just talking to them about the value of these experiences. Showing them some of the data and some of the research that’s been done out there and the amount of impact that it has on the students and the level of retention of the information that they’re getting. I think it’s very powerful. Having peers talk to peers, so faculty talking to faculty about their own
experience with service learning. Helping them find some sites that make sense with their classes. Talking to them about how they could be putting into place some of that theory, they could be bringing it to life and fulfilling a community need. That’s so important. Those are some of the tools that we use. It’s definitely a good outlet for publication. There’re a lot of peer reviewed journals that take articles around service learning, both in a specific field, specific to the class, and the project that the faculty worked on, or just a teaching journal that looks at a different way of getting the information across to the students. Those are definitely elements of that act as an incentive. Just their connection with the community and the students.

**PRICE:** I know you already mentioned it before, but could you explain some of your goals, either short-term or long-term?

**GARCIA:** I’ll start with long-term. Again, what we want to do is institutionalize service learning at Suffolk. I want students not to graduate without taking a service-learning course. Service learning to become part of the culture, and civic engagement. And that’s going to look different across the institution. At some level, all the business schools have to take a service learning course before they graduate. So we have that piece somewhat covered. I think we could definitely do more in the business school. Just making it a part of the culture in so many ways and that means not only from the student’s side but also the community partnerships that we have that are sustainable and that the university’s committed to putting in resources to sustain those partnerships with the community. That faculty have been recognized with promotions and tenure and many other avenues because of the type of work that they’ve been doing that we’re looking at when we’re hiring faculty and administrators that we’re looking at the type of service that they’ve done and validate that type of experience at the university. I think when we’re at that place where we do all this stuff and then we truly assess the impact that we’re having on the lives of our students and in the community, and then I think I’ll be happy. [Laughs] It’s definitely a direction that I want to lead us to.

Short-term, I think we need to still get out there and educate people about what service learning means and what it entails. And continue to be advocates for this type of work and I think a lot of it is raising awareness that this is something that could be done in every field and every
department in the institution. And let me tell you a little story about a math class. Many people when they think of service learning, they think of the typical liberal arts: sociology, psychology, government, and those types of classes.

But I have a story about math. We worked with a calculus class this last semester. Where students from the calculus class were invited to become tutors for students that were somewhat in an alternative school where they’ve tried to do the MCAS for so many years but they were not successful. So they were older --but younger adults I should say that were struggling with math. Students were given the opportunity to become tutors, they were optional. About thirteen students opted to do it in lieu of a final project. They tutored about fifteen students on math on the MCAS. At the end of the semester, every single one of those young adults passed the MCAS because of the impact of the students. Math is not a field or department that you would say, “Quick! A service learning class.” But there is.

And the impact that the students can make in the community is so enormous. It’s such a great way to teach the students to retain that material, that math material, because research shows that when students have to teach something they are more likely to retain that information. But it’s also to change the life of this youth that after many, many times tried they got this tutor and this mentorship and passed the MCAS. Stories like that --we want to have more and be at every department and be able to educate people. I think creating a service-learning definition across the university is a short-term goal that we want to push forward and create a path to validate the type of work that we do.

**PRICE:** Great. Do you plan on staying at Suffolk for much longer?

**GARCIA:** Yeah! I don’t perceive me going anywhere anytime soon. But of course, you never know.

**PRICE:** Would you be interested in doing anything else, other than this?

**GARCIA:** No. I love my work.
PRICE: Really?

GARCIA: I love my job. I really do. Now that we’re talking -- it’s funny because I just had a second baby. I have two boys and the question is; should I be working, should I not be working? And there’re days where I wish I didn’t love my job so much. But I’m so passionate about the work that we do that I couldn’t see my life without doing it, in many ways. And so it makes it tough because I want to be with my kids but I also couldn’t be who I am without this type of work. I couldn’t think of a better job. I love it.

PRICE: That’s so nice.

GARCIA: Well…. you know.

PRICE: Thank you so much. Is there anything else that you’d like to add?

GARCIA: No. I just want to say that we do a lot of service-learning work but we also do a lot of community service type of work. We invite students to do community service like ASB. I’m just one person in a group of people that make this happen. Definitely one of the things that we are strong believers in is student leadership. Letting students in on the projects, organizing and take them and call them their own. And we’re just here to support them in many ways. But there’re a lot of people that this type of work couldn’t have been as successful as it is now without everybody’s help; mainly the students.

PRICE: Thank you.

GARCIA: Sure!

END OF TRANSCRIPT