

Alumni Profile

Teomara (Teya) Rutherford – Education PhD Program



Career

Please provide a brief overview of your career path since graduating from UCI.

After graduation I took a position as an Assistant Professor of Educational Psychology at North Carolina State University. I've been there since.

What made you get into the career that you are in?

I've always had questions about how individuals make decisions—especially into schooling and careers. The research I conduct allows me to take steps toward answering some of these questions. I've also been a teacher of some form as long as I can remember, starting by assisting my father with swimming lessons as a child. Being able to teach a new generation of educational researchers is great—it's rewarding to watch students develop, and working as a team strengthens the research we can produce together.

What do you see yourself doing in five or ten years?

More of the same. I just hope to be better at it! My goal is to continue researching and teaching within a university setting, building both an impactful program of research and mentoring increasing numbers of graduate students.

How do you hope to make a difference?

Within my research, I hope to contribute to our understanding of how people learn and what motivates them. This can then be applied to developing increasingly effective learning environments and interventions.

With my mentoring and teaching, I hope to provide students with tools and experiences that will allow them to have fulfilling and meaningful careers, researching and effecting change on topics that go beyond the scope of my individual work.

Your Time at UCI

When did you attend UCI?

2009-2014.

What program were you in?

The Education PhD Program in the School of Education.

Why did you choose to come to UCI?

UCI offered the chance to work with faculty from a variety of disciplines conducting research about pressing problems in education. I was also attracted by the strong methodological training students receive, the excellent funding, and a location that afforded opportunities for my spouse and children.

Reflections

Was there one thing or one person at UCI that really helped or made a difference in your graduate/postdoctoral career? If so, tell us about whomever or what it was?

My original advisor, Michael E. Martinez made an incredible difference in how I approach my work and my mentoring of students. Although Michael passed away during my third year of graduate studies, his impact on me has been long-lasting. Michael had a way of making each individual feel that they were valued and important. In our discussions, he pushed my thinking while nevertheless making me feel confident enough to try out new ideas. This influenced my developing identity as a scholar and the way I interact with my own students.

UCI SOE has continued to honor Michael's legacy with the Michael E. Martinez prize for graduate students. Wonderful faculty at SOE, such as Dr. Farkas, Dr. Eccles, Dr. Duncan, and Dr. Vandell, supported me in continuing the work I had started with Michael, and providing guidance as I completed my studies.

Alumni Life

What are you currently up to?

My current research focuses on understanding the development, evaluation, and affordances of digital tools and environments, specifically focusing on how motivation both influences and is influenced by digital learning. I run a lab with doctoral, masters, and undergraduate students at NC State. Our website is <http://rutherfordlab.wordpress.com/>

We are currently supported by two NSF-funded grants. One grant is based out of UCI (Investigating Virtual Learning Environments) and one out of NC State. In the latter we partner with computer scientists to understand how student and teacher patterns of use within the elementary mathematics software, ST Math, relate to student achievement and motivation. Details on these and other projects are on my lab website.

What advice would you give to a current graduate student as they look towards their future careers?

If you want a tenure-track job after graduation, be realistic about the prospects, but go for it! This means being mindful of your goal from year one (this applies for other future careers as well). Get involved in research right away. Look for opportunities to publish, present, and network. Gather advice from many sources and figure out what is consistent and applies best to you.

Your career doesn't begin when you earn your PhD; it begins when you start your PhD program. Start building your professional presence immediately, both within your program and in your field of study outside of UCI.