
ALUMNI FEATURE, May 8, 2019

Tiana E. Cruz, '10 & '12



Honors College Alumna, Tiana E. Cruz, '10 & '12

Major: Bachelor of Science, Psychology |
Master of Arts, Experimental Psychology

Current Title: Research Analyst, University
of Maryland, College Park

Tiana E. Cruz is not just our next Alumni Feature portrait, but she is also the recipient of this year's Distinguished Honors College Alumna Award. As such, this feature is meant to provide graduating and current Honors College students the opportunity to discover the work of someone completely dedicated to helping others live the best life they were meant to have.

Tiana began her Towson University career in 2006 with a major in business and her career focus undecided. She wasn't sure what she wanted to do, so business seemed like a logical step. Then, in her second semester, something happened: she took a psychology-based Honors College class called Honors Human Development, which was taught by Dr. Jonathan Mattanah and everything changed. For the first time ever, she realized the power of psychology and that ignited her curiosity. She wanted to know more and for a young undergraduate student, the Honors College provided her with that opportunity.

After officially making the academic shift to major in psychology, Tiana set her sights on learning and doing all she could within the preview of academic opportunities and as such, began work as an undergraduate research assistant. After completing her period in this position, she became a principal investigator for a project that dealt with the development and validation of a scale to measure attitudes toward gender nonconformity. This project became her undergraduate thesis and Honors College capstone project. It is also where she would find her interest in research. Having a brother that is part of the LGBTQ community, Tiana shared how important and personal it was for her to begin work in this area. Tiana graduated from Towson in 2010 with her Bachelor of Science's degree in psychology and two minors, one in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Studies, and one in Business Administration.

Tiana returned to Towson that fall to begin courses for her Master of Arts. Majoring in experimental psychology, she jumped at research opportunities. During her two years of completing graduate work, Tiana worked on no less than four major research projects and served as the principal investigator for two. Her research included topics such as indirectly assessing attitudes towards gender nonconformity, positive transgender experience, and gender-inclusive housing preference. To Tiana, this focus of her work was crucially important and applicable to the present day.

After graduating from TU in 2012 with her master's in experimental psychology, Tiana began work as an adjunct faculty member in Towson's Department of Psychology. In this role, Tiana had the opportunity to teach students through two main courses, one dealing with sex differences in psychology and the other related to behavior statistics. During this same period, she also began research work at Johns Hopkins University in the Department of Neurology, where she first worked as a research program coordinator and then as a medical training program administrator.

In 2017, Tiana accepted her current position at the University of Maryland Counseling Center. In this capacity, Tiana serves as a research analyst, working on issues relating to the collegiate life experienced by students. Tiana is currently conducting research on perhaps her most rewarding work to date, a two-year long study related to food insecurity among college students. As she shared, "[this work] is probably what I'm most proud of because I can actually see the positive impact the research is having as we're going [it];" for as her and her team's findings have been made available to university and community-based stakeholders, numerous changes have taken place to combat areas in need of change. To Tiana, food security is a basic need, and because of her and her team's work, that need is being addressed in a very real and profound way.

Tiana has published work in *The Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling, Supporting Transgender and Gender-Nonconforming Youth*, and *Journal of Contemporary Medical Education*. Although her research fields have not been identical in nature, they were a part of a process that led her to where she is today. As she explained, often in life, situations or events do not unfold the way we might expect but rather take unexpected turns or hit unforeseen bumps, which is, as she put it, "okay." That's the journey we call life and one that Tiana encourages all students to embrace with focus and optimism. She is where she is today because she was able to take opportunities, learn from them, and use them to her advantage. In the vein of helping others live their best life, it is her wish that Honors College students that you remember the importance of that message and take it to heart. Don't allow discouragement or unforeseen events knock you off course. Embrace what comes with a willingness to grow and thrive to be the best you can be.

If you have any questions for or are interested in connecting with Tiana, please contact the Honors College office at honors@towson.edu.

By Sheariah Yousefi, Honors College Alumni, '13 - Sheariah is a founding member of the

Honors Alumni Council and creator of the Alumni Feature. She writes the features from her home in South Korea, where she lives with her husband, works as an EFL Instructor with the Special District for International Education through the Ministry of Education of South Korea and volunteers within the community through support and outreach programs. Have an idea for an Alumni Feature? E-mail honors@towson.edu to have your idea passed along to Sheariah.