



Get to know University Councillor Nirosha Balakumar, ArtSci '19



What is your most memorable moment as a student?

For me, it isn't about one memorable moment but it's about the people that I got to make those memories with. The most memorable part of my time at Queen's was finding my home away from home, my 'family' in the African and Caribbean Student Association (ACSA). For four years, that community grounded me and was core to my identity development. From our monthly Soul Food Sundays to our annual Culture Show and Dance Battle to the educational and awareness initiatives, ACSA was

truly a place where I felt accepted and like belonged.

This found family became my lifeline through challenging periods and when I left Queen's I felt like I was leaving a part of my heart and soul behind. But, I have to say the ACSA Legacy Alumni Network has been crucial in helping keep those memories alive and that support continuous beyond the walls of Queen's.

Tell us a little about your current career

I currently work at McMaster University in the Department of Family Medicine as the EDI & Anti-Racism Partner. In this role, I lead the design, delivery and evaluation of programs and other initiatives aligned with the department's commitment to equity, diversity, inclusion (EDI) and anti-racism undertaken in a manner that reflects the diverse experiences and interests of equity-deserving groups and acknowledges and honours Indigenous wisdom, self-determination, and ways of knowing.

Additionally, I continue to maintain strong relationship with the Queen's Human Rights and Equity Office, as an ongoing Content Developer, helping curate educational content for asynchronous learning modules. I also have the pleasure of working with a UK education based company – InvestIN Education, as an International Development Consultant, where I design and teach curriculum for young budding international development leaders.

What is the best career advice you've ever received?

The best career advice I've received is that as a racialized person and especially as a racialized woman, it is so incredibly important to find your mentors and advocates that will stand with you and by you. Recognizing that it can often be challenging to navigate predominantly white spaces, the importance of not feeling like you have to do it alone is to be noted. I was also told that your mentors don't have to be within your organization. Finding folks outside your organization but within your field that are willing to support you can be just as effective.

What is the career highlight you're most proud of?

I think I am most proud of the fact that every day I wake up and choose to do what feels challenging. Not just because EDI and anti-racism work can be a long uphill battle, but also because as someone from an equity-deserving group this work can truly take an emotional, physical and mental toll on you. It is not a typical 9-5. It is not just something I've studied or practiced, but it is something I live and do not get to truly walk away from. When I hear assurances from staff, faculty and learners that the work I am doing has made them feel heard and seen in ways they've never been before in the workplace, it reassures me that this work is worth the challenge.

As the youngest and only racialized person on management, it can be difficult to speak your piece and advocate for what you believe, especially when you might be faced with opposition and resistance. But I've learnt that my voice, even if it is one voice has power and strength and because I have a seat at the table, I have to use it to the best of my ability.

How do you spend your free time?

In my free time I enjoy spending time with my dog Shakti – who is just a bundle of energy and personality. While I was in grad school, I picked up digital illustrating as a hobby which was to help manage the stress that came with writing a thesis. I still like to illustrate as a self-care activity, and I also enjoy writing as I am a spoken word artist.

I will also admit that I am an active TV show binge watcher. Somehow, I can't get myself to watch a 2-hour movie but instead I'll end up watching 2 seasons of a show in a day!

What motivated you to stand for election for University Council?

I was motivated to stand for election for University Council as I started to see more racialized and younger folks represented in the Council. It made me feel like although I might be a recent grad, I still had something valuable to contribute. It also made me feel like we could start to de-stigmatize what we traditionally think a 'Councillor' looks like.

What are your aspirations for being on University Council?

I hope to continue to bring a lens that allows us to broaden our commitment and strategies surrounding EDI & anti-racism. I also wish to help strengthen Queens' international reach through expanding our opportunities for experiential and global learning. I hope to also help encourage other young and racialized alumni to see that they do belong in these spaces and deserve to have a seat at the table.

Anything else you would like to highlight?

One of the best parts of pursuing an academic career at Queens' was the plethora of international opportunities I had. From a study-abroad course at the University of Havana in Cuba, to the International Law and Politics Field School at Bader College in England, to the Matiriki Global Citizenship Conference in New Zealand to a United Nations internship in Kosovo. Queens' truly opened the doors for me to have cross-cultural experiences that have shaped my career today.

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