

Dr. Ally Zhou

November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2023



- Director of The Center for the Study of Race, Gender, Ethnicity and Culture, Office of Faculty Affairs, Diversity Initiatives & Professional Development, Provost & Executive VP for Academic Affairs, Florida Gulf Coast University
- Mandela Fellowship, Fulbright program.

### **General Background**

Ally Zhou, Ph.D., is Professor of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) at Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU), where she has served as Director of the Center for the Study of Race, Gender, Ethnicity, and Culture in the Office of Academic Affairs and Chair of the Department of Teacher Preparation Programs and Chair of the Department of Curriculum,

Instruction, and Culture in the College of Education. Her teaching and research focus on second language reading and writing, pedagogical grammar and grammar for writing, English for Academic Purposes, discourse analysis, vocabulary teaching and learning, and qualitative research methods. She is the Principal Investigator/Project Director of FGCU's Fulbright Teaching Excellence and Achievement Program and has served as the Academic Director of FGCU's Mandela Washington Fellowship Leadership Institute. Both programs are sponsored by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and administered by IREX. "I'm in transition to my next position, but I am Professor, in the College of Business." always passionate about helping international students, professionals and leaders.

**How did your academic background prepare you for a career in international affairs, and can you share details about your previous roles and responsibilities in the field?**

My Ph.D. is in second language education, and I have spent more than 25 years working with people who speak English as a second language. This includes students, scholars, and teachers. My focus has always been on helping them navigate not just the language but also American culture, as well as their specific areas of expertise, particularly in education.

Having a doctoral degree in second language education has shaped my career. I have dedicated my life to working with international students, professionals, scholars, and leaders for over 25 years. The Fulbright Teaching Excellence and Achievement (TEA) program, for instance, aligns perfectly with my expertise. We host teachers who specialize in teaching English or English as a foreign language, and now even STEM teachers. When I applied for the Fulbright grant, it was fueled by my passion and the alignment with my training in second language education.

My academic and professional journey revolves around teaching English as a second language. The courses I have taught in the past have all been centered on this theme. Teaching English as a foreign or second language is not just a job for me; it is my area of expertise, and it resonates with my personal experience of learning English as a second language.

Having learned English as a second language myself and then teaching it, I understand the challenges that international teachers face in the classroom. My academic and professional experiences have prepared me with the knowledge and skills needed as a faculty member and administrator, enabling success in seeking grants and operating programs effectively.

**What advice do you have for individuals looking to pursue a career in international affairs?**

Promoting open-mindedness and fostering humanized experiences, both the Fulbright and Mandela programs play a crucial role in bringing professionals and scholars to the U.S. These initiatives create opportunities for people to connect and engage with international individuals.

Encouraging Americans, particularly students, to maintain an open mind is a key aspect of my mission. It is a drive that compels me to actively promote intercultural understanding. Despite challenges and biases, it is essential for individuals to be open-minded, especially in getting to know people from different cultures, races, and backgrounds.

Personally, I am passionate about creating opportunities for individuals to have humanized experiences in connecting with internationals. Both the Fulbright and Mandela Washington programs have enabled me to bring international professionals and leaders to our region, fostering connections and understanding.

While discussions about culture are important, they do not compare to the in-person experiences of interacting with people. Humanized interactions provide a deeper understanding of others' cultures and perspectives. My passion lies in driving efforts to promote cultural and intercultural communication, emphasizing the importance of in-person interactions in fostering genuine understanding and connection.

**Are there any lessons you have learned that you wish you knew when starting your career?**

I am content with the path I have chosen; I would not change anything about the past 25-30 years I have spent in this field. Pursuing a degree related to my passion was a deliberate choice, and I have been satisfied with the results. Throughout these years, I had the privilege of having mentors and a support system that believed in me and provided assistance whenever needed.

Unlike some individuals who may switch between different areas due to challenges, I have remained steadfast in this field for the past three decades. I have found fulfillment in what I do, and achieving my goals has been satisfying. The presence of mentors and a reliable support network has played a crucial role in my journey, offering guidance and assistance whenever I required it. Looking back, I cannot think of anything I wish I had known; I am genuinely content with where I am.

**How is the Fulbright program involved with Model UN?**

The Fulbright Teaching Excellence and Achievement Program has been a significant initiative at FGCU, and I have served as the principal investigator for the past three years. We were fortunate to secure the grant in 2021 and 2022, with hopes of receiving it again this year from the U.S.

Department of State. Last year marked our inaugural participation in the Mandela Washington Fellowship Leadership Institute.

My connection with Alan van Egmond played a crucial role in bringing the Fulbright Program to FGCU. Alan's passion for the program aligned well with the diverse perspectives our international secondary school teachers could offer to high school students here. Fulbright teachers, representing various countries worldwide, have been a valuable addition to our Model UN program, contributing to the competitive atmosphere and global perspectives.

In the first year of their attendance, I was not familiar with the Model UN program, but after developing a partnership with Alan, we started working together. Last year, we attended the Model UN program and invited 24 great teachers from the Fulbright Program to attend debates on the second day of the program.

Looking ahead to the next year, we plan to enhance the program's impact by integrating Fulbright teachers more directly with high school students in southwest Florida. This involvement will allow for meaningful interactions between teachers and students, contributing to the overall success of the program in our region. While I have been at FGCU for a little over three years, there is a commitment to building on this collaboration, leveraging the Fulbright Program for the benefit of both international teachers and local students.