

Courtyard Conversations S3E1- Dr. Kirk A. Foster Transcript

Jaelon:

Welcome to Courtyard Conversations. I'm your host, Jaelon Jackson. In today's episode, we have Dr. Kirk A. Foster, the Dean and Professor of Social Work at the University of Texas at Arlington. Dr. Foster is a distinguished leader and scholar whose research on poverty, social capital, collective action, and restorative justice has significantly influenced the field, particularly within African American communities. With his work supported by the National Science Foundation and published in top academic journals, Dr. Foster's contributions have been widely recognized, including the Outstanding Book Award from the Society for Social Work and Research. As the new dean of one of the largest social work schools in the country, Dr. Foster brings a bold vision and a wealth of experience, having previously served in leadership roles at East Carolina University and the University of South Carolina. His commitment to excellence in education, research, and community engagement promises to drive transformative change at UTA's School of Social Work.

Jaelon:

How are you today?

Kirk:

Doing fine. How are you?

Jaelon:

I'm doing all right.

I'm here today. So usually whenever we start, we always like to ask, you know, what started you in social work?

Kirk:

Yeah. So for me, that's always an interesting question because we we know that social work is a discovery major. And I did not discover it until after I had already completed one graduate degree. I was a local church pastor in Ferguson, Missouri in the 1990s at a time of significant change and trying to figure out how we could best respond to to the shifting needs of the community around us.

And as I brought folks together to help me think critically about that, I realized that the majority of them were credentialed and licensed social workers. And I got to thinking, these folks have a skill set that I really need to do what I want to do in communities. And so it was within a couple of years that I started exploring social work as a profession because, you know, in my mind, just like in many people's minds, social work was a very narrow profession, primarily around child welfare.

And so, you know, some period of exploration and some conversations and visits with admissions teams at a couple of different programs later, I discovered I discovered in social work a place where I could really bring together prior, prior prior educational opportunities and

prior commitments, my interests in a number of different areas. And so that's how I found myself in social work.

It's it's really it's it's it's not an uncommon story because many folks do find themselves in social work after exploring around a bit.

Jaelon:

I actually love hearing that because everybody is everybody's stories so different, like some are from personal experience, some are from, you know, just seeing what they can do after figuring out that it's just not about child welfare.

What are your thoughts since you've been here? You know, Texas, UTA School of Social Work.

Kirk:

Yeah. So let's start let's start at the macro and micro because we having spent the last almost 13 years in the Carolinas, first in South Carolina, then North Carolina, moving to Texas was was a change to say the least. So it has taken a little bit of time to get used to the volume of people. There are a lot of people, a lot of cars, a lot of space. Every everybody says things are bigger in Texas and I'm not sure that they're necessarily bigger. There's just a lot more of it. But Texas has been good to us so far. Um, you know, we are finding our place, building a network of friends we've enjoyed exploring around.

So that's Texas. So we've, we've been here now just about seven months and have begun to become settled in, in various communities. So that's good and that's important for us as a community practitioner. I'm always looking for ways that I can engage with communities of people, um, communities that feed me and excite me and keep me going, but also communities where I can give back and make a difference.

And so, so that's sort of, that's Texas on that broader big level. It's been good coming down, you know, thinking about thinking about UTA and the university and, and the school of social work. The last university I was at was a regional institution. I have been I've spent my career in public institutions because of my commitment to public education, because of my commitment to ensure high quality, affordable educational access and attainment for the general population.

It is important that we create communities of people who are critical thinkers and that education is accessible. And so as coming from one regional institution coming to another, I also have a deep appreciation and respect for UTA's role as an anchor institution here in Arlington, here in the Metroplex, as as an institution that plays an important role in the in the economy of this region, not only in terms of producing highly skilled, highly educated, competent workforce, but also how our faculty and our scholars are providing innovative ideas, innovative research that shape the way work is done.

And we are able to do that here. And as again, as a regional institution, we're drawing from our region. Our graduates tend to stay in the region and so we are very much responsible for a large part of the economic growth and the educational attainment for the region. So that's exciting to me. And as you mentioned in the intro, U.T. Arlington School Social Work is not only the largest school of social work in the state of Texas, but also one of the largest in the country, which means that we have a responsibility and ongoing responsibility for shaping not only education here, but also social work practice.

How that happens in the state of Texas and how that happens nationally and globally. It's a great opportunity and not many deans have the opportunity to have such a wide impact as I as I do here and as we do collectively as faculty and staff. As I said last week to everyone, all of us, all of us, no matter where you sit within the school, if you are faculty, if you are staff, it doesn't matter where you sit, if you are a leader, if you are a full professor, an assistant professor, if you are a professor of practice, if you are a staff member, all of us collectively have an important role to play in social work, education and in shaping the profession. And because of our size, we have a unique opportunity to do that. And so I've really enjoyed the time to sit with the school and to hear from the students, to sit and talk with staff, to sit and talk with faculty, to better understand hopes and dreams and aspirations and how we can come together not only for the realization of our own, of our own hopes and dreams, but also the larger collective. And I see us doing that work very well here in the School of Social work. And so I'm excited to be part of that. I'm excited to be journeying with everyone to write that next chapter and to envision what that might look like for us.

Jaelon:

Yes, sir. We're glad to have you here at the School of Social Work at UTA and State of Texas right.

You know, hopefully you get to go to the fair.

Kirk:

We have we have talked about that. We did look at some of the fair food, you know, is as I think a lot of people love to go to the fair for like whatever crazy fried fries you can get. We were looking for some unique things that that maybe, you know, typically Texas fair food as opposed to in the Carolinas or as opposed to where I grew up in southern Illinois going to the fair as a kid.

So yeah, I think we're going to try we're going to try and manage that.

Jaelon:

Definitely. It'll be a good experience. It'll definitely be a good experience. So I know your research is on a poverty and justice. How will you, you know, bring your research in here at the School of Social Work?

Kirk:

Yeah, So that's a great question.

And I appreciate I appreciate you inviting me into space to think about that openly. It's as I said a couple of minutes ago about the role of public education. And as I look at our student population, not only here in the school social work, but thinking about the student population at UTA and thinking also about the the draw of a regional institution and the the mission of a regional higher education institution providing that accessible, affordable education.

And so in my work, I have thought about a couple of things poverty and inequality. As one of them, I've thought about the ways in which members and communities go to local

organizations to meet their own social and economic needs. And I carry that with me. And I carry I carry those narratives with me on the stories of people that I've sat and talked with, either when I've been doing research on the American Dream or talking with folks about working, or going to urban congregations and other urban institutions to get food and figure out how to pay their light bill, figure out how to get the physicals for their kids so they can go to school, and how am I going to work both jobs and make sure that my kids have child care? So all of those stories I carry with me as I think about the ways in which we provide, as we provide a service to our students, how do we ensure that our education remains accessible, happy to sort of foreshadow a significant gift that the university or that the School of Social Work has received for scholarships.

And so we'll be making that announcement soon. But working to develop scholarships for our students so that we continue to be affordable so that our students graduate with less and less debt so they can go out and and worry about being good social workers, not worry so much about how do I pay back that student debt, thinking about how we structure our course offerings, how we structure our programs as a university, how are we family friendly? How are we friendly to veterans? How are we friendly to populations who may be working a job or two and caring for kids and trying to fit in school? So I carry, again, those narratives, the data, if you will, from those years of working in various communities across the country and into this role and thinking about not only not only what we do, but how we do it.

Jaelon:

Okay. And I noticed you you mentioned you put an emphasis on community.

Kirk:

Yes. Always.

Jaelon:

Can you, you know, talk a little bit about, you know, what community means, like in in social work and you know what it means to you. I know even, you know, talking to you off camera. Yeah. You know, even when you give speeches, you really emphasize community and and you even started with it today.

Kirk:

I did. You always hear from me. So would you like the definition that I give in my PhD seminar or -

Jaelon:

I was like, I was like, sure.

Kirk:

No, no, no, no. So I have I long taught a doctoral seminar in communication research. And so we have talked a lot about what community means, but community for me is, is a, an assemblage of people with a shared interest, a shared goal or shared narrative.

It is something that binds us together in a way that we are better because of it and better together than we are individually. That's why you hear it so much from me. I do harp on it a lot. I've probably said it, you know, when when we go back and watch this reel, if you will, it's like in a checkmarks how many times did Foster "community" in that conversation, probably a lot because it is important.

We are communal beings. We we exist not in isolation, we exist together and we are better together in all things that we do. We learn collectively in the classroom. We have this amazing thing called Team Science, where our scholars get together with other scholars and work to solve some of society's largest and seemingly intractable problems. We govern together. And the reason I talk about community so much is because I want to remind all of us, including myself, about the work that it takes to be together, about the importance of us being together and the role that that has in ensuring a good quality social work education for our students, but also the role that it has in ensuring and building a great work environment for all of us. And so that's why so that's what it means to me. It means that we are that we are committed to one another and that we recognize that I can only do what I do because you're doing what you do and your successes are my successes and my successes are your successes. And we'll call Douglas out on the other side.

On the other side of the camera, you know his as well. And so so that's the point. It's to remind us all that we are collective and we when we go rogue and when we are too focused on us and and just, you know, about my little bubble, we lose sight of the global importance of what we do and doing it in community with one another.

Jaelon:

Oh, yeah, I love that. I actually love that. It reminds me of It Takes a Village,

Kirk:

Right! It takes a village, it takes a community. A village is a community. And it it really does. And it's not to it's not to harp on that adage and it's not to be cliché either. It's it takes a village phrase has been used a lot.

But it is true. I mean, it is really true. If you think about your own life and where you've gotten it's been a lot of hard work and it's been a lot of individual determination, probably been a lot of quiet nights alone with a computer trying to get a paper done. Um, you know, time in your office hammering out a project.

But it's also been on the shoulders of a lot of people. Mm It's on, it's been on a lot of other people's successes. It has been in conversation with a lot of others. It is through the support of a loving support of family, of colleagues. Um, of friends allows us to, to keep on keeping on.

Jaelon:

All the time.

Um, yeah, that's deep. That is deep. What are your top priorities when it comes to teaching and research here at the School of Social Work?

Kirk:

So on the teaching side, I it's, it should be no surprise to a lot of folks. I do value technology. And for us on the teaching piece, as we think about innovations in social work, education, it is around how we leverage artificial intelligence to use it in productive ways.

We do know that AI can be used in very unproductive ways and damaging ways I've seen it, but how do we how do we leverage AI in productive ways? How can we work with students to see AI as a tool in their social work practice and teach that in the classroom? How rather than running and hiding or saying that, oh, or stigmatizing AI's this bad evil thing, you know, How can we think about that a little differently?

Also, a virtual reality. And, you know, I believe as we think about the next the next era of social work, education and working with client individual clients or family units or organizations or communities, whatever that level of practice might be, there is an important role for virtual reality to play in our ability to place students into low stakes environments where they can practice and build competency and we can evaluate them in real time and provide real time, both formative, you know, real time formative assessment for them as they are as students are practicing skills and not damaging anybody, not setting a community on fire, you know, not, you know, not not engaging in a therapeutic

technique that is that is not you know, that's not beneficial for the client. Again, low stakes environment. So those two things I see are are really the next stage of social work education that I that I would like to and that we've started that I'd like to lean into and that we started talking about here at the School of Social Work.

On the research side, it is simply ensuring that we have a world class faculty who are doing the fantastic scholarship that shapes the lived experience of so many people that we are out there providing, um, new evidence that informs policy and informs practice, and it shapes the ways in which society treats its most vulnerable members. That's that is my vision for our research. And our faculty are doing that and that we continue to do that. And we've become known as a place where, where good scholarship happens, where lives are shaped, where policy is made and influenced.

Jaelon:

Definitely. I can completely understand that, you know, every time I end up, you know, having a conversation with a faculty member about like, their research and stuff like that, I'm like, Wow, yeah, this is, this is really good research.

And before I got here, I never really looked into research. Um, I don't think I could do it myself, but learning about what the faculty is doing here is very interesting.

Kirk:

Yeah. And so I've been working with, um, with various individuals to ensure that our, our research is landing our faculties. Research is landing in places where it can be seen and where it can have impact and hope to get some faculty in front of state legislators.

You know, again, a policy piece, how can we translate what we're doing various places so we can continue to influence the knowledge base, impact what's happening with other scholars, but also impact on the practice side and the policy side. So, you know, it's a both. But yeah, our

faculty are doing some amazing work and in a whole bunch of different areas we just brought on as as you may know or not know, ten new faculty members who are all amazing in their own right, looking forward to the work that they're doing along with our other fifty.

Jaelon:

50?!

Kirk:

Yeah.

Jaelon:

Oh, no, no. I'm not a faculty member. Right. I like the ones that are already here. I was like 50? Where 50 come from?

Kirk:

I know. We're up to, I think. Yeah, right, right at that 60, right at that 60 number.

Jaelon:

Oh, man, I didn't know we had that many. Yeah. Oh, man, we are large.

Kirk:

We are large. Yeah, yeah.

Jaelon:

What are some tips that you can recommend to students, faculty and the general community get involved within their surrounding communities?

Kirk:

It's about finding and again, this is a cliché and we've heard it a lot, but it is finding where your passions and the needs of the worlds intersect. And... being willing to put yourself out there and, and engaging in whatever small or large way to find, to find a way to ensure that your voice is heard.

Simple things like voting, right. You'll hear that a lot from me this fall. Um, not about voting a particular way, but exercising your right and engaging in important community is city level, county level. Um, processes that have a direct impact over your life as you live in a particular municipality. Um, finding civic organizations that share similar values to yours and, and looking for ways to volunteer.

Um, you know, there are lots of, there are lots of organizations who do really good work from, you know, from animal rescues to foster care. Right? You can be a guardian ad litem. I mean, yeah, there's a huge gamut. Um, but finding, finding that space, finding that outlet, understanding that it's it's not, it's not an additional time burden, but it's a gift to give back to the community.

It's a gift back to the people. And it's really a gift to yourself.

Jaelon:

Yes, sir. Um, and I think this may be my last question.

Kirk:

All right.

Jaelon:

Brace yourself. You know, what are your long-term goals for the School of Social work, both in the university and in the field of social work?

Kirk:

Yeah, it's to echo Jaelon, what I said earlier, and that is just for us to continue. Continue doing the good work that we are doing. We we have risen in the rankings, in the national rankings this past year for schools of social worker and on the top 13%. My um, my hope and my vision for us is that we continue to um, to climb and not, not, not, not necessarily. Again of all deans I look at the camera of all these like to be able to brag about that and it's important, but not for climbing sake, but because it signifies that our colleagues out there at the other 200 plus 300, I forget the number schools of social work, social work programs see us as an important value to social work education, and social work research, that we are making a difference, that our faculty are making a difference in what they do in the classroom and what they do in their scholarship that our graduates are out there making a strong difference in the communities that they serve and the places where they operate. And others take notice of that, that they're either in community practice or PhD graduates out teaching at other schools and also doing amazing research that we continue to be seen as a leader within social work education and social work research. That is really ultimately my vision for the UTA School of Social Work.

Jaelon:

And that's, that is deep. I said that was deep earlier, but that is deep. We're really glad to have you here.

Kirk:

Yeah, it's good to be here. It's been an amazing seven months with you.

Kirk:

You know, in one, in one breath it's flown by and another breath I'm like, wow, it has, you know, some days it's felt like seven months, but that's with any job. That's with any job. But I do love being here and I can't say it enough how much I enjoy spending time with the staff and joking around with with you all, you know, hanging out again. It reminds me that all of our work matters, right? Everything. Everything, what all of us do matters. Down to the, down to the very smallest thing.

Jaelon:

Yes, sir.

I think that's all the time that we have.

Kirk:

Great, deep thoughts with Jack Handy. Back to the 1980s or 90s SNL reference.

Jaelon:

I've never heard of that.

Kirk:

Now you have to, now you have to look at it on YouTube.

Jaelon:

If you want to learn more about the School of Social Work and what social workers do, please visit our website, and follow us on our social media pages.

And please be sure to give this video a thumbs up. Subscribe to our channel and turn on post notifications for more content down the road. As always, everyone, please be safe. Stay empowered and stay inspired. Until next time, my name is Jaelon Jackson - Signing off.

Kirk:

Go Mavs!