

INTERVIEW WITH MICHELLE LESLEY ANNETT



Michelle Lesley Annett is a dedicated educator and researcher with roots at St. Francis Xavier University, where she earned her Bachelor of Arts in Honours Sociology in 2017. She went on to complete her Master of Arts in Critical Sociology at Brock University, followed by a PhD in Sociology from Carleton University. Michelle is a contract instructor at StFX, where she teaches various sociology courses. Her research spans a diverse range of topics, including sex work, disability studies, family studies, social reproduction, decriminalization, accessibility, addictions, and much more. Michelle’s work is grounded in a strong commitment to social justice, accessibility, and inclusive education.

Can you share a bit about your journey through the Bachelor of Sociology program at StFX and what inspired you to later go on pursue teaching, particularly in social studies and English?

I first did my undergraduate degree here at StFX, I completed my honours thesis in sociology with a subsidiary in English. Then I attended Brock University for a master’s in critical sociology and finally went on to complete my PhD in sociology at Carleton University. I stuck with sociology all the way through my journey. However, when I first got to StFX, I was enrolled in the Humanities Colloquium program, which is a unique first-year program that lets you dip your toes into different courses without a declared major. In my second year, I took a sociology course with Dr. Norine Verberg, who is still a professor at StFX. The close, reflective conversations in that class sparked my interest in sociology, and from there, I just stuck with the discipline throughout my career.

Did you always see yourself pursuing a career in academia, or did that interest develop over time?

I saw it on the horizon, but sociology wasn’t really at the forefront—I was originally thinking maybe English. I always saw academia as part of my journey, but I never made it my end-all-be-all. The idea of a career has changed significantly over time. I knew it was something I could pursue in different ways, so I’ve worked with the government, in research, and done service work that aligns with my interests. In one way, it was something I always wanted to do, but at the same time, it was a career path that I felt I could adjust if needed.

Was there a particular course, professor, or experience during your time as an undergrad that had a lasting impact on your path?

Dr. Norine Verberg and Dr. Lynda Harling Stalker are the two faculty members I really looked up to. Dr. Verberg was not only empathetic, but her course changed the course of my academic career at StFX; ironically, it was the very first course I ended up teaching, so it came full circle. Dr. Lynda Harling Stalker was my thesis supervisor at StFX and provided exceptional support and advice. She encouraged me to apply to my master’s and hinted at what programs might be best for me. That institutional support and having someone really rooting for you can change the trajectory of your academic career. I constantly mirror my own teaching practices after them—they're amazing women in our department. They also connected me with great people, helping me build the network of support I needed in academia and guiding me to prioritize those values with future supervisors and colleagues.

What has it been like transitioning from being a student at StFX to now teaching here, and has anything surprised you about the experience?

It’s definitely an odd transition, especially since I’m teaching remotely and not in person with students. At the same time, having been a student at StFX just a decade ago, I can relate to many of the challenges students face. I know exactly what supports are available on campus— I used the writing center, I relied on campus’ mental health resources— so I understand how difficult it can be to advocate for yourself when you need accommodations. Because of that, I’m able to guide my students and provide more effective support, as opposed to isolating students who are facing challenging obstacles. StFX is a great community, but many students are far from home and navigating big changes. I think professors from larger schools might not fully understand those unique challenges. My personal experiences here at X as an undergraduate provides me with the foundational knowledge on creating a supportive learning environment, inclusive of all students’ needs.

What advice would you give to students who are considering pursuing sociology studies or a career in academia?

Sociology is a great option for most people because it is so interdisciplinary. For example, business students might find value in taking a family course, as we discuss topics like parental leave and workplace policies that affect families. It's also beneficial for teachers, as they learn about different cultures and social norms. In fact, there isn't a discipline that doesn't intersect with sociology in some way. Whether you're pursuing sociology as a complement to another degree or as a standalone field, it's valuable. Sociology opens up a wide range of opportunities, especially in government and provincial work. Many government jobs and internships prioritize sociology backgrounds, so even if you're studying something else, sociology can broaden your career options. For students considering sociology, I would recommend taking courses that genuinely interest you—even if you're not sure how they will fit into your future career. You never know what might spark a new interest or lead to a path you want to explore. Many students feel pressured to figure everything out by the end of their undergraduate years, but that's unrealistic and limiting. Take classes that engage you; they can make your academic journey more enjoyable and help you discover areas you're passionate about. Additionally, you'll find that some courses stick with you in ways that others don't, especially those that encourage critical thinking or spark your curiosity. These are the ones you'll remember years later.

What advice would you give students pursuing graduate studies or a career in academia?

Imposter syndrome is a big challenge for many students in academia. It's crucial to navigate it and not let it define you. Don't compare yourself to others, especially in grad school, where you'll encounter peers with impressive scholarships, work experience, or publications. It's easy to feel inadequate, but remember, everyone is human, and it's okay to be in a different place in your journey. Be open to opportunities, even if they don't exactly match what you envisioned. You might find a path that resonates with you, and the experience will always offer something valuable. Also, many students struggle with marketing their skills after completing coursework, so it's important to recognize your strengths, such as being a good listener, a reliable colleague, or someone who manages their time well. Lastly, don't be afraid to apply for opportunities, whether it's grad school or a job. Believe in yourself and your abilities, your skills and knowledge are valuable.

How has your experience as an alumni shaped your teaching philosophy or how you interact with students?

My time at StFX was challenging, particularly from a mental health perspective. I understand what resources are available, and I know how hard it can be to ask for accommodations. These experiences have shaped my approach to creating a more inclusive and accessible classroom. For example, I offer extensions to students who need them and make sure to connect students with mental health resources if they reach out. I also try to normalize the process of asking for help, because that's a skill itself, and something most people will have to do throughout their careers. Reflecting on my experiences as a graduate student during the pandemic and navigating online learning has also influenced how I teach. I'm especially mindful of students who missed out on opportunities during COVID, such as engaging in classroom activities. I strive to create a supportive environment by encouraging students to get involved and making sure they feel comfortable seeking help.

What makes StFX unique as a place to study and work, in your opinion?

At StFX, you're not just a number. When I attended, I didn't fully appreciate what that meant until I went to larger schools, where the personal connection was lost. The community feel at StFX makes a big difference. You can build meaningful relationships with faculty and staff, and that can really shape the trajectory of your academic career. The sense of community at StFX extends beyond students, it's about the connections you build with faculty, which is unique. Faculty members genuinely care about students' success and are always willing to help. From a student's perspective, this community feel is invaluable. Alumni are also incredibly supportive and willing to offer guidance. This is especially important when you're exploring career options or looking for help with assignments. As a faculty member, I value the close-knit relationships we have within the sociology department. We host events like talks and social nights to foster this community spirit. I recently participated in an immersive service-learning trip to Ecuador, where I got to see firsthand how students from various disciplines engage with their academic journeys in a community-focused environment. The unique programs at StFX, like the ISL program, offer students valuable opportunities for personal and academic growth. Despite the challenges of balancing coursework, work, and social life, extracurriculars play a big role in shaping students' overall experience. These activities often become some of the most impactful parts of their education.