

Since joining UMass Boston nine months ago, Christian Calienes Deza has already made a significant impact in Institutional Research, Assessment & Planning. As the Director of Assessment & Planning, he collaborates with academic and co-curricular departments to foster reflection on student learning, ensuring continuous improvement across the university. His ultimate mission? To enhance the student experience by identifying areas for growth and implementing best practices.

"My role is about supporting faculty and staff in evaluating student learning, helping them make improvements, and sharing successful strategies," Christian explains. "At its core, it's all about ensuring students get the best possible experience."

Christian describes his daily responsibilities as ever-changing. Some days, he engages in faculty meetings, while others involve data analysis, reporting, or presenting findings. Currently focused on building foundational assessment structures, he looks forward to increasing direct student engagement. "Right now, we're setting up key structures, but as things stabilize, I hope to interact more with students," he says. "Understanding their experiences is what truly drives our work."

Christian's path to assessment and planning was anything but conventional. He earned a bachelor's degree in Sociology and Philosophy from Fairfield University, followed by a master's in Sociology and Demography from Penn State and a doctorate in Geography from CUNY. His academic journey wasn't originally directed toward higher education assessment, but his passion for critical thinking shaped his approach.

His career began at Fairfield University, working on a grant integrating Geographic Information Systems (GIS) into schools. He then spent over a decade at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, immersing himself in institutional research as well as assessment and planning. Later, he brought his expertise to Hobart and William Smith Colleges before joining UMass Boston.

As a first-generation college student and immigrant, Christian sees himself in the students UMass Boston serves. "The students here are who I was," he shares. "I was fortunate, and now I dedicate my career to helping students like me. If they have the will to succeed, we must support them. Even on tough days, walking around campus reminds me why I do this work."

He recalls struggling to navigate college as a first-generation student, including a moment of panic when he and his roommate thought they needed a doctor's note for missing class. Moments like these fuel his commitment to ensuring students have the guidance they need.

## **Advice for Institutional Researchers and Assessment professionals**

For those entering the field, Christian offers key insights:

1. **Look beyond data.** Success comes from understanding the institution holistically.
2. **Engage in dialogue.** Conversations often reveal deeper needs behind assessment results.

3. **See the bigger picture.** Be open to tasks beyond your job description—they're learning opportunities.
4. **Prioritize student perspectives.** Data are valuable, but direct conversations with students provide essential context.