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**The Demographic Dividend**

*Why the success of Latino faculty and students is critical.*

*By Anne-Marie Nuñez and Elizabeth Murakami-Ramalho*

In 2010, Maria Hernandez Ferrier was inaugurated as the first president of the new Texas A&M University campus in San Antonio. To celebrate the inauguration of a Latina college president, one of the few in the nation, a group of Latinas, including many local professors, took part in the formal procession. This group of women received special recognition, both during the ceremony and in the media. The city’s main newspaper, the San Antonio Express News, noted, “About 60 local Latina women who hold doctorates attended the ceremony in full academic regalia to support Ferrier and to show their numbers in the academic community.”

Latina faculty are rarely visible in this way. Only 4 percent of tenured or tenure-track female faculty members in the United States are Latina (78 percent are white, 7 percent are African American, and 7 percent are Asian American), and only 3 percent of female full professors are Latina. The gathering of Latina faculty at Ferrier’s inauguration illustrated the potential for a critical mass of Latinas to come together in one place to support one another in the academy. Dressed in full academic regalia, they represented the possibility of access to privileged positions in the professoriate. Indeed, some wide-eyed passersby who saw them lining up in the procession asked, “So, are you all really professors?” They were proof that Latinas, and Latinos more generally, can and do make it to the academy, despite their generally limited access to higher education opportunities, particularly baccalaureate and postbaccalaureate degrees.

**Demographic Transformation**

Although Latino enrollment in higher education has increased as the US Latino population has grown (Latinos now outnumber African Americans), more often than not Latinos begin their college education in community colleges or less selective four-year institutions—institutional types with lower persistence and completion rates in general. Moreover, the broader political, economic, and social climate in the United States has become increasingly hostile for Latinos as new policies opposed to immigrant rights, affirmative action, and ethnic studies programs have emerged. After the Arizona legislature passed a law (currently being challenged by the federal government) to broaden the capacity of state personnel to detain and request identification from any person perceived to be an illegal immigrant, several more states, including Alabama, launched initiatives to increase surveillance of immigrants and deny them public services, including K–12 and higher education. Affirmative action policies have been banned in some key states where Latinos are concentrated, leading to drops in application and enrollment rates at flagship and selective public universities.
Even when they are accepted to a university, Latinos are often denied opportunities to connect with their cultural backgrounds and to communicate in Spanish. Ethnic studies programs and courses, including Chicano studies, sometimes struggle for support and legitimacy. Arizona’s legislature has gone so far as to ban the teaching of ethnic studies in K–12 schools. This challenge to ethnic studies has been particularly targeted at Chicano studies, despite evidence that Latino students who participate in these programs actually have higher educational achievement than those who do not and high school graduation rates on par with those of their white counterparts.

Although educational research suggests that dual-language K–12 programs are effective in helping English learner (EL) students—defined as students who do not speak English well enough yet to be considered proficient—to learn languages and to improve in broader content areas such as math, these programs have been effectively prohibited in Arizona, California, and Massachusetts. Even when Latino EL students enter college, they often must enroll in remedial courses and struggle to achieve full literacy and academic success.

It is not surprising, then, that according to a recent Pew Hispanic Center survey, two-thirds of Latinos report that discrimination against Latinos in schools is a major social problem. Latinos mention schools more often than workplaces or other public places as sites of discrimination. A Pew Research Center survey suggests that Americans from all racial and ethnic groups currently believe that Latinos are the group that experiences the most social discrimination. Unfortunately, much research has shown that, as it has for African Americans, such discrimination can negatively affect Latinos’ academic achievement, engagement, and sense of belonging in K–12 and higher education.

**Demographic Dividend**

Although the number of Latino students in US higher education has increased in recent decades, and Latinos have now surpassed African Americans as the largest minority group in US higher education (currently constituting 22 percent of total enrollment), Latinos as a group still have the lowest educational attainment of any racial or ethnic group. According to Pew Hispanic Center data, only about 13 percent of Latinos age twenty-five and over hold college degrees (compared with 18 percent of African Americans, 31 percent of whites, and 50 percent of Asian Americans). Latinos consequently tend to work in low-skill occupations. Pew data show that only about half as many Latinos (19 percent) as whites (39 percent) are employed in management, science, engineering, law, education, entertainment, the arts, and health care.

This is sobering news, considering that by 2050, Latinos will represent the main source of population growth and are projected to make up 30 percent of the US population. Moreover, Latinos are overrepresented in the youth population: about 17 percent of Latinos, compared with 10 percent of non-Latino whites, are under the age of eighteen. In California and Texas, Latinos represent half of all public K–12 students.

Sociologist Marta Tienda contends that the increasing Latino youth population could offer this country a “demographic dividend,” contributing to future economic productivity as the overall US population ages. President Obama, sensitive to this issue, highlighted the importance of supporting Latinos when he
authorized funding for the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics in 2010: “This is not just a Latino problem, this is an American problem.”

Education scholars Patricia Gandara and Frances Contreras, in the title of their 2009 book, coined the term “Latino education crisis.” During the past two decades, they and other pioneering higher education researchers—including Estela Bensimon, Sylvia Hurtado, Amaury Nora, Michael Olivas, Laura Rendon, and Daniel Solorzano—have documented the many barriers to postsecondary educational attainment for Latinos: limited academic preparation, difficulty navigating the college environment, financial concerns, exclusionary college climates. Latino college students tend to come from high schools with few resources to prepare students for college. Many are the first in their families to attend college, so they are sometimes unfamiliar with strategies for managing college responsibilities. Latino students also often are reluctant to take on loans, in part because of the financial and familial responsibilities they already have during college. They are more likely than other students to be employed and to work full time to finance their college education, so they may have less time to devote to their studies.

The broader political climate can also make it difficult for Latino students to find a sense of belonging in their college communities. Vulnerability to stereotypes about Latinos, such as those that are increasingly depicted in the media, can have a negative effect on Latino students’ academic achievement in college as well as their college completion rates.

**Improving the Campus Climate**

Although Latinos constitute about one in six Americans and more than one-fifth of the undergraduate students enrolled in US higher education, they make up less than 5 percent of the professoriate. Latino college students tend to complete bachelor’s degrees at lower rates than members of other racial and ethnic groups, leading to lower rates of graduate degree enrollment, doctoral degree completion, and faculty employment. Latino faculty will continue to be largely invisible unless universities make concerted efforts to recruit and retain them. At least two decades of research on diversity in higher education indicate that increasing the presence of Latino faculty in higher education is critical to promoting Latino students’ educational attainment. Latino faculty understand the cultural backgrounds of Latino students and can serve as role models for them.

However, increasing the numbers of Latino faculty and students in the academy (as well as members of other historically underrepresented groups) is not enough to ensure their success or build a community. Intentional efforts must also be made to maximize the benefits of diversity. As Daryl Smith notes in her 2009 book *Diversity’s Promise for Higher Education: Making It Work*, efforts to build a diverse faculty often focus on the recruitment of faculty members from historically underrepresented groups but underemphasize the importance of retaining and promoting them.

**The Dual Challenge for Latinas**

The research of higher education scholar Caroline Turner and others explores the dual challenges of being women and being Latina in the academy. As Joya Misra, Jennifer Hickes Lundquist, Elissa Holmes, and Stephanie Agiomavritis documented in a recent *Academe* article on service work, women often face
institutionalized sexism and are expected to take on additional professional responsibilities, such as uncompensated university service, that impede their ability to advance from the junior to the senior faculty ranks. Because of their dual status as women and as members of an underrepresented group, Latinas are more likely to encounter racism, stereotyping, lack of mentoring, tokenism, uneven promotion, and inequitable salaries when entering the academy. Research has documented the stereotypes that Latina faculty often encounter: some are told by colleagues that they are particularly articulate, or that they speak English well, implying that this is atypical, while others have described instances where students, other faculty members, or staff members have assumed that they are service workers or anything but professors.

These experiences send the message that Latinas do not belong in the academy. Moreover, although crossgender and cross-race mentoring can be extremely beneficial, the dearth of senior Latina faculty means that junior faculty are less likely than others to find role models who can give them guidance about how to navigate these specific challenges.

Our Strategy for Supporting Latinas

When we began our first faculty positions in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Texas at San Antonio, a Hispanic-serving institution whose enrollment is 45 percent Latino, we found that only seven out of fifty-seven, or just 12 percent, of the female professors in our school of education were tenured Latinas. Similarly, while just under one-quarter of undergraduates in Texas’s public institutions are Latino, only 6 percent of tenured faculty members at these same institutions come from Latino backgrounds. Our school’s figures exceed the 2.8 percent national figure for Latina tenured faculty representation among female professors, but it is nonetheless a remarkably low figure, considering the racial and ethnic makeup of our university and our city, the latter of which has a majority (63 percent) Latino population.

Since beginning our faculty positions, we have been part of a group of junior Latina faculty in the school of education called Research for the Education and Advancement of Latinos (REAL). Members of REAL, which was established in 2005, share research interests in broadening opportunities for Latinos at all stages of education. Members come from different disciplines and study topics ranging from early childhood education to higher education. We meet regularly to discuss our experiences and to share strategies for managing our careers and other responsibilities, including how to assemble promotion and tenure files and how to choose service commitments. We also talk about gender roles and balancing familial caretaking responsibilities.

Sometimes we simply meet over lunch to catch up on one another’s personal and professional lives. Other times, we travel to a formal retreat center, a rented house, or a group member’s house to spend a weekend writing and socializing. At a typical retreat, REAL faculty members will scatter around the space, each taking up a room or a corner with her laptop, working on manuscripts until the late afternoon. Retreat evenings are spent socializing.

In addition to this peer mentoring, we have several senior Latina faculty members who are the organization’s madrinas (godmothers). They have helped clarify the requirements and expectations for
promotion and tenure at our institution and have offered advice on how to handle our varied duties as faculty members.

As part of this effort, we now have subgroups that pursue common research agendas. The associated research and writing projects have resulted in the publication of peer-reviewed articles on a wide range of topics. For example, one pair in the group has edited a special issue of a journal that addresses P–20 (prekindergarten through graduate school) partnerships, bridging scholarship of two distinct sectors of education that typically are not coordinated. Another pair has advanced scholarship on how K–12 school leaders can target the needs of EL students through initiatives such as dual-language programs. These experiences have allowed us to work across disciplines and connect diverse bodies of scholarship.

We have also collected and analyzed data about our experiences in the group for journal articles and national conferences. Our articles address Latina faculty members’ experiences of belonging and marginalization in the academy, the development of a Chicana perspective on peer mentoring, pedagogical strategies in Hispanic-serving institutions, and other topics.

Our initiative offers a sense of community for Latina scholars. Moreover, several of us have received tenure while being part of this group; the majority of our group now consists of tenured faculty members who have navigated the tenure process together. All but one of our members have stayed at the institution, and the one who left eventually returned, saying she valued the supportive climate of our university and of REAL.

We have been asked many times about how we have built this supportive academic space. We would offer the following advice to faculty members interested in forming organizations like ours:

- Find a group of like-minded individuals and meet in ways that do not require extensive time commitments (such as brown-bag lunches).
- Identify lead organizers (having two or three individuals in this role may help distribute the efforts involved).
- Determine common research goals.
- Find an institutional home (for REAL, this was the university’s Women’s Studies Institute).
- Investigate the possibility of internal grant funding (we secured a university grant to conduct our first retreat).
- Find other creative ways to share or obtain resources to support the organization’s efforts (for example, we have sometimes shared our own homes as retreat spaces or have been given access to retreat spaces by senior faculty madrinas).
- Get the “buy-in” of senior faculty and administrators.

A Collective Responsibility

In her 2011 keynote speech at the annual meeting of the American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education, Rachel Moran, dean of the School of Law at the University of California, Los Angeles,
described overhearing an elementary school teacher say about her as a young Mexican American child, “Such a bright girl. Too bad there’s no future for her.”

Moran’s success indicates that the future for Latinos in the academy is bright if and when they are afforded the appropriate opportunities. Echoing many other leading scholars and advocates for the educational advancement of Latinos, Moran emphasized the need for political will to advance Latino success in higher education in the face of significant economic, social, and political barriers.

In mobilizing this political will, Latino faculty cannot undertake the tasks of building more inclusive campus climates or promoting Latino postsecondary attainment alone. While we encourage Latino faculty and others from historically underrepresented groups to form support systems such as the one we have described, we recognize that Latinos at most other institutions do not have the significant presence they have at our university.

Efforts at recruiting Latino faculty and students must be coordinated with initiatives to involve college leadership. Because Latino faculty and administrators tend to be underrepresented in leadership roles, high-level administrators from all backgrounds must share the responsibility for creating institutional support systems for Latino faculty and students. As the work of Sylvia Hurtado, Daryl Smith, Caroline Turner, and others demonstrates, maximizing the benefits of a diverse faculty and student body must be a clearly articulated goal aligned with concrete strategies across different units. Institutional leaders can provide a variety of resources to support an active community of scholars of color. Developing and sustaining systems of senior faculty and peer mentoring can help make the promotion and tenure process, as well as the dynamics of institutional culture, more transparent for incoming junior faculty. In addition, as Sylvia Hurtado and Jessica Sharkness noted in their article in the September–October 2008 issue of Academe, implementing a reward system that recognizes faculty members’ service to the broader community can provide affirmation and incentives for this kind of work.

Several Hispanic-serving institutions, including our own, have been successful at graduating large numbers of Latino students, as well as large numbers of Latinos in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Scholars from the University of Southern California’s Center for Urban Education and other institutions currently are conducting research to identify what productive Hispanic-serving institutions are doing to promote Latino education in the sciences. Faculty members and administrators in other institutions can learn from what these institutions are doing to promote degree completion, particularly in the STEM fields.

A senior Latino professor who has been with our institution for more than thirty years recently said to us, “I wish I was going to be around to see what happens as Latinos continue to grow in the population. I won’t be around to see it, but you will. You are lucky that you will be able to.”

While concerns about Latino educational access may not be of interest to everyone in this anti-immigrant climate, the positive economic implications of promoting Latino educational advancement are clear. The Latino educational crisis can be transformed into an opportunity to make an investment in the educational fate of Latinos, which is inextricably tied with the future of this country. The academy can play an important role in this effort.
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