

## ***Laberintos y Testimonios:* Latina Faculty in the Academy**

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*Caminante, no hay puentes, se hace puentes al andar.*  
(Voyager, there are no bridges, one builds them as  
one walks.)

—Gloria E. Anzaldúa

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It is no secret that the exceedingly low number of Latinas in academia at all levels presents a crisis for the United States. Although somewhat improved, graduation rates in undergraduate programs are still considerably low. However, the situation is even more drastic when we focus on the experiences of women who obtain a Ph.D., and who then choose to join the professoriate and go through the tenure-track process. Tenure-track positions are extremely competitive and once a Latina scholar secures one, the road to success is difficult. Faculty members are expected to excel in publishing, teaching, and service to both the profession and the institution. Thus, there are challenges that remain. These demands are expectations for all faculty, but they often are overwhelming tasks for Latina faculty in academia. Many women of color (WOC) who are faculty members

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struggle to achieve a balance but find that they need to reconcile the overlap between their work positions and their personal identities (Berry & Mizelle, 2006). The tenure track process may leave many with an overpowering sense of loss and lack of direction as they enter what many researcher have called the “*laberinto*,” the labyrinth of academic structures, a place that can be dark, lonely, and without much direction. In fact, several research studies have found that an integral part of being a tenure-track faculty member is the relationship between the faculty member and the institution of higher education (Mawdsley, 1999). Accordingly, institutions of higher education should work to understand and promote an increased representation of faculty of color in academia by helping these faculty members build relationships both with and within the institution. The dismal numbers of WOC (and Latinas in particular) who are in faculty positions from assistant professor to full professor tells a story of the challenges and often hostile environments that they have had to face to survive in institutions of higher education.

Research conducted on minority faculty over the last 20 years has focused on the low representation of faculty of color in higher education (Kerby, 2012; Nuñez, McDonough, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2008; Turner, González, & Wong, 2011). According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac* (2007-2008), in 2005 faculty of color made up only 17% of total full-time faculty (7.5% Asian, 5.5% Black, 3.5% Hispanic, and 0.5% American Indian). Additionally, fewer than 12% of full professors in the United States were people of color (6.5% Asian, 3% Black, 2% Hispanic, and 0.3% American Indian) (*The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, 2007-2008). For female faculty of color, the numbers are even more dismal. In 2005, for example, only 1% of full professors were Black, 1% were Asian, 0.6% were Hispanic, and 0.1% were American Indian (Turner, González, & Wood, 2008). Little improvement has been realized since then. In 2010, 78.2% of total female faculty were White, while 7% were African Americans, 6.7% Asian Americans, 4% Latinas, and 0.6% American Indians. Thus, women faculty, particularly WOC, remain drastically underrepresented (*The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, 2010).

Several studies and numerous personal narratives have concluded that underrepresentation of Latinas and WOC in academia has much to do with the stress and expectations placed on them during the tenure process. Astin, Antonio, Cress, & Astin (1997) found that “at least 60% or more of the faculty of color reported ‘somewhat extensive’ to ‘extensive’ stress about the review/promotion process compared to only 44% of White faculty” (p. 81). High expectations and daunting demands often create feelings of isolation and fear in faculty of color who face a seemingly hostile tenure and promotion system on many campuses. As Rhoades-Catanach and Stout (2000) noted, tenure-track decisions have long-term consequences, not only for institutions but also for faculty. It has been well-documented in the research literature that WOC are highly aware that they will face many challenges in academia (Cooper & Stevens, 2002; Mabokela & Green, 2001; Turner, 2002). Of particular interest, a study conducted by Medina and Luna (2000) found that gender, ethnicity, and social status influence feelings of marginality that exist among

Latina faculty in academia. In short, instances of marginalization abound in the literature regarding WOC faculty (Balderrama, Texeira, & Valdez, 2006; Benjamin, 1997; Delgado Bernal, 2006; Delgado Bernal, Elenes, Godinez, & Villenas, 2006; Garcia, 1995; John, 1997; Li & Beckett, 2006).

This special issue of the *Journal of Educational Foundations* explores the struggles faced by Latina faculty. These struggles became evident through an examination of Latina faculty members at a specific Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). The essays in this special issue examine the experiences and trajectory of several Latina faculty members during their time in the academy. A great deal of research has been conducted on the need to support Latina/o faculty during the early years of their career (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Gonzáles, 2013; Murakami-Ramalho, Nuñez, & Cuero, 2010; Nieman, 1999; Turner, González, & Wood, 2008; Turner, González, & Wong, 2011), but few have looked at programs that have been created to specifically mentor Latina faculty. In the quest to illuminate the types of programs that work to support Latina faculty in academia, this special issue examines the role of an organization called the Research for the Educational Advancement of Latinas (REAL). This university-wide collaborative among junior and senior female professors was established to aid in the development and retention of new tenure-track professors in academia. Additionally, this special issue reflects on the impact that collaborating with REAL had not only on its members' academic trajectory, but also on their personal lives as well. This issue chronicles the experiences of Latina professors with the hope that other faculty members of color (who might be engaged in similar struggles) may discover that they are not alone and that they realize that collectives can be created to provide support systems to help navigate their way in the academy. Furthermore, this special issue explores how creating and working with support groups such as REAL can serve as a platform for building community and avoiding the academic, social, and emotional isolation that is often experienced by Latinas in tenure-track positions. Finally, it explores the importance of the experiences and *consejos* (words of wisdom/advice) of Latina and faculty of color who "have been there, and done that" in the development and retention of new Latina faculty in academia.

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### **Research for the Educational Advancement of Latin@s (REAL)**

REAL was started in 2005 in order to create a support network for Latina scholars from different academic fields but who have common research interests and are committed to improving the experience of Latin@s in academia. According to Alanís, Cuero, and Rodríguez (2009):

Research for the Educational Advancement of Latin@s (REAL) [pronounced in Spanish as "reh-ahl"] is an interdisciplinary research... It is primarily comprised of Latina tenure-track faculty and another University who are interested in researching Latina/o issues in education from various perspectives (e.g., educational leadership and policy studies, bicultural/bilingual studies, curriculum and instruction, special

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education, and educational psychology). The purpose of REAL is to represent the voices of a new generation of Latinas in the academy and to document their journey through specific values of support, persistence, and legitimacy. The primary goals of this collaborative are: to engage in active interdisciplinary research with a focus on Latina/o issues, to present collaboratively at national and international conferences, and to provide collegial support through the tenure-track process. (p. 243)

The goal of REAL confirms what other researchers have stated about the necessity to advocate for equity for communities of color when conducting research, publishing, and living as Latin@ academicians (Bettez, López, & Machado-Casas, 2009; Murillo, 2002; Nieto, 1999; Suarez-Orozco & Paez, 2002; Trueba, 2004). In order to survive in academia, REAL's founding members decided to come together as they maneuvered through the tenure and promotion process. As new Latina faculty were hired, REAL acquired new members and grew. First, the group met informally, but as the group got bigger there were more formal monthly meetings and retreats. REAL eventually became a space for academic, emotional, and professional support for a membership of over 20 faculty members. Through REAL, they were able to obtain the necessary knowledge, motivation, and mentorship to navigate the complexities of academia as first-year tenure-track Latina faculty. REAL members provided support by helping members develop ideas for their writing and by reading and reviewing each other's work before it was submitted for publication. Adapting the concept of *madrinas* (godmothers), senior REAL members provided mentorship and guidance to junior Latina faculty who were navigating the tenure track (Nuñez, & Murakami-Ramalho, 2011). Although there are no formal bylaws for the group, different members help to coordinate meetings and activities for REAL. Research activities by group members have resulted in several publications including a special issue of a journal, an article published in *Academe* (February, 2012), and presentations concerning Latina education from prekindergarten through graduate school (Research for the Educational Advancement of Latin@s, 2010). In summary, REAL has provided partnerships, collaboration, socialization, and support to succeed in the laberinto that is academia.

The university where REAL is hosted conforms to what the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) defines as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). HACU states that HSIs can be defined as "colleges, universities, or systems/districts where total Hispanic enrollment constitutes a minimum of 25% of the total enrollment" (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, n.d.). The university that hosts REAL has a student body that is 44% Hispanic, much more than the percentage required to qualify as an HSI. Additionally, it serves a historically under-served population, many of whom are first-generation college students. The university is situated in a rapidly growing region of South Texas that historically has been under-served by universities. Due to rapid growth, a strong research focus and increased visibility, the university has become an aspiring Tier One institution and as a result has created more rigorous criteria for promotion and tenure.

The demographic statistics at the university where REAL is hosted parallel

data found in the literature on WOC in the professoriate. According to Balderrama, Teixeira, and Valdez (2006), in 1997 WOC accounted for only 2.5% of all full professors, while 72.1% were White males. White females accounted for 17.3%, while women of color comprised only 8.1% (Harvey, 2001). According to Mendoza Reis and Lu (2010), “*The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2005) reported that nearly half a century after the civil rights movements of the 1960s, 35% of tenure-track faculty (assistant, associate and full professors) in all academic fields were female. Of these, only 5% were females of color” (p. 2). *The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac* (2007-2008) reported similarly dismal numbers for 2005 regarding white women and WOC, especially in the United States. The total number of full-time tenured or tenure-track women in the United States was 467,325. Of that number 2.33% (10,879) were Black, 2.34% (10,944) were Asian, 1.20% (5,606) were Latina, and 28.9% (135,158) were White. It has been well documented that even today, WOC struggle to have their voices acknowledged within the ivory tower (Medina & Luna, 2000; Murakami-Ramalho, Nuñez, & Cuero, 2010; Watford, Rivas, Burciaga & Solorzano, 2006).

Currently, in Texas, just 6.6% of all higher education faculty are Latina/o (Apocada, 2010). At the university that sponsors REAL, there are 1,319 total faculty, 559 (42.2%) of whom are females; of the total faculty, 849 (64.0%) are Whites, and 242 (18.3%) are Hispanics. Additionally, 219 (16.6 %) are at the rank of full professor, 213 (16.1%) are associate professors, and 189 (14.3%) are assistant professors; however, there are few available statistics on gender, ethnicity and rank, making it difficult to gauge the number of Latinas who have been promoted to tenure status (Faculty and Student Diversity and Recruitment University Office, 2010). In addition, the university wants to hire more minority and female faculty members in order to achieve its goal of becoming the first HSI in Texas to attain Tier One status.

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### **Enredadas entre Testimonios y Laberintos (Tangled between Testimonies and Labyrinths): Latina Faculty in Academia**

The frameworks we utilized for this special issue of the *Journal of Educational Foundations* are *testimonio*, and narrative analysis. The Latina Feminist Research Group (2001) referred to life narratives as *testimonios* in their book *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*. The authors collaboratively wrote sections of the book and offered each other feedback and support while working on their individual stories. This process, which is described in the introduction, speaks to the difficulties and challenges of crossing boundaries, even those that exist between latinidades (p. 9). In the process of *testimoniando*, the group arrived at a method; the very act of *testimoniando* became a way of theorizing and of “generating knowledge” (p. 12). As Moraga (1981) wrote in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, sometimes it is easier to come together between the

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covers of a book than through coalition. Yet, we found that the members of REAL worked collaboratively and supported each other in feminist *testimonio* practice. In contemporary Chicana research, the use of *testimonios* connects the personal and the lived in contested spaces such as the classroom (Delgado Bernal, 2006) or academia (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001) and allows for them to become oral and written truths about our lives as Chicana/Latinas in the United States.

Because most of the authors of the essays in this special issue are bilingual Latinas, their *testimonio* practice is also bilingual. Therefore, within and throughout the narratives, Spanish will be interspersed in the authors' *testimonios*. The use of Spanish is important because it is the first language of most of the authors; doing this maintains authenticity and assigns value to our identity and culture (Hernández-Avila, 1992). As Levins Morales (2001) states, the use of one's tongue is also an act of resistance, a political move of solidarity with other marginalized Chicanas and Latinas. In *Translated Women*, Behar (1993) explained that using a native language is an act of resistance against relinquishing the power of interpretation of experience. The use of Spanish also provides a unique perspective from which women can write about culture and history (Behar & Gordon, 1995).

The second framework utilized is narrative research (Creswell, 2003). Narrative research is a process of negotiating memories and experiences, and healing from stress, racism and discrimination in our personal lives and in academia (Hernández-Avila, 1992; Méndez-Negrete, 2000, 2010). Narrative provides a sensitizing tool to explore and to deconstruct the experiences or spaces of resistance with a clear sequential order that offers insights to connect events in a meaningful way. Elliot (2005) outlines three ways in which using narratives provide a unique perspective from other discourses. First, they are *temporal* and sequential containing a beginning, middle and an end. Second, they are *meaningful* and order events into a temporal sequence that contain a resolution or conclusion. This is why narratives can be said to have a causal dimension. Thirdly, they are inherently *social* and produced for specific audiences. Therefore they are particularly meaningful for those who share similar experiences to those in the narratives. Thus, using these lenses, the authors provide stories about their experiences as faculty members in the academy. These narratives explore the concept of mentoring, the role of REAL and the complexities experienced by Latinas/Chicanas as they enter the world of academia and become what Cantú (2007) called *fronterizas* and live in a constant state of "in between" or in the margins of several borders (i.e., language, culture, home, family, work, etc.) often having to choose one—always negotiating self, identity, and representation. Situating the research within *testimonios* and narrative analysis allows the authors to reflect on their personal narratives and arrive at certain conclusions, but it also strengthens and validates their experiences as Chicana/Latina scholars, authors, and activists in academia as they both provide a repertoire of meaning, context, *voz auténtica* (authentic voice), personal experience, negation, and most importantly, validation within and about spaces of contestation, resistance, and marginality.

Therefore, this special issue is a gathering of *testimonios* that explores the



experiences of Latinas in academia. In the first article, entitled “Before the Tenure Track: Grad School *Testimonios* and Their Importance in Our Profesora-ship Today,” Patricia Sánchez and Lucila Ek provide a very powerful example of the counter-hegemonic practices that Latinas go through when they enter academia, initially as students and subsequently as faculty on their way to future career paths. As tenured faculty they also provide meaningful examples of how faculty from across disciplines can support each other while combating the ways Latina academics experience the hostilities of the Academy. According to the two authors, they emerged from a “prison” that represents the structure of white-male-dominant social-cultural reproduction processes. Utilizing what they called “maps” they have been able to navigate such places like graduate school and the tenure-track system to become part of a minority of Latina faculty that have “made it” and resisted the repertoire of resistive arts. Nonetheless, they argue that resistance remains to a large extent a conscious effort, though it may take shape as an unconscious act, and that oppositional behavior or agency serves as a potential foundation for future maps of resistance.

The second article by Lilliana Patricia Saldaña, Felicia Castro-Villarreal, and Erica Sosa titled “*Testimonios* of Latina Junior Faculty: Bridging Academia, Family, and Community Lives in the Academy” discusses barriers faced by the authors as they struggle to succeed in the academy; they tell of ways of negotiating who they are as females, women of color and academics. The authors call the pull between the “family, marriage, and work...” as the “intrapersonal tug of war” of the academy that describes internalized oppressive narratives as “shadow beasts” (Anzaldúa, 2010) that people of color, women, and those who are the most marginalized in society carry about in their everyday lives.

Next, in “An Academic Community of *Hermanidad*: Research for the Educational Advancement of Latin@as (REAL), a Motivating Factor for First-Year Tenure-Track Latina Faculty,” Elsa Cantú Ruiz and Margarita Machado-Casas explore their experiences as first-year faculty and the struggles they encountered in the process adjusting to the demands of academia, especially those facing Latinas entering the professoriate. They share the role REAL played in their sense of “*Hermanidad*” (Sisterhood) with other scholars who “had been there before” and how the mentorship component affected their lives as they navigated the academic labyrinth.

In “Latina Faculty in the Labyrinth: Constructing and Contesting Legitimacy in Hispanic Serving Institutions,” Leslie D. González, Elizabeth Murakami, and Anne-Marie Núñez employ critical neo-institutional (CNI) and intersectionality lenses to situate Latina faculty members, as well as HSIs, in the broader field of higher education. Additionally, they provide a critical review of the literature and a fresh analysis of work that addresses the experiences of Latina faculty members, particularly those who serve in Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs).

The article “At Home in the Academy: Latina Faculty Counterstories and Resistances” by Maricela Oliva, Mariela A. Rodríguez, Iliana Alanís, and Patricia D. Quijada Cerecer draws from multiculturalism, borderlands studies, LGBTIQ

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studies to frame the ways Latina tenure-track faculty members articulate their struggles and actions directed at opening a culturally appropriate space in a faculty world that identifies them as ‘other’ and seeks to assimilate them. The *testimonios* of Latina tenure-track scholars in this article come from a range of disciplines such as teacher preparation, school leadership, and higher education administration, to describe and theorize the process of becoming faculty in what some have called the “figured world” of academe.

Finally, in the concluding article, “*Lo Último: Consejos—Un Diálogo Respetoso Entre Colegas*,” Olga A. Vásquez, Belinda Bustos Flores, and Ellen Riojas Clark share their *Consejos* (words of wisdom) in a *diálogo de saberes* (dialogue of knowledge) as these three senior Latina faculty share their mutual *compromiso a la comunidad* (commitment to the community) which has brought them together in solidarity to envision and work for *un futuro mejor*. Collectively, these Latina scholars share many years in academia and have mentored many Latinas in higher education. In this article, they share the ways in which they have negotiated their own work, and collaborated with other Latinas to build *confianza* (trust) and *respeto* (respect) while they negotiate academia and the collective arms of their community culture and the familism lived in their traditional Latino homes. Their work is a touching and real call to action, of identity representation and of creating new paths for other Latina scholars. They call for unity, collaboration, and change as they reflect on how each one of us can play a critical role in creating a brighter and stronger tomorrow for Latina scholars.

This issue of the *Journal Educational Foundations* is more than a reaffirmation of the struggles that Latina faculty encounter when entering academia; it is a call for action, a “*si se puede*” to transform our dialogue and our practices focusing on transformation and change. With this special issue we aim to honor the struggles encountered in the process of redefining academia itself—a way of documenting our roles as creators of new paths. It is exploring the voices of retired *sabias* (wise ones) giving us *consejos* (words of wisdom/advice) on how to break new paths without giving up who we are. To go beyond the points last reached in order to reach full potential—to transcend, to extend, to reach—to redefine academia. With the presentation of these *testimonios*, we call for the opening of the eyes and the unveiling of the soul in our collective Latina academic realities in today’s society. We put out a call to move beyond the margins of the labyrinth of our collective realities of our *Latinidad* within academia and the community that binds us together, a call to position ourselves and to create spaces of legitimacy and solidarity within academia for us and for all Latinas who come after us. Our aim in assembling this special issue is to document the ways Latina scholars have navigated the sometimes turbulent waters of academia. The authors are at various levels in their professional lives and candidly offer *testimonios* where they explore their position and the struggles inherent in their academic lives. The essays collected in this special issue trace the paths followed by Latinas at an HSI, some more successfully than others, and lays a foundation for future work and for other Latina scholars who will



face similar circumstances in their careers. Thus, we will have set a path for future issues of the *Journal of Educational Foundations* as it continues to present cutting edge work that provokes a range of ideas and moves our scholarship forward.

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