

Latino College Presidents: In Their Own Words (2013)
by David J. León and Rubén O. Martínez (Editors)
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Abstract

This book review examines *Latino College Presidents: In Their Own Words (2013)*, a recent volume edited by David J. León and Rubén O. Martínez and part of the “Diversity in Higher Education” series. The volume features 11 bio-professional essays written by current and/or former college and university Latino/a presidents. This collection of stories is particularly relevant to Latino/a graduate students and junior faculty and staff who are seeking insight into the realities of pursuing executive leadership positions in higher education.

To fully understand what an individual has accomplished one must hear their story, and *Latino College Presidents: In Their Own Words* does just this by providing Latinos/as in executive leadership positions a space to share their varied pathways to the college presidency with a new generation of aspiring Latino/a leaders, including their successes, challenges, and advice. Part of the “Diversity in Higher Education” series, this pioneering work is a thoughtful collection of bio-professional, and often very personal, essays written by 11 current and/or former Latino/a college presidents with additional contextualization by the volume’s editors, David J. León and Rubén O. Martínez. The volume is particularly relevant as recent studies suggest that the percentage of Latinos/as in postsecondary faculty and leadership positions has declined despite increasing Latino/a undergraduate and graduate student enrollment (Cook & Kim, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). It is the hope of these authors that this collection of stories will encourage and inspire the next generation of Latino/a college leaders—and, as argued by the editors, that these future provosts, presidents, and chancellors will work against the pervasive neoliberal¹⁰ ideology that currently dominates the American higher education system.

Alfredo de los Santos, Jr.’s forward to the volume draws on his rich experiences as El Paso Community College’s founding president, his position as former Vice Chancellor of the Maricopa County Community College System, and his connections to the authors of this volume—illustrating how small the world of higher education Latino/a leaders is. In the first two chapters, León and Martínez discuss the volume’s genesis, which began with their earlier survey of Latino/a college presidents, followed by a brief review of the (limited) literature on Latino/a executive leaders and a preview of the themes apparent across the essays. Contributing authors were asked to explore their upbringing and family life, educational experiences, how they negotiated the administrative ladder and discrimination, examples of successful and less successful programs they helped to create, and advice to Latinos/as aspiring to executive leadership positions in higher education.

The editors made an intentional decision to organize the remaining chapters by institutional type, moving from less selective community colleges to more selective universities “because that is both how Latino students and presidents are distributed” (Martínez & León, 2013a, p. 10). Part I contains essays by four community colleges presidents, Part II includes essays by six presidents at different types of public and private four-year institutions, and Part III includes an essay by the Chancellor of The University of Texas System. While many of the presidents featured in this volume have worked at multiple and varied colleges and universities, as the editors point out there are still no Latinos/as in executive leadership positions at any of the nation’s Ivy League institutions.

¹⁰ Neoliberalism is the set of economic, political, and social practices that enable individuals to be economic actors. Privatization, deregulation, and the valuing of individual agency over public welfare are some examples of neoliberal practices. In higher education, these market-based practices also include viewing students as “consumers” and education as a private good, reductions in federal and state tax support, and the emphasis on “innovation”—such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)—to increase institutional efficiency.

Although these authors come from different parts of the country, including Puerto Rico, have diverse family backgrounds, and have followed both traditional and non-traditional pathways to the college presidency, León and Martínez identify four themes that are consistent across their stories: 1) family support for education and character development; 2) perseverance when faced with discrimination and discouragement; 3) the importance of mentors; and, 4) a deep commitment to public service. While many of the contributing authors were the first in their family to graduate from high school and pursue a college education, all of these current and former presidents came from families that valued education and hard work. For President Rodolfo Arévalo, his family's commitment to education was reflected in his father's decision to stop migrating out of Texas for seasonal farm work for the sake of his children: "Education was important to both my parents, as they understood the lack of it" (2013, p. 119). Likewise, "college became a given not an option..." for President Erlinda J. Martínez and her siblings, "...they wanted us to succeed and believed in us" (Martínez, 2013, p. 52).

Similarly, almost all of the authors cite encouragement from a critical friend—a professor, colleague, or supervisor who encouraged them to go to graduate school, apply for fellowships, and urged them to pursue "unobtainable" positions, as well as painful instances of discrimination and prejudice. President Leslie Ann Navarro, who holds the distinction of being the youngest college president appointed to date, shares her stories of having her car vandalized and being sexually assaulted by a community member during a party held by the board in celebration of her second year as president. Other presidents, such as President Mildred García and President Arévalo, encountered high school counselors who discouraged them from applying to college or faced biased hiring practices: "...I [President Arévalo] was informed that even though [the dean] thought I was the best suited for the position, he could not support my application because the university was not ready to appoint a Hispanic (Mexican) as a full dean" (Arévalo, 2013, p. 124). The authors persisted despite these barriers, often driven by their commitment to public service and a deep-held belief that these positions would allow them to positively affect the lives of a greater number of students.

It should be noted that many of the authors in this volume attended college during a time when higher education was commonly viewed as a public good and received national support through a variety of social and financial programs that made attendance more affordable (e.g., the G. I. Bill, the *Civil Rights Act of 1964*, the *Higher Education Act of 1965*). In addition, the massification of the American higher education system in the years following World War II—in both number of institutions and enrollment growth—allowed for more faculty and administrative opportunities across all institutional levels (Gumport, Iannozzi, Shaman, & Zemsky, 1997). Today, however, future college and university leaders face declining state and local appropriations for public higher education institutions, the pressure to increase access and efficiency, the pervasive focus on student and institutional accountability, and in general a more competitive academic and employment market (Thelin, 2011). These new realities, which the authors attribute to the adoption of neoliberal policies and practices across higher education, make pursuing and obtaining an executive leadership position more challenging, and perhaps less appealing, for Latinos/Latinas as education has come to be seen more as a private good.

Martínez and León's concluding chapter revisits the essays' major themes and includes suggestions for Latinos/as interested in pursuing senior administration positions. Many of the presidents cautioned aspiring leaders that the pathway up the administrative ladder is fraught with setbacks. President William V. Flores advises that Latinos/as should "not expect it to be easy to advance up the ranks...work twice as hard and achieve results that no one can question. Think big and achieve big" (2013, p. 171). The editors also provide an overview and critique of professional development programs for aspiring higher education leaders, which in their view have "had a limited positive impact in positioning Latinos to assume leadership roles" (Martínez & León, 2013b, p. 271) given the decline in Latino/as pursuing these types of positions. León raises concerns about how these programs treat the topic of diversity: programs that primarily serve White administrators and include diversity as only a small part of a larger leadership curricula or programs that target diversity but primarily serve a non-White population.

While all of the stories shared in this volume are engaging and insightful, what distinguishes the collection from similar literature are the stories from the Latina college presidents and how they have successfully negotiated the cultural and social tensions associated with tradition and educational and professional aspiration.

President Martinez shares the challenges she faced in pursuing her graduate degrees and career goals while balancing her responsibilities as a young wife and mother, and the anger she incurred when she moved her family away from Southern California to accept a position as Administrative Dean for Student and Community Affairs: “My father did not speak, write or call me for months. I knew that I had angered him. I was no longer the dutiful daughter doing what was encouraged and expected...I doubt if he truly came to understand my desire to use my education” (Martinez, 2013, p. 54). For President Herlinda Martinez Glasscock, being the only female and only Latina in a leadership position was a source of both isolation and opportunity—“As one of the few Latinas in college administration from the Panhandle of Texas, I was called upon to serve on many state-wide committees...This level of work gave me a broader perspective of higher education in Texas and exposure to committee members who became colleagues, role models, and friends” (pp. 66-67), and when asked to serve as Interim President: “I was treated with courtesy, but at an arm’s length. It was evident that I was not an insider, not only because I was different, but also because of the campus I represented” (p. 67). For these Latina presidents, professional success required them to work harder and be better than their male counterparts while also renegotiating cultural norms that preferred women to stay close to home and out of the workforce.

In perhaps an equally interesting contribution to the literature, the final chapter of the volume also includes the editors’ elaboration on the impact of neoliberalism on Latinos/as in higher education. León and Martinez challenge the research community to consider why Latinos/as are being left behind and/or choosing not to pursue leadership positions within higher education, as well as the extent to which neoliberalism is at fault (for the reasons mentioned above). However, their suggestion that we look outside academe for accomplished Latinos/as to fill executive leadership positions would seem to undermine their initial critique of neoliberalism. By looking to the market for future administrators, are we not then eating our cake and having it too? While the editors argue that “outsiders who promote the Public Good would be much more acceptable to the internal constituents of higher education” (Martinez & León, 2013b, p. 275) than perhaps others who come from industries and occupations outside the university, it may be challenging to find candidates who view education as a public good if they have been successful in private industries where neoliberalism is most pervasive. It would seem that investment in national and institutionally based professional development programs that develop and enhance the leadership capabilities of Latino/a graduate students and junior faculty and staff would be a more promising in the long run, even if their impact is currently limited.

Latino College Presidents: In Their Own Words is a necessary read for undergraduates, graduate students, junior faculty and staff, and all those who are considering senior administrative and leadership positions in higher education, particularly Latinas who often face additional cultural and institutional barriers to advancement. This collection of stories is a reminder that assuming the presidency is a process built on hard work, developing and sustaining professional relationships and networks, perseverance, and a deep commitment to public education and service. This volume is hopefully the first of many collections focusing on the leadership stories and pathways to the college and university presidency.

References

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