
REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Values, Migrant Parents, Leadership, and the Public Good

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Introduction

The fields were not ours, but we as a migrant family worked them because that was our task as we searched for a better tomorrow. Families like ours were characterized by an inter-generational sense of kinship, one that regards the collective work of family as both a product of and a contribution to our community. As migrants, we were seekers, searching and learning about ourselves as we migrated from state to state. Along these roads, we learned we needed to continue to seek opportunities to improve our condition and the well-being of our family.

In the following narrative, I intend to recount my leadership development by reflecting on some of my experiences growing up in a migrant family, participating in the United States education system in predominately Hispanic neighborhoods, and working as an educator and administrator in institutions of higher education. I do so in order to propose ways to open new spaces for the Mexican American community. I will share the ways that values and principles common to our culture, including unity and social consciousness; resourcefulness and responsibility; physical, mental, and spiritual health, and a commitment to education, have informed my personal

ABSTRACT

This reflective essay posits an examination on how migrant experiences and educational development shape identity and inform their core values. Understanding the formal academic socialization experiences of migrants can serve to inform a commitment to the public good through exposure to academic readings, research and service that shape knowledge, values and perspective. This socialization trajectory grounded in knowledge and experience has enlightened the author's perspective to improve access, guidance, opportunity, mentoring and engagement to migrant students. The leadership challenge is to master the art of "barn raising" as we share finite institutional resources.

leadership development. I will then suggest ways these shared values can help our community access new resources and opportunities. We have learned that without structural opportunities, moments of validation for our stories are stripped of their transformative power and left to the realm of memory. Thus, I will share lessons learned so future generations understand our past as we continue to access new resources and opportunities to build our future leaders.

Parents

My father was born in 1929 in Sabinas, Coahuila, "*La Región Carbonífera (a coal region)*," sixty-five miles from the U.S./ Mexico border, and my mother was born in 1934 in Jiménez, Coahuila, approximately twenty miles from the same border. Like many others, they traveled north as migrants. As historian Zaragoza Vargas thoroughly documents in *Proletarians of the North* (1999), a great number of these migrants chose to make their homes in the greater Midwest. Not us — we traveled

to the Northwest. My family would depart in April and come back in October as we followed the crops to Caldwell, Idaho, experiencing the *Cinturón del Diablo* (which meant standing up and moving with a belt with two fifty-pound sacks of potatoes); Milton Freewater, Oregon (sugar beets); Walla Walla, Sunnyside, and Toppenish, Washington (asparagus, mint, and hops); and Sidney and Savage, Montana, where we worked with sugar beets. We moved around like this for twelve years, experiencing life and all its challenges as a family, living in labor camps and in a *vagón* (railroad car) in Othello, Washington, always at the margins of the economic strata.

On Values

In the midst of our familial struggles, we learned about our obligations and lived for each other to ensure our own survival. Our parents demonstrated their love and care by providing us with food, shelter, and protection from the elements. This type of nurturing generated a lifelong mutual commitment to each other. We learned about being humble, listening, giving maximum effort, and staying true to our word. We learned the distinction between having gone to school and being educated. *Ser (siendo) educado* is much different than *tener (teniendo) educación*, or having a formal education. *Ser educado*, to be educated, according to my parents, has nothing to do with status or wealth or position; it involves all the learning that occurs in the context of family and community. It means being a person of value, of honesty, integrity, and a strong work ethic. Their approach to any work was to do it well *y con ganas*. From 4:00 a.m. to dusk, we always arrived at the fields on time and stayed until the task was completed. *Ser educado*, to be educated, for example, meant sharing space and resources with the less fortunate when bouts of bad weather arrived. Nature was in fact among our biggest challenges; we could not control it and we were cognizant that it impacted our economic well-being. We survived economically by saving and operating with finite resources to ensure we were prepared to deal with unexpected circumstances.

Even though my mom and dad only attended elementary and high school, respectively, they valued education very highly. My parents always saw power as something internal: a choice of thought and an act of will. In essence, we were the architects of our own destiny. Power and resilience came from within, and when our parents or their friends were confronted with a dilemma, they would ask, "*Qué podemos hacer?*" — What can we do? What I learned was

that my parents were creative and resilient leaders. They had vision and imagination and believed we were capable of fulfilling any dream we envisioned. They taught us that we had the power to control our circumstances, but that it was up to us to take such action. After all of our scholarly accomplishments, they would challenge us with the question: "*Y qué más?*" — And what more can you do?

Resourcefulness and Responsibility

My parents' resourcefulness was displayed when, despite the fact that they could not read or write English, they learned to read maps and road signs as we traveled from Eagle Pass, Texas to Walla Walla, Washington. This type of action clearly demonstrated to me and my brother that anything was possible. We believed that with power came the responsibility of commitments made and the courage to see them through. If my parents worked hard in the migrant fields, we had the responsibility to work hard in school. We defined power as that which results from the center of our human experience (Terry, 1993). Since we were constantly challenged beyond our comfort zones, we became resourceful and gained wisdom from our experiences.

When I organized my first boycott of little league practice because it was 100 degrees at 3:00 p.m., my mother asked if I had signed a permission form to play for the duration of the season. When I told her I had, she said, "You have to meet your responsibilities and adhere to the rules of the coach, '*ser hombre de palabra*,' Be a man of your word." If you make a commitment, you have to follow through.

Also, despite our marginal economic status, there was never a sense of lacking. On the contrary—we felt a sense of abundance and resourcefulness. We valued everything and everyone. Our resourcefulness is what helped us remain dedicated to our causes, despite the many obstacles we faced. *Nunca sentíamos que nos faltava nada, pero no teníamos con que comparar. We never felt like we were lacking, but we had nothing but our lives to compare to.*

Commitment to Self and Others

As the Spanish *dicho* (saying) goes, we can always add more water to the soup. "*Échale más agua al caldo*," (and she would in fact add more water to the soup when unexpected hungry visitors arrived for dinner). My parents thus taught us about our obligations to others: to provide for our elders and children. They reminded us that every action we took reflected on

our parents' reputation, family name, and sense of responsibility. There was an ever-present consciousness that we lived within a community, and that the well-being of this community was inextricably linked to our own. My mother frequently cooked for children from other families and visited the sick in the *barrio*. The time spent helping others was necessary—we never questioned it; we learned from it. My father represented men who wanted to get married and had no local relatives. *Iba y pedía la mano*—he would ask women for their hand in marriage on behalf of these men, a custom known as a *comisión*. I am told that only one of the many marriages impacted through this custom ended in divorce, but we have no documentation, just my father's aged recollection.

Physical, Spiritual, and Mental Health

My mother is a gentle spirit, friendly and warm with others, but with great serenity, *y muy bondadosa, very warm-hearted*. She is always in the background with an informed opinion, always making things happen. My mother's courage, decisiveness, and love come from her faith and deep understanding of the spiritual aspect of daily life. She also loves nature and the cultivation of plants, and recognizes that life is a gift and that we have to act to create our own destiny in order to achieve our goals.

Creating Unity

Leadership as exercised within our family and extended family did not always consist of every voice being heard or every option being taken into consideration. Rather, the interactions were built on trust. My parents taught us that whether you were leading or following, both positions require vision, courage, and the wisdom to know which one is needed and when. At times, leading and following in negotiating with farmers were interchangeable. I have learned that this delicate dance of leadership requires an agile, generous spirit that seeks the collective well-being (*pero sin que te hagan tonto, decía mi padre. Y a veces usaba palabras más fuertes, con la "P"*). *"But without allowing anyone to make a fool out of you. Sometimes, he used stronger words for "fool," like one starting with a "P" — for pendejo."* This process of negotiation produced unity, trust, and cooperation in my family because we learned to respect and understand others. Navigating four states as migrants and negotiating housing costs and wages without knowing the language and the culture were all difficult tasks. Being an immigrant meant learning to survive in both cultures without knowing the language or the system

of negotiation. Yet we knew the value and power of language and that it extended past *dichos, refranes, corridos, poesías* (*sayings, proverbs, ballads, and poetry*) as well as music, since the words of so many songs reminded us of who we were and where we came from. The struggle to learn another language makes one realize that much of communication is non-verbal. We learned that communication starts from within, with a clarity of intention to understand and be understood. *Cuida lo que haces y lo que dices*, (*Watch what you do and say*) as being aware of what you say must agree with what you do. English, though, was a necessity, not a replacement. Spanish, our native tongue was a fundamental expression of our history, identity, culture, ancestral familial ties, spirituality, and love. We were taught that to lose our language was to lose our tradition, our roots. Como decía mi mamá: *"Un árbol sin raíces,"* like a tree without roots. My father would always say that *"la fortaleza de un hombre es la familia."* The strength of a man is his family. To this day our children — and now grandchildren — are connected to the extended family, our lifeblood, as we set forth into this new millennium.

Socialization

The answer to the question as to why or how a migrant student from a migrant family becomes a professional who values and promotes leadership and the public good is complex because it is a result of socialization, opportunities, and professional development that take place within the family and other social institutions as one strives to develop his or her social capital. This was a common occurrence in Eagle Pass, a small town where de los Santos, Hernández, Ramirez, Towns, Calderón, Midobuche, Montañó, Olivares, Treviño, and Chavira (whose son is an actor in *Desperate Housewives*) all achieved Ph.D.'s in the twentieth century. These families provided sustenance, emotional security, and a sense of belonging. The local institutions helped us conceptualize the world and develop social capital that was created as we learned to build networks and relationships that resulted in reciprocity and mutual benefits.

Life as a Classroom

In regard to the socialization process as part of a migrant family unit, I had the opportunity to travel to the western United States to work in Idaho, Oregon, Washington, and Montana. This initial developmental stage taught me many lessons about leadership reciprocity, familial solidarity, negotiation, housing wages, social relations, and discrimination based on

class, race, and ethnicity—conditions that I would further conceptualize during my subsequent formal education and training. In essence, our parents included us in the most fundamental aspects of the struggle for the survival of the family. This experience was critical in keeping us together as a family, and optimistic about our future. And even though we were at the social and economic margins of American society, these margins provided sufficient space to permit change and transformation to take place for my family and me. Even though our material assets were limited, we had work, our health, and each other.

Also, my father and mother taught us about hard work, loyalty, and the causality between choice and consequence. We lacked formal education or skills and only had a limited ability to speak English, so we made the most of our assets. Thus, we learned as a family that life was our classroom. We learned to enter public spaces and create our own opportunities without the power to define our cultural roles and actions within the larger society. Our socialization was simple yet complex because we interacted and negotiated our work with numerous other people, and that impacted our family economically (Arciniega Casaus Castillo, 1978). Despite these challenges, we learned to be resilient and take risks to ensure our own survival. During our experience as migrant agricultural workers, my parents made sure we were enrolled in the elementary and middle school grades for at least seven or eight months out of the school year. My abilities to speak and understand English were developing, so I became the family translator and assisted my father in negotiations with farmers and the Montana Sugar Company, which contracted our family to perform agricultural labor. These negotiations provided me with opportunities to interact with adults, gain self-confidence, and to contribute to the well-being of the family.

My experience is similar to that of many other Mexican Americans of my generation who have joined the ranks of university faculty, administrators, and other professionals. Our socialization experiences influenced and informed our commitment to social justice and the public good. Furthermore, we learned that education was critical to overcoming the challenges we faced as we interacted with and were exposed to the different institutions in the United States.

Humble Beginnings

During my familial socialization process, I gained values that became ideological foundations for the rest of my life. Our

familial sense of identity and our cultural orientation compelled us to be resourceful and maintain a sense of perpetual well-being. I also learned about personal and communal responsibility, and that our well-being was always connected to the well-being of our extended family and community (And by way of illustration, my mother-in-law was accepted as a part of our extended family for the last twenty-seven years of her life.) We also learned to value nature and collected all kinds of plants, fruit trees, and vegetables, and shared them with our neighbors and friends. In essence, we understood and acted on our inter-connectedness with nature. We also valued listening and storytelling and took pride in our language and the *dichos* (*sayings*) that we used to rationalize our experiences and share the wisdom we gained. These *dichos* represented reservoirs of cultural empowerment that we used to explain the world. Most importantly, we learned to be grateful and humble and to enjoy life.

Our familial socialization also taught us to value others, respect the wisdom of our elders and be aware of existing opportunities. I held on to these values as I entered the formal educational system. I entered the public school system in 1958, in Eagle Pass, and that same year I attended Walla Walla schools but stopped going after the first day because I could not immediately adapt to an environment that was not culturally relevant.

I had the opportunity in the late fifties and sixties to attend public schools whose student bodies were predominantly Mexican American. The majority of the teachers, however, were Anglo women who had come to Texas from different parts of the country, usually because their spouses had been transferred to work in Eagle Pass. I had very few visible role models during the course of my formal education, but the few who are engrained in my memory left a lasting impression. Ms. Lopez and Ms. Frausto were the only Mexican American teachers at Robert E. Lee Elementary, and Mr. de Hoyos, Mr. Bermea, and Mr. Bernal were the only Mexican American instructors at Stephen F. Austin Middle School. They were all inspiring teachers who cared about their work and their students.

Literacy, Values, and Formal Schooling

My lack of assimilation was clearly evident in elementary school where I first encountered characters like Dick, Jane, Spot, and Puff, the yellow cat character who taught us how to read and promoted personal values and good cheer.

These characters were not familiar to me, since I had first learned to read Spanish from Mexican comic books that endeared me to *Memin Pinguín*, the character who was most recently honored with a stamp in Mexico and criticized in the United States for the stamp's alleged racist representation (Fears, 2005). I had my first Mexican American teacher of History in middle school — eighth grade — who made us memorize and recite the Gettysburg Address and taught us about justice, race, and the Civil War. In high school Algebra, I learned the regression equation from Mr. Ricardo Salinas, although I did not realize its significance until I had to enroll in a statistics class in college where we analyzed how the equation could be used to make predictions. My high school baseball coach taught me about discipline and performing to the best of my abilities. Competing as a state finalist established within me a winning tradition that continues to influence my attitude toward life. My high school Spanish teacher made us memorize and recite a poem by José Martí:

“Cultivo una rosa blanca”

Cultivo una rosa blanca
En julio como en enero,
Para el amigo sincero
Que me da su mano franca.

*Y para aquel que me arranca
el corazón con que vivo;
ni cardo ni ortiga cultivo;
cultivo una rosa blanca. (Martí, 1997)*

High school was, in fact, where I first discovered my love of verse, as I became enamored with other poems like *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's "Hombres necios que acusáis,"* and Antonio Machado's *"Caminante, no hay camino."*

These high school lessons were further enhanced by reading Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) and John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* (1961) in which the author dyed his skin black and began an odyssey of discovery through the segregated American South. Sinclair depicted the working conditions in slaughterhouses, and Griffin showed the way blacks were treated and perceived by the whites of the region. The exposure to the aforementioned books further exposed me to the issues of social justice and the public good. My exposure to these readings in the late sixties in high school provided an intellectual foundation to my understanding of fairness and justice. It was then that I began to witness literacy's payoff: knowledge, the shap-

ing of social mores, and my awakening to new ideas that materialized as Mexican Americans emerged in leadership positions in the schools and government of my border community in the late sixties (Shockley, 1974). I became aware of the public school walkouts in Crystal City, just 45 miles away from Eagle Pass (Gutiérrez, 1974). All of these public school experiences, the role models I had in my community, and a stable family provided a foundation for a clear sense of identity and introduced me to the concepts of justice and the public good.

Unlike Mexican Americans in other parts of the United States, in my community we knew who we were and had no stigma to overcome concerning our identity (Hoffman, 1963). While many continued to flee from their Mexican heritage, we cultivated a sense of pride in our ethnic community. Our neighbor, Rommel Fuentes, thought he was Elvis Presley, but once he came back from UT Austin, he was a Chicano and later sang his famous song *"Yo soy Chicano"* in the documentary *Chulas Fronteras* (1976).

Higher Education

In terms of my socialization during undergraduate and graduate school, I continued being inspired by professors and literature that promoted change, social justice, the public good, and honoring for one's community.

During my undergraduate years at Texas A & I University, Dr. Rolando Hinojosa-Smith introduced me to *Estampas del Valle* (1973), his Quinto Sol Award-winning novel about the Rio Grande Valley, Tomás Rivera's *...Y no se lo tragó la tierra* (1971), and Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972). Their characters were people I knew, people engaged in every aspect of daily life in their community. I developed a thorough understanding of my cultural history through Rudolfo Acuña's *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (1972); Ray Padilla's critique of the historian Leonard Pitt in the journal *El Grito*, "A Critique of Pittian History" (1972); and George I. Sánchez's *Forgotten People: A Study of New Mexicans* (1996). José Reyna introduced me to *dichos, refránes* and *corridos*, like those in Americo Paredes' *With His Pistol in His Hand* (1958), that were used to transmit, explain, and document stories about our folk heroes. Martha Bernal, Amado Padilla, Antonio Castañeda, and Manuel Ramirez, who were emerging with groundbreaking work in Psychology, also influenced my development, as did Blandina and José Cardenas' "Theory of Incompatibilities" (1977), which attempted to explain the needs of students in poverty, and Charles Reich's *The Green-*

ing of America (1970), which examined the lack of aspiration among middle-class Americans. These academic experiences clearly enhanced and supplemented the traditional college curriculum. Furthermore, these scholars enhanced my sense of self, and gave me the confidence to pursue graduate studies in Social Work and Education at the University of Michigan.

At Michigan, in a class on social policy, one of the architects of the Social Security Act, Professor Wilbur Cohen, illustrated and explained the ramifications of this act on all workers in America. This was clearly a lesson concerning the public good in a national context. Professor Charles Moody of the School of Education's Desegregation Center augmented this perspective with an explanation of the implications of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 for segregated schools in the Midwest and lessons concerning racially-fueled court cases like the *Independent School District v. Salvatierra* (1931) case in Del Rio, Texas, and *Westminster School District v. Mendez* (1947) case in California. Professor Tony Tripodi, co-author of *Social Program Evaluation* (Epstein, Fellin, & Tripodi, 1971), emphasized the importance of evaluating the effectiveness of social initiatives. Professor William Merhap taught me the value of recognizing regional linguistic differences and how to use language to communicate and build community. Also, through Aaron Wildavsky's *Politics of the Budgetary Process* (1964), I learned how the complex federal budget is constructed incrementally. These intricate and dynamic concepts of consciousness and budgetary expenditures are critical to institutional change, systems theory, and valuing and promoting the public good.

In his interview with Bill Moyers in *A World of Ideas* (1989), Arturo Madrid from the University of Minnesota and the Ford Foundation taught me how socialization and diversity can

influence the common good, and how migrants can enter systems and institutions to create change. Gloria Anzaldúa introduced me to her revolutionary re-conceptualization of *La Frontera* (1987) and the cultural roots and development of the Chicano movement, emphasizing our resilience and familial bonds. David Rice, in his collection of short stories titled *Crazy Loco* (2001), introduced me to neighborhood characters like Pepe, Chuy, Chula y Lobo, who were missing in the sixties but could now stand side by side with Dick, Jane, Spot, and Puff. These academic socialization experiences have helped form the person I am today.

Heritage and Higher Education

Institutions of higher education have the responsibility to produce practitioners, leaders, professionals, and scholars who promote the public good. Mexican American migrant students must therefore strive to be part of the pool of students who matriculate and train as leaders, practitioners, professionals, and scholars. This is a very significant and serious *compromiso* for our generation of faculty and administrators. We have to ensure not only that we are represented in institutions of higher education, but also that we play a leadership role in all of our public institutions. We have to insert ourselves into public spaces in order to ensure our integration into all systems of governance. Education is a vital tool in generating change. It is a tool for justice, for liberty, for development. It is not just for service. It is an investment. Education at all levels is the most critical intervention that will sustain and strengthen the Mexican American community. Our representation continues to be minimal in the faculty ranks as we represent less than 5% of the faculty.

Table 315.20. Full-time faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity, sex, and academic rank: fall 2013

Year, sex, and academic rank	Total	White White,	Black, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Two or more races									Race/ ethnicity unknown	Non- resident alien ²⁾
			Total	Per- cent ¹⁾	Black	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander			American In- dian/ Alaska Native	Two or more races		
							Total	Asian	Pacific Islander				
2013\3\ Total	791,391	575,491	157,480	21.5	43,188	33,217	72,246	71,038	1,208	3,538	5,291	20,013	38,407
Professors	181,530	148,577	29,111	16.4	6,665	5,604	15,417	15,247	170	573	852	2,323	1,519
Associate professors	155,095	116,817	32,580	21.8	8,812	6,381	15,809	15,626	183	591	987	2,859	2,839
Assistant professors	166,045	112,262	38,011	25.3	10,542	7,130	18,402	18,070	332	683	1,254	5,695	10,077
Instructors	99,304	73,859	20,684	21.9	7,448	6,340	5,236	4,950	286	879	781	3,180	1,581
Lecturers	36,728	27,453	6,591	19.4	1,728	2,015	2,436	2,403	33	117	295	1,151	1,533
Other faculty	152,689	96,523	30,503	24.0	7,993	5,747	14,946	14,742	204	695	1,122	4,805	20,858

Sources IEC National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Higher education is critical because it equips migrant students with the communication and analytical skills to participate in our society and compete in our economy. We, as professors and administrators, have the following responsibilities: 1) to provide intellectual stimulation to our students by engaging them in discussions, 2) to provide them with hands-on experience by introducing them to applied research opportunities in the community, and 3) to reinforce their commitment to the public good by furnishing them with internship opportunities with public and private entities that lead to employment and service choices. We also have a role as mentors to provide guidance and opportunities for migrant students. Mentoring is an ancient concept that comes from Greek myth, that is, from Homer's *The Odyssey*, where Mentor was the name of the loyal and wise teacher into whose care Odysseus entrusted his son. Mentoring serves as the dominant method of informal succession planning in corporations and systems that sponsor and promote individuals or groups. Under the tutelage of a mentor, the protégé should enjoy such benefits as career skills development, networking, and accelerated cultural systems engagement. As mentors, we have the ability to enhance the self-confidence and self-worth of the migrant students we come into contact with, and help guide them toward opportunities for advancement. Mentoring relationships need to be planned and sustained in order to nurture the next generation of Mexican American leaders. Opportunities to mentor students present themselves in work-study programs, research assistantships, internships, fellowships, sponsorships, and even professional meetings and conferences. Mentoring our students and colleagues is one of our greatest *compromisos y obligaciones con nuestra comunidad*, commitments and obligations to our community.

Furthermore, in this age of interaction and technology, we must master the art of "barn raising" (Prestwood & Schumann, 1997) or coordinating the efforts of institutions to share university resources and using them to solve problems and build community. Such collective efforts give our migrant students opportunities to apply the theories they have learned and to work with others in pursuit of shared goals. These experiences will help them learn to interact with others, reflect on their values, and develop habits of mind that help them to discover new ways of acting and living. The key is to work collectively with the students and community to recognize our developed shared goals, utilize the experience we have gained, improve on our past efforts, and adapt as our needs change.

As leaders in a community of scholars, we must obtain the cooperation of policy makers and colleagues by informing them of our progress and our needs. We have to make a strong case so these needs are understandable and relevant. Our supporters will not join us unless they understand our values and goals. When we gain the cooperation and understanding of institutions, we become colleagues. This relationship can evolve into teamwork and can produce integration and cohesiveness to nurture synergy and transformation. When we reach a high level of synergy, we will be able to recruit, orient, develop, and motivate our migrant students to contribute to the public good. This is not an easy task, but one that deserves our commitment and support.

Defining the Public Good, and Education, the Basis of Democratic Progress

Speaking within the context of academia, I define the public good through the perspective of a professor or administrator that promotes and values access, trains leaders for public service, develops student citizens who are engaged, develops research that generates new knowledge to improve society and facilitates inclusiveness with respect to economic development opportunities. Lee Benson and Ira Harkavy argue that "Education is the basis of all democratic progress. The problems of education are therefore the problems of democracy" (Benson & Harkavy, 2000). As a faculty member, I focus inwardly with respect to my practice and the social relevance of what I do. I also focus outwardly on the social impact my efforts have on developing networks and collaborative partnerships that will engage the institution, migrant students, and the community. This approach is described by Ernest Boyer (1990) in his discussions of the four facets of scholarship—discovery, integration, application and teaching—and reaffirmed in Derek Bok's *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education* (2003).

Critical to today's scholarship is engaging students in the discovery of phenomena such as *colonias* on the U.S.–Mexico border or the health issues of migrant farmworkers, exposing and documenting the region's health and living conditions, education, environmental policies, and civic displacement. José Ortega y Gasset (1944) describes the mission of the university as follows: "To foster scientific research, train political leadership, teach learned professions, and create cultural persons that can make intellectual interpretations. Faculty, in collaboration with migrant students,

administrators, and the community, should apply knowledge to consequential problems for the public good. This effort becomes an ongoing professional endeavor that feeds our quest for continuous learning and which extension services at land grant institutions must continue to pursue.”

In order to contribute to the public good, faculty and administrators must engage in research and teaching in an institution that embraces community engagement by recognizing the societal implications of this work. If, for example, we give migrant students cameras to discover, document, and describe their social conditions and testify before a congressional committee, we are in essence teaching them to discover and integrate knowledge into a narrative that will inform public policy issues (Chahin, 2001). Promoting the public good will require ongoing collaboration with the community in order to facilitate the engagement of the university, faculty, and students with the surrounding community. This will build community capacity and teach migrant students and faculty lessons on the integration and application of knowledge for the public good.

The aforementioned academic experiences and training prepared me to begin a career promoting the public good. In my 38 years of working in different institutions of higher education or related to higher education, including non-profit organizations, vocational training, and policy development agencies, I have certainly experienced change, conflicts, and challenges concerning the public good. Pablo Freire, in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), introduced me to the concept of *conciencia*, the level of consciousness at which you search with rigor and humility for the truth.

During the last 38 years I have learned that my teaching, scholarship, and service to the community are all related to valuing and promoting leadership and the public good. I have witnessed the rewards of creating opportunities for students, providing data to enhance public discourse with public officials, testifying in court, and leveraging public and corporate funding for projects with an interest in the public good. Engaging in this type of activity requires a proactive approach that connects systems and people to make the systems work for all, including those who have traditionally been excluded from institutions. All of these activities require partnerships and networking with colleagues and institutions of similar value orientations. Social capital is therefore built by understanding the reciprocity of relationships and valuing and respecting the wisdom of others.

Solutions

The limited pool of significant mentors and role models has taught me to be resourceful, collaborative, data-driven, pragmatic, and creative, to ensure that institutions respond to our needs and the public good—regardless of race, gender, social class or religious persuasion. Even though issues and priorities vary depending on the mission of the institution, the public good remains the goal. The Mexican American community is keenly aware that it has entered these spaces with the challenge of leveraging power to define its roles and integrate issues into public discourse.

We need to bring different ideas to an educational sphere in which Latinos might be the demographic majority but lack the mainstream cultural exposure necessary to understand and navigate systems outside the region. In some instances, technology has overcome information barriers, but experience and exposure are still critical for successful engagement with regional, state, and national entities.

My experiences with Texas state policy makers were not only about resources, but also about access to opportunities at all levels, such as undergraduate academic programs, graduate studies, and professional schools. Influencing state public policy requires engagement with elected officials and litigation representing a collective class of citizens that do not have access to the same higher education opportunities. This type of engagement requires professors to develop networks with scholars, civic organizations, elected legislators, and political appointees to facilitate leadership, discourses, and litigation like with the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) that has partnered with academics and civic organizations to challenge the state.

Despite numerous higher education plans adopted by the state and universities, gaps in student representation continue to exist. Leadership and vision from scholars and administrators will continue to be needed to promote the public good. Organized leadership at the institutional level has to take place on multiple fronts to make the institution respond to the changing demographics, which would require the following:

- Allocations of resources to recruit, retain, and graduate first-generation students.
- Cultivation of external networks to recruit faculty and staff and produce graduate students who value changes and promotes the public good.

- Development of external partnerships with foundations, corporations, civic organizations, and legislators that support change for the public good.
- Facilitation of the student development of organizations that nurture and promote their intellectual interests.
- Organization of faculty and staff to promote development of an institutional community to support the public good.

The changes we need can only be realized through an organized, concentrated effort from faculty, staff, administrators, students, and the local community.

At Texas State University — San Marcos, faculty leadership with foundation partners created and institutionalized the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children’s Book Award and the Southwest Writers Collection, both of which honor and recognize the cultural contributions of the community’s authors and intellectuals who promote literacy. This impacts the campus environment as the community of students begins to see itself at the center of the intellectual enterprise and the generation of knowledge.

These institutional changes occur to various degrees relative to leadership, dialogue, and resources. Regardless of the degree of involvement of faculty, staff, and students, change teaches us many lessons from which we continue to learn as we seek the public good. Perhaps the greatest lesson I have learned is that all people—regardless of age, race, or class—possess a rich culture and body of knowledge from which progress can flourish. However, progress is not feasible unless we build a sense of community and engage colleagues and students in developing viable solutions for the public good. We must provide our students and colleagues with opportunities for action and reflection. If we can do this, we can engage their participation as stakeholders in the public good.

Concluding thoughts

Perhaps my sentiments can be best expressed by an excerpt from the late Tomás Rivera’s poem, “The Searchers”:

We were not alone
 After many centuries how could we be alone?
 We searched together
 We are seekers
 We are searchers
 and we will continue to search
 because our eyes
 still have
 the passion of prophecy.(Rivera, 1990).

The values we’ve inherited from our migrant families teach us how to understand ourselves and attain self-respect and self-identity. Despite the hardships, these values bring out the competence and confidence that help us lead others. This part of our cultural heritage has universal applications that we must pass on to future generations as they transition into the different systems in our society. We have learned that a strong character has nothing to do with titles or wealth. Our ability to lead comes from within, and our commitment to one another is vital to our survival. We rely on one another; we are bound by our word and sense of obligation. What we do and how we prepare ourselves will determine the opportunities and choices we have, moving forward into our collective future. *Sí se puede, pero tenemos que saber y conocer.* Yes we can, but we need to be able to know and understand.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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