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Diverse Pathways to the PhD: A Study of Women Faculty in the Sciences and Engineering at a Hispanic-Serving Institution

This article attempts to convey a largely untold story about women professoriate in STEM fields. By interviewing female faculty members at a Hispanic serving institution, we focused on the process through which young women are supported and/or discouraged from pursuing doctoral work. Specifically, we sought to compare the experiences of Anglo, Latina and international faculty, giving insight about their lifelong experiences, documenting their struggles and successes.

Research Background. There exist significant lacunae in the theoretical and empirical research devoted to marginalized groups in academe. First, the vast majority of scholarship has examined position in academe of each disadvantaged group separately, e.g. women, African-Americans, Latinos, etc. Second, there is a lack of large-sample qualitative studies written about Latina faculty in Hispanic serving institutions. Finally, the vast majority of research on marginalized groups in academe focuses on *negative* experiences, such as isolation, tokenism and discrimination (e.g., Gándara, 1995; Hochschild, 1995; Verdugo, 1995). This can be attributed to the fact the existing research on Latinos and African-Americans in academe reflects on their experiences in the context of majority-oriented institutions of higher education (e.g., racial/ethnic minorities in predominantly White institutions). Indeed, the condition of these groups in majority-oriented institutions is characterized by isolation, and all negative experiences associated with it. The isolation underpins the marginalized existence of the ethnic minority groups in predominantly White universities and colleges because these groups constitute numerical minorities and consequently cannot build supportive networks. And supportive, close-knit ethnic networks are essential for the survival and productive functioning of minority faculty as they are proven to compensate and reconstitute for familial ties (Ream, 2005; Stanton-Salazar et al., 2000).

By examining both positive and negative aspects of the past and present academic careers of more than 50 female faculty of different ethnic backgrounds and investigating their professional lives in the context of Hispanic-serving institution, this study attempts to bridge the lacunae in the existing research. The novelty of the study presents unique challenges for understanding factors underlying progress of Latinas in academe.

Methodology. This study used grounded theory methodology to analyze the interviews of all female tenured/tenure-track faculty at a Hispanic serving institution. Letters of invitation to the interview were sent to 65 women, of whom two refused to participate. This results in the total

sample size of 63. Interviews were conducted within one semester period. They were audiotaped and later transcribed. This process was extremely time-consuming because many of the audiotapes required additional listening. Several checks have been made to make sure that the transcriptions were accurate to the tapes and there is no material too personal to be included in the interview, which the subject later may regret. Once transcripts are checked for accuracy, the interviews were analyzed using QSR Nudist software. In order to detect the latent and explicit themes that occur repeatedly in the interviews the more than 30 categories (nodes).

Results. We found that:

1). On average, native-born Latinas encountered greater impediments to their academic aspirations from their families and communities, than the majority of Anglo and international faculty.

2). Social support from families, peers and mentors was critical to the attainment of doctoral degrees and further professional development of these women.   The relative important of sources of social support depended on the stage of the academic career. Particularly, the support that women received from their parents, siblings, friends and peer groups was more important earlier in their academic careers, while spousal support and mentorship became more important later in their academic careers. The majority of Latinas and international faculty also relied on financial support, usually in the form stipend and scholarships. A few faculty mentioned that they were misunderstood and/or discouraged by their families. Some also complained about generally unsupportive atmosphere in academe for women.

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