

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

**ScholarWorks @ UTRGV**

---

Organization and School Leadership Faculty  
Publications and Presentations

College of Education and P-16 Integration

---

Winter 2016

## **Latina Titans: A Journey of Inspiration**

Velma D. Menchaca

Shirley J. Mills

Filomena Leo

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/org\\_fac](https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/org_fac)



Part of the Educational Leadership Commons

---



## Latina Titans: A Journey of Inspiration

**Velma D. Menchaca, Ph.D.**

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

**Shirley J. Mills, Ph.D.**

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

**Filomena Leo, Ed.D.**

Consultant

### Abstract

*This qualitative research examined the journey of renowned female leadership in higher education. Two top level Latina administrators of universities were interviewed extensively to discover their journey to leadership. The theoretical framework used was Latina critical race theory, feminist theory, and counter-storytelling. Themes that surfaced were strong supportive mother, fervent faith, humble beginnings, mentors, intelligence, and challenges not obstacles. These guiding themes serve as a path for Latinas who aspire to higher educational leadership positions.*

**Key words:** *Latina leadership, educational leadership, Latinas, gender issues*

***How we spend our days is how we spend our lives—Annie Dillard  
(as qtd. in Schulte, p. 255)***

**T**his research was the result of the intellectual energies unleashed because of the researchers' great respect and appreciation of the Latinas we admired for breaking the mold and becoming highly successful leaders. We appreciated their choices in life and the struggles they experienced, as they reached the top of their professional careers. Through the examples of their lives, we have gained an understanding of the issues women of Mexican heritage confront in order to reach the pinnacle of success—true Latina titans, giants among their peers. Latinas have emerged from the traditional roles of stay-at-home moms and submissive wives to become strong, high-energy professionals who use social media to support their professional development (DelCampo, DelCampo, & DelCampo, 2009). This article supports the knowledge and advancement of Latinas by exploring the lives of two highly successful Latinas who have paved a path to success.

## Statement of the Problem

Historically, Latinas were not encouraged to pursue education beyond high school (Carteret, 2011). Latinas have always embraced the concept of family (DelCampo, et al., 2009). The traditional educational system of the early 30s and 40s perceived that the role of Latinas was to marry after high school and begin having a large family (Bishop, 1937; Ellis, 1929; Galanti, 2003). Participating in family activities was essential to the well-being of the family, and a Latina's immediate and extended family was often the focus of their lives; thus, these young girls were strongly encouraged to take—in fact, channeled into—homemaking while in high school, a form of deficit thinking that can be traced to the early 1920s (Gonzalez, 1990; Valencia, 1997). During that historical time, Latinas were not expected to attend an institution of higher education, nor were they encouraged to leave their home and seek additional schooling (National Women's Law Center & Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009). The Latinas were stereotyped and treated differently. This generated a feeling of being out-of-place, isolated from other students, with no one to guide them to aspire to higher levels of education. The two Latinas chosen for this article were born in this era and experienced many of these pressures, but both overcame the barriers and moved on to higher education.

In the 1960s, public schools channeled Latinas into low-level vocational programs that emphasized menial work such as “domestic servants, laundry workers or seamstresses” (Valencia, 1997, p. 79). When Latinas first considered employment outside of their homes, their choices were very limited (Leal-Muniz & Constantine, 2005). After high school, some Latinas were encouraged to pursue positions as secretaries, receptionists, hair dressers, or assistants to others in leadership that did not require a lot of time outside the home and away from family. Latinas who worked out of the house had strict time requirements to enable them to be home early enough to take care of their families (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

In the 1960s, during the civil rights movement, college was not really an option for most Latinas (MacDonald, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Some of the parents were not supportive of their daughters or did not understand the requirements that the colleges placed upon them (Jackson, 2013). Once they were able to attend college, these women experienced a whole new world. The Latinas realized that there were opportunities for them, and they began to desire the possibilities that derived from education and privilege. Jackson (2013) found that

The level of educational attainment for Latinas has risen in the past few years, yet it still sits at a level significantly lower than that of white women. Graduation rates for Latinas were at 31.3 percent in 2008, still significantly lower than graduation rates for white women, at 45.8 percent. (p. 2)

Latinas have had a high degree of support from the extended family to attend college. One study found that mothers were more likely to support their children in attending college than fathers; however, more Latinos than Latinas felt their parents were supportive (Chacon, Cohen & Strover, 1986). Gandara (1982) also found that both parents of Latino and Latina college students were very supportive; the Latinas in her study indicated that they felt more motivated by their mothers, who influenced them to

excel. However, another study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education (2013) and commissioned by the Eva Longoria Foundation to examine Latina educational success revealed the conflict experienced by Latinas:

Although Latinas complete college at almost twice the rate as their male counterparts, they trail all other women by significant percentages . . . . They are often expected to prioritize family responsibilities above school; they often feel that they “don’t belong” in school, a feeling that can be reinforced by discrimination and low expectations; they see few models of Latinas who have excelled educationally that they can emulate, and too many lack any understanding of how or even why to pursue a college education. (p. 1)

While this was true for most Latinas, the two women of this study chose professions in higher education. They did not look into the mirror and see the typical Latina of the time, but instead saw a reflection of highly intelligent women occupying positions of power. This was a novel reflection that suggested entirely new possibilities, new pathways for these women to follow. These two Titans pursued their desire to get a bachelor’s degree from a university. Once they tasted the success of a bachelor’s degree, they were inspired to pursue further education: one obtaining a master’s degree and the other a doctoral degree.

## **Research Design**

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lives of two highly successful Latinas in positions of leadership in higher education to identify the optimal pathway to career success. The researchers of this article chose two women from institutions of higher education. One held a position of leadership at a four-year university and the other held a position of leadership in a community college.

Three research questions guided this study:

1. What support do Latinas need to attain successful careers outside of the home?
2. What barriers do Latinas face in creating a highly successful career?
3. What is the profile of highly successful Latinas?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework was guided by a hybrid that borrows from critical race theory (CRT): Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit), feminist critical race theory (FemCrit), and counter-storytelling. The historical processes of language, accent, immigration status, ethnicity, identity, and sexual orientation are core to Latina/o populations (Garcia, 1995; Hernandez-Truyol, 1997; Johnson, 1997; Martinez, 1994).

LatCrit is an approach designed to facilitate understanding of how Latinas have been marginalized, yet remain resilient, and oppressed, yet attain success despite all of the inequities they have confronted (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012). FemCrit explores how Chicana feminism emerged during the Chicano movement as a means to give Chicanas a voice and space (Blackwell, 2003; Cotera, 1997). Within a short time, Chicans began writing about their struggles of being excluded, marginalized, and absented from the social and political discourse of the male-dominated Chicano movement (Hurtada, 1998).

Counter-storytelling is used to examine different forms of racial and gender discrimination by Latinos (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). These stories focus on experiences that are seldom expressed or captured unless participants feel safe and protected, allowing them to express their personal experiences involving social justice issues (Delgado-Bernal, Solórzano, Villalpando, & Yosso, 2001). Using critical race methodology analyses, these experiences of Latinas constitute studies in a safe space where they can voice their—struggles, pain, sacrifices, silencing, and the—marginalization they have encountered (Anzaldúa, 1990; Guajardo, Guajardo, & Casaperalta, 2008; Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Lopez & Davalos, 2009). Latinas have described their experiences in order to shed light on their oppression and injustices through storytelling, *cunetos*, *testimonios*, tales, and family histories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Through *testimonios*, the exclusion and marginalization of Latinas has surfaced and been studied and documented.

By using this theoretical framework to illuminate the lives of the Titans, the researchers were able to lay the foundation for understanding the lives of these two Latina feminists to voice the obstacles, injustices, and pain they encountered. Their experiences inspired them to reflect on their world as they struggled, yet prevailed reaching great levels of success.

### **Research Setting and Participants**

The researchers identified over twenty women who lived in Texas as possible participants. Each candidate was evaluated by the Latina researchers, relying upon their cultural knowledge and research expertise and experiences to determine the best fit for the study. Each author evaluated these women and eliminated all but two highly successful women born in an era of marginalization and low expectations for Latinas. These women reached maximal positions of leadership in higher education and were located in close proximity to the researchers. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in their homes to encourage them to speak openly (see Appendix A).

### **Literature Review**

The literature review will focus on leadership, mentorship, and education of Latinas.

### **Latina Leadership**

Latinas are the fastest growing segment of the American workforce, with Latinas constituting 14.8% of the U.S. labor force (Ramos, 2012). But while Latinas provide environments that allow other Latinas to

flourish and become the “power-*mujeres*” that light up the future for Latinas (Ramos, 2012), Blalock (2014) noted that all women leaders are held back by their own lack of efficacy, and nowhere is that more obvious than with Latina leaders. According to Blalock, “Women need to be more open to new opportunities; to take more risks; to say yes, even when they’re unsure” (p. 5). She said that women leaders must cultivate a sense of self-awareness and project the image of a leader. Latinas must emulate the characteristics of powerful female leaders. Blalock (2014) provided an example in Anna Maria Chavez, CEO of Girls Scouts of the USA and the daughter of immigrant farm workers from Mexico. Chavez’s goal in high school was to attend Yale, and she made it happen. She became the first Latina to lead the Girl Scouts and has set her goal to foster a new generation of females that “become leaders of their lives, families, communities, and businesses” (Blalock, p. 11). Chavez has encouraged Latinas to set the target high and create opportunities to succeed.

Christman and McClellan (2012) studied female leadership in higher education academic administrators. The researchers expected to observe female leaders as feminists, but Christman and McClellan were surprised to find that women of exceptional academic leadership experienced significant barriers to their leadership positions. The most interesting point the authors found was that females were not “fenced in” by the social constructions of gender—that these women learned to navigate through the barriers set up by others’ perceptions of gender stereotypes. The researchers did find that females tend to be more relational than their male counterparts when leading, while male leaders feared being considered weak if they were relational. The conclusions of this study were that these higher education leaders were able to break the gender mold and negotiate the complex boundaries between male and female expectations by operating in an area between the “social perceptions and gender constructions based on biological sex” (p. 665).

### **Latina Mentors**

An important aspect of the early professional lives of Latinas was the lack of mentors in their field. Few, if any, mentors were in existence at the time the Latinas were rising in the leadership of higher education institutes. They had very small successes in obtaining mentoring for themselves, but they did provide role models for other young Latinas (Bandura, 1986; Cardoza, 1991; Flores & Obasi, 2005; Gandara, 1982). Mentoring others as they excelled in their careers was essential to increase the pool of successful Latinas in the world of higher education, offering other Latinas an opportunity to acquire invaluable referrals and establish important networking connections. Brown, Setren, and Topa (2013, June) determined that referred candidates have a 40% chance of getting hired than non-referrals, suggesting that mentoring and the development of professional relationships is of inestimable value in the work environment. The Latina Titans recognized how important it was to mentor those who followed them because of their own lack of role models and mentors (Flores & Obasi, 2005).

### **Latinas in Education**

Latinas have made great strides in attending college and seeking degrees. Over the last 40 years, women have significantly outpaced men in attaining college degrees. While the level of educational attainment for Latinas has also risen in the past few years, however, it still sits at a level significantly lower than that

of white women. The college graduation rate for Latinas—has increased faster than any other group of women (31.3%), but it is still significantly lower than that of white women (45.8%), with Latinas earning about 7.4% of the degrees attained by women even though Latinas constituted 16% of the female population in 2012. Women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) are at a very low rate (3%), while women in general make up only 24% of the STEM workforce (Jackson, 2013). Latinas often choose education as a career. Education allows them to be active with their families while still meeting the desire to have a career. Latinas are indeed making strides in the workforce, but are still far behind other females of the general population.

### **Methodology and Participants**

Through semi-structured interviews, the researchers began to build an understanding of the lives of the Latina Titans (Anzaldua, 1990; Latina Feminist Group, 2001). Their *testimonios* revealed the marginalization they experienced on the path to success. Using LatCrit as a framework, the authors were able to recognize the marginalization these Latinas felt as they pursued higher educational goals. The FemCrit framework allowed the researchers to trace the experiences of marginalization in the participants' lives as they emerged as leaders in higher education, creating spaces and voices to be acknowledged as Latina leaders at a time when females were not often seen as leaders.

The following stories are retold based on the participants' recollections. Because these participants were chosen based on their success and visibility in the communities they served, we believe their stories will reveal much about the challenges that Latinas encountered as they worked to become highly successful in the field of higher education. These women played a major role in the mentorship for other Latinas and their eventual success.

Themes were identified and supported with quotes from the actual interviews. Participants' names and identifying information were changed to protect their anonymity.

#### **Berta**

Berta is in her late 60s. She was born to a poor Mexican American family and was one of three children. Her father did not complete the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, and her mother had some schooling but did not attend high school. Berta was raised in a highly segregated community that was racially divided, with Mexican and Anglo schools. She attended the Mexican school where "she thought that the library was the greatest thing." Her family had lived in the predominantly white district and purposefully moved to the Mexican district so she would not experience the discrimination her parents had experienced.

Berta grew up in an ethnically-affirming environment and remembers vividly that her entire family was involved in improving the life of Mexican Americans in her community. Most of the leaders of the community were part of her large extended family. A large percentage of her extended family lived in or around her block. The saying "it takes a village to raise a child" was the culture that she lived. She was nurtured by her parents and her extended family, which included aunts, uncles, and cousins, and her parents focused on her being raised in humble but proud beginnings. The leaders of her Spanish-

speaking church were members of the family. This family nurtured literacy as well as leadership. Berta knew at a very young age that she was destined to be a leader because she was raised in this environment. She could walk any block from her house and find family or friends who became professionals, such as doctors, lawyers, educators, judges, or engineers.

Berta was a first generation college student. She always knew she would become educated. Her parents knew she was brilliant, and they encouraged her to work hard and support her Mexican American heritage. She left home to attend a college in a large urban area and received her bachelor's degree from a flagship institution. She later received her doctorate from an Ivy League school.

Berta had discovered education when she began working with early childhood programs and loved it because she always wanted to make a difference in lives of others. Her work always took precedence over her family life, and that contributed to her unsuccessful marriage. She often found males to be intimidated by her leadership. The social and political institutions at the time were not accepting of successful, strong, Latina leaders, so she pursued a career in higher education instead.

### **Celia**

Celia is in her late 60s. One of eight children, she grew up in a small rural community and in a family of humble origins. Both parents attended high school but did not graduate. Her father supported the family as a laborer, and her mother stayed at home. Both parents were very supportive, however, and she described her childhood as protected and sheltered. Both parents recognized that education was the way out of poverty and encouraged Celia to do well in school. Celia's mother was very involved in the schooling of the children and volunteered as often as she could, but both felt that, for a woman, it was most important to also "support her family." After she finished high school, Celia's mother earned her GED and worked as a custodian in the schools. Celia also remembers her father being very intelligent and always reading the newspaper from beginning to end.

Celia was a high achiever and always an honor student while in school. She also worked to help the family make ends meet. She married after completing high school and worked on her college degree with her husband's support. Having completed her bachelor's degree, she started her career as a business teacher, subsequently beginning a master's degree in school administration.

She realized that she was being passed over for school administration positions, perceiving this as male bias, so she decided to pursue a position at a community college where she was the leader in the financial office. Her success there came from her life experiences and her teaching experiences. While she had no female mentor throughout her career, she excelled in her career because she was dedicated and worked hard. Now Celia believes that gender issues are the strongest deterrent to women's success. She was determined and did not see raising a family as an obstacle. She had three children who are all successful professionally.



## Discussion

To understand the history of Latinas' professional growth through the last century and the problems and barriers they faced, the researchers identified two highly successful Latinas in higher education. In their own career development, these two women tried to find mentors or advocates to pave the way for them, but, for the most part, they had to pave the way on their own. When they could find mentors or advocates, they discovered a path much more easily because, then, they had role models to help them find their way within a professional world predominantly occupied by males. Cracking the glass ceiling was important to both women, but for these two brave Latinas, there were sacrifices to be made. Both experienced marital conflicts. One of the Latinas experienced a divorce, which precipitated feelings of humiliation or shame for her. She suffered feelings of guilt for not being the perfect reflection of the Latinas of her time. Both were absent from their families and were not able to commit expected time to their families. Yet, when asked what cultural values were most important, they talked about hard work, values, family, determination and perseverance. They did not want their children to repeat the cycles that they or their mothers had taken. They improved themselves just as their own parents or grandparents did. These two women truly inspired a new reflection in the mirror for Latinas.

The researchers conducted qualitative interviews with each Latina searching for stories that might inspire other Latinas to aspire to excellence, analyzing the data by identifying codes of interest supported by direct quotes from each woman's interview. The codes were collapsed into six themes that were shared by the two Latina Titans: a strong, supportive mother; fervent faith; humble beginnings; mentorship; determination and intelligence; and challenges versus obstacles.

### A Strong, Supportive Mother

These Latinas had supportive mothers, both relating stories about the strong influence of their mothers. Berta stated:

Nothing was impossible for mother, whether it was making a dress or just being . . . extraordinary competent. My grandfather's side was education. There was never a question that I would get an education and achieve. It was like '*Siempre fueron maestros*'."

Celia noted that her mother never worked when she was growing up, and she felt very sheltered and protected because her mother was always involved in her life. Celia believes that her strong values in family, education and helping others originated from her mother.

One Titan lived with both parents while the other Titan lived in a home of divorce. Divorce in the Hispanic population at that time was rare because of the strong relationship to the Roman Catholic religion; however, it was not unheard of in that generation. There was speculation that many couples split but did not formally divorce (Furstenberg, 1994). According to the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (2007), 66% of Hispanic children lived with two married parents as compared to 70% of all U.S. children living with two married parents. In the early 1990s, all population subgroups were changing with postponement of marriage, a steady increase in divorce, and a decrease in remarriage

after divorce (Furstenberg, 1994). After five years of marriage, the divorce rate for Latinas remained significantly low at 7% (US Census Bureau, 2011). For Latinas who do remarry, the rate has remained stable since the 2010 US Census (US Census Bureau, 2011).

Even though one of our Titans experienced divorce and the other did not, both felt their mothers were a strong influence in their lives. This was a dominant theme that strongly bound our two Titans. They spoke with great pride and pleasure when they described their mothers. Both of them spoke of the inner strength and humility their mothers possessed regardless of the circumstances of their lives.

### **Fervent Faith**

As each woman shared memories of her early life, it was apparent that both were raised with family members who valued faith. Because these family members of strong faith surrounded each Latina, both of them professed a fervent faith still today. Berta said,

I lived in a very loving, nurturing, and safe community. I was raised in the church. There were many role models in church, and I learned to read the bible in both English and Spanish before I went to school in first grade. (personal communication, 2014)

Values they possessed were traced back to *familia* or extended family. Both Titans also noted that family ties were strong and that, most often, the father was the head of the family while the mother was responsible for the home. Creating a fervent faith flows throughout the female generations of the Latinas.

There are 50.5 million Hispanics/Latinos living in the United States, and some 29.7 million are estimated to be Roman Catholic, which is about 59% of the total Hispanic/Latino population (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2013). Our Titans were of the early generation who were strongly Roman Catholic or members of one of the dominant Protestant churches of the 60s, such as the Episcopal, Baptist, or Methodist religions (Johnson, Hoge, & Luidens, 1993). Approximately 55% of Hispanics in the U.S. said they were Roman Catholic, which was down from 67% in 2010 (Paulson, 2014).

### **Humble Beginnings**

Our Titans considered themselves to have been raised in humble households. Poverty rates for blacks and Hispanics have always exceeded the national average (University of Michigan, 2003). The Michigan researchers noted that, prior to 2003, 35% of Hispanic children under the age of 18 lived in poverty. Our Titans were not exceptions. This may explain why both Titans felt their needs were met, but they felt and knew they were poor. Berta stated, "We were not impoverished, but we certainly didn't have any wealth." Celia echoed that sentiment: "We didn't have much money, but there was always enough. We always felt loved, and at least I think I'm speaking for all of us, you know" (personal communication, 2014).

## **Mentorship**

Mentorship was important to both women, but neither had a mentor, so they chose to mentor others to ensure the path to success was easier for the generations of women who followed them. Celia noted that while she was not formally mentored, she did have her brothers as male role models who provided guidance for the job. There was frustration in Celia's response, indicating her sadness for not having a female mentor helping her along the way to success. Berta mentored other females and males and said, "I passed the torch, allowing others to lead. I had a sense of helping the community." Both were community-minded and wanted to do for others what had not been done for them.

Informal mentoring did come in a variety of ways. For example, Celia shared that her father "was not a high school graduate, but he was very intelligent and read the paper from cover to cover and anything else he could find." but it appeared that neither of these Latina Titans had any formal mentoring. In their professional lives, it became essential to mentor others. They were committed to mentoring students to ensure that others, both male and female students, would feel supported and move on into college.

## **Determination and Intelligence**

Trying to describe these two Latinas was a challenge because each was so unique. Both of them were determined and intelligent women. Their confidence was evident. Berta described herself as having been precocious in her childhood. She believed that her intelligence allowed her leadership roles to be a natural extension of her gifts:

I was strong-willed and change-oriented and [as a] result, focused as a leader. I was a creative woman and solved a lot of problems. Texas institutions were less ready to consider people like me because I was strong-willed. I stumbled into education and loved it! (personal communication, 2014)

Celia also described herself as high energy and intelligent: "I was a high achiever and on the honor roll and valedictorian of my graduating class. I was voted most likely to succeed" (personal communication, 2014). Celia started working in one of the high schools as a secretary and continued working on her teaching degree. She saw herself as a person that could solve problems:

I was always speaking my mind. Trying to see how to put a situation together and figure it out. I've always been open and honest with my superiors. I believe that if a woman is successful in a certain position then that paves the way for someone else to move forward. (personal communication, 2014)

After a fulfilling career, both women left a legacy for other Latinas to follow. They worked diligently to be at the top of their professional lives and succeeded.

## Challenges versus Obstacles

Both of our Titans viewed the obstacles they encountered as challenges, not obstacles. They were not afraid to confront the challenges and to persevere. While both Titans said they were discriminated against during their school years, they were able to see that the existence of discrimination elicited a determined response. Berta noted that:

As a woman, it [my career] was very male dominated . . . . From the time I was young, my parents told me I would do well and open doors for the Mexican American people. . . . But as a woman, you know, we had a tough role to hold. The Chicano movement was very male dominated and not inclusive of women. (personal communication, 2014)

Celia worked in the school districts for over 30 years. She had to leave home and family to get to a district that would allow her to be a leader: “To get the job I wanted in leadership I had to drive a long distance and leave my family each week to stay in an apartment. It was difficult” (personal communication, 2014). Truly both Titans faced impediments but did not consider them obstacles. Instead, each perceived them as challenges.

## Results

To understand the history of Latinas’ growth, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with two Latinas to determine what inspired them to excellence. Through *testimonios*, these Latina Titans shed light on their experiences of inequities, challenges, oppression, obstacles, resistance, marginalization, and barriers. They prevailed personally and professionally. They surpassed their male counterparts and acquired top-level, typically male-dominated positions. They became the top salary earners of their organizations, earning well over six digit salaries. To complete our stories, we return to our research questions:

1. What support do Latinas need to attain a successful careers outside of the home?
2. What barriers do Latinas face in creating a highly successful career?
3. What is the profile of highly successful Latinas?

## Support

The stories of these two Titans emphasized the need for support from the home, workplace, and extended family. The Latinas faced many obstacles with feelings of isolation. When exploring the support needed to achieve careers in higher education, our Latinas considered their mothers to be their greatest advocates and mentors. Both mothers encouraged their daughters to move forward and provided moral support to them. Both mothers also supported their daughters’ education in ways that reflected the Latino cultural values and beliefs of that time. Their support was evident in their parental engagement, including *sacrificios* (sacrifices), *consejos* (advice), and *apoyo* (moral support) (Ramos, 2014).

While the Titans did not have strong formal mentors, they both recognized the need for mentors to move up in higher education. Latinas who do find mentors or advocates discover the path to be much easier because the strength of the role models helps them navigate within and without a professional world occupied predominantly by males (Sherman, Munoz, Pankake, 2008). These two Latina Titans could have benefitted from a network of prominent and powerful Latinas, such as The *Adelante* Movement or the National *Hispana* Leadership Institute, both Latina-driven organizations that address educational inequities and foster the professional growth of the working Latina (Ramos, 2012). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are more opportunities to find female mentors to assist Latinas along the path to leadership in higher education even though there are still barriers to success.

### **Barriers**

To identify the barriers to a highly successful career, the researchers explored how the Latina Titans reached their high levels of achievement. Both Latinas experienced barriers and challenges when entering the workforce and began the progression up the ladder of success. They were absent from their families and unable to meet the family responsibilities defined by their culture. They felt the sting of divorce and unhappy relationships. They knew the pain of missing many of their children's activities. To sum up, they experienced personal pain along with the growth and expansion of their careers. While these barriers still exist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many Latinas experience far less pain because of the support and mentorship of others. Divorce is still experienced as shameful, but there are many more Latinas who choose happiness over the pain of an unhealthy relationship. There are more support systems to help women in general to thread their way through the path to leadership in higher education.

### **Conclusion**

The stories of these Latin Titans provided a profile of what a highly successful Latina in a higher education leadership role might be. These women worked long hours at their offices with strong stamina and determination. They strove to be the best they could and had a very strong work ethic. They sought professional success and, many times, their work took precedence over family out of necessity. While this was in direct conflict with a cultural upbringing that taught them to be family-focused, they managed to navigate their personal lives with integrity. Though they often missed family gatherings and children's events, they found ways to validate their loved ones and establish a role model of professional success for their children.

These two Titans were very successful in higher education. Their road to success, while fraught with lack of support and many barriers, did not prevent them from attaining the pinnacles of their careers. Their paths paved a clear road to success for other Latinas to follow, providing support for other Latinas as they walked the path to leadership in higher education. It is clear that intelligence, compelling persistence, and a strong desire can create a positive picture of Latina Titans for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## References

- Anzaldua, G. (1990). *Making face, making soul/haciendo caras: Creative and critical perspectives of feminists of color*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.
- Blackwell, M. (2003). Contested histories: *Las hijas de Cuauhtemoc*, Chicana feminisms, and print culture in the Chicano movement, 1968-1973. In G. F. Arredondo, A. Hurtada, N. Klahn, O. Najera-Ramirez, & P. Zavella (Eds.), *Chicana feminism: A critical reader* (pp. 59-89). Durham, NC: Duke UP.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bishop, H. P. (1937). *A case study of the improvement of Mexican homes through instruction in homemaking* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Southern California, Los Angeles.
- Blalock, B. (2014). *Dare: Straight talk on confidence, courage, and career for women in charge*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Brown, M., Setren, E., & Topa, G. (2013, June). *Do informal referrals lead to better matches? Evidence from a firm's employee referral system*. Staff Report No. 568.
- Cardoza, D. (1991). College attendance and persistence among Hispanic women: An examination of some contributing factors. *Sex Roles, 24*, 133-147.
- Carteret, M. (2011). Cultural values of Latino patients and families. Retrieved from <http://www.dimensionsofculture.com/2011/03/cultural-values-of-Latino-patients-and-families/>
- Chacon, M. A., Cohen, E. G., & Strover, S. (1986). Chicanas and Chicanos: Barriers to progress in higher education. In M. A. Olivas (Ed.), *Latino college students* (pp. 296-324). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Christman, D. E., & McClellan, R. L. (2012). Discovering middle space: Distinctions of sex and gender in resilient leadership. *The Journal of Higher Education, 83*(5), 648-670.
- Cotera, M. (1997). Our feminist heritage. In A. M. Garcia (Ed.), *Chicana feminist thought: The basic historical writings* (pp. 41-44). New York: Routledge.
- DelCampo, R. G., DelCampo, D. S., & DelCampo, R. L. (2009). Work, family, and personal fulfillment issues of professional and working class Latina women. *The Business Journal of Hispanic Research, 3*(1), 48-52.
- Delgado Bernal, D., Burciaga, R., & Carmona, J. F. (2012). Chicana-Latina testimonios: Mapping the methodological, pedagogical, and political. *Equity and Excellence in Education, 45*(3), 363-372.
- Dillard, A. (2013). *The writing life*. New York, NY: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc.
- Ellis, P. (1929). *Americanization through homemaking*. Los Angeles, CA: Wetzel Publishing Co.
- Flores, L. Y., & Obasi, E. M. (2005). Mentors' influence on Mexican American students' career and educational development. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 33*, 146-164.
-

- Furstenberg, F. F., Jr. (1994). History and current status of divorce in the United States. *The future of children*, 29-43.
- Galanti, G. (2003). The Hispanic family and male-female relationships: An overview. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 14(3), 180-185. doi:10.1177/1043659603253548
- Gandara, P. (1982). Passing through the eye of the needle: High achieving Chicanas. *Hispanic Journal of Behavior Sciences*, 4, 167-179
- Garcia, R. (1995). Critical race theory and Proposition 187: The radical politics of immigration law. *Chicano-Latino Law Review*, 17, 118-148.
- Gonzalez, G. G. (1990). *Chicano education in the Era of Segregation*, Philadelphia, PA: The Balch Institute Press.
- Guajardo, M., Guajardo, F., Casaperalta, E. (2008). Transformative education: Chronicling a pedagogy for social change. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 39(1), 3-22.
- Hernandez-Truyol, B. E. (1997). Borders (en)gendered: Normativities, Latinas and a LatCrit paradigm. *New York University Law Review*, 72, 882-927.
- Hurtada, A. (1998). *Sitios y lenguas: Chicanas theorize feminism*. *Hypatia*, 13(2), 135-159.
- Hurtado, A., Cervantez, K., & Eccleston, M. (2009). Infinite possibilities, many obstacles: Language, culture, identity, and Latino/a educational achievement. In E. G. Murillo, Jr., S. A. Villenas, R. T Galvan, J. S. Munoz, C. Martinez, M. Machado-Casas (Eds.), *Handbook of Latinos and education: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 284-299). New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Jackson, M. (2013, November 7). *Fact sheet: The state of Latinas in the United States*. Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/report/2013/11/07/79167/fact-sheet-the-state-of-latinas-in-the-united-states/>
- Johnson, B., Hoge, D. R., & Luidens, D. A. (1993, March). Mainline churches: The real reason for decline. Retrieved from <http://www.leaderu.com/ftissues/ft9303/articles/johnson.html>
- Johnson, K. R. (1997). Some thoughts on the future of Latino legal scholarship. *Harvard Latino Law Review*, 2, 101-144.
- Latina Feminist Group. (2001). *Telling to live: Latina feminist Teeios*. Durham, NC: Duke UP.
- Leal-Muniz, V., & Constantine, M. G. (2005). Predictors of the career commitment process in Mexican American college students. *Journal of Career Assessments*, 31, 204-215.
- Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., & Hackett, G. (2000). Contextual support and barriers to career choice: A social cognitive analysis. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 47, 36-49.
- Lopez, T. A. & Davalos, K. M. (2009). Knowing, feeling, doing: The epistemology of Chicana/Latina studies. *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social*, 8, 10-22.

- Martinez, G. A. (1994). Legal indeterminacy, judicial discretion and the Mexican-American litigation experience: 1930-1980. *U.C. Davis Law Review*, 27, 555-618.
- National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (2007). Hispanics and Latinos. Retrieved from <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/research-and-policy/marriage-facts/culture/hispanics-and-latinos/index.aspx>
- National Women's Law Center & Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (2009). Listening to Latinas: Barriers to high school graduation. Retrieved from <https://www.maldef.org/assets/pdf/ListeningtoLatinas.pdf>
- Paulson, M. (2014) Even as U.S. Hispanics Lift Catholicism, Many Are Leaving the Church Behind. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/08/upshot/even-as-hispanics-lift-catholicism-theyre-leaving-it.html? r=0>
- Ramos, E. (2012). Latina leadership: We've come a long way, baby! Retrieved from <http://nbclatino.com/2012/12/12/latina-leadership-weve-come-a-long-way-baby/>
- Ramos, M. (2014, June). The strengths of Latina mothers in supporting their children's education: A cultural perspective. *Child Trends Hispanic Institute Research Brief #2014-29*. Retrieved from <http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Strengths-of-Latinas-Mothers-formatted-6-10-14.pdf>
- Rivera, L. M., Chen, E. C., Flores, L. Y., Blumberg, F., Ponterotto, J. G., & (2007). The effects of perceived barriers, role models, and acculturation on the career self-efficacy and career consideration of Hispanic women. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 56(1), 47-61.
- Sangha, S. (2012, November 13). *Latinas attend college in record numbers, but stay close to home*. Retrieved from <http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/lifestyle/2012/11/13/latinatas-attend-college-in-record-numbers-but-stay-close-to-home/>
- Sherman, W., Munoz, A., Pankake, A. (2008). The great divide: Women's experiences with mentoring. *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*, 6(4), 239-259.
- Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical Race Methodology: Counter-storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 23-44.
- Solorzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2001). Critical race and LatCrit theory and method: Counter-storytelling. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 14(4), 471-495. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09518390110063365>
- University of Michigan (2003). 2003 poverty research grants: Poverty and health. Retrieved from [http://npc.umich.edu/opportunities/research\\_grants/2003\\_poverty\\_grants/](http://npc.umich.edu/opportunities/research_grants/2003_poverty_grants/)
- U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (2013). Laity and parishes. Retrieved from <http://www.usccb.org/about/media-relations/statistics/laity-parishes.cfm>



- U.S. Department of Education (2013). *Making education work for Latinas in the U.S.* Commissioned by Eva Longoria Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/edblogs/hispanic-initiative/2014/06/making-education-work-for-latinas-in-the-u-s/>
- United States Census Bureau (2011). Number, timing, and duration of marriages and divorces: 2009. *Household Economic Studies*. Retrieved from [www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/p70-125.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/p70-125.pdf)
- Valencia R. R. (1997). *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. Washington, DC: The Falmer Press.

Appendix A  
Interview Protocol for Successful Latina Women<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore the lives of successful Latina women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We hope to discover the characteristics and success of these women in order to advance other Latina women in successful careers.

Time of Interview:	
Date:	
Place:	
Interviewer:	
Interviewee:	
Position of Interviewee:	

**Interview Protocol Items:**

- 1. Tell me about your childhood. Did your childhood have any impact on where you are today?**

**Probes:**

Where did you go to elementary school, etc.?

Tell me about it. Where were you raised?

- 2. What influence did your parents have on your education?**

**Probes:**

Born when (general)

Education levels

Marital status

Careers (Migrant Workers)

Mom

Dad

Approximate Financial Status when you were home

---

<sup>1</sup> This protocol is based on Sample Interview Protocol found in Creswell (2014). Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. (4<sup>th</sup> Ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

**3. Tell me about your career path.**

**Probes:**

What was your vision for self when your career began?

Did you have a career plan? When was it established?

**4. What individuals inspired you to pursue your professional goals?**

**Probes:**

Mentors?

Spouse/significant other?

Family members?

**5. What sacrifices did you have to make to reach this level of success?**

**Probes:**

What obstacles were thrown at you along the way?

What opportunities did you receive that moved you forward?

**6. What impact did your culture and values have on “breaking the glass ceiling” for Latina women?**

**Probes:**

At what point in your life were you motivated to be successful?

How did your Latina values and culture influence your success?

What happened to you to start the process?

**7. How would you define yourself as a leader?**

**Probes:**

How does that influence your leadership of your organization?

Did gender play a role in your professional life?

How do you feel about change?

**8. How did you level the playing field for yourself in order to be successful?**

**Probes:**

How many times were others given the opportunity to move forward and you were left behind? (Identify their gender and ethnicity).

Do women have “secret weapons: that your male counterparts do not in reaching success?

**9. How have you paved the path for other Latina women?**

**Probes:**

Mentoring?

Opportunities?

Not? And Why?

**10. What does the future hold for you?**

**Probes:**

Higher position?

Different Profession?

Retirement?

Taking care of family?

**11. Name five personal traits you believe attributed to your success.**

**12. Are there any other comments about Latina professional women's success that you would like to add to our research?**

Thank you for participating in this study.

### About the Authors

**Velma D. Menchaca, Ph.D.** ([velma.menchaca@utrgv.edu](mailto:velma.menchaca@utrgv.edu)) earned her Ph.D. from Texas A&M University in Curriculum & Instruction, with a minor in Educational Administration in 1991. She is currently a professor and department chair for the Department of Organization and School Leadership at the University of Texas RGV. She has previously taught at the University of Texas Pan American, Texas State University, and Tarleton State University. Menchaca has been a university professor for 25 years and was in public education for 11 years. Her research focuses in the areas of cultural responsiveness, English Learners, mentoring leaders, and rural education. Dr. Menchaca teaches in the areas of sociocultural issues, school and community engagement, and special populations, and teaches in the master's and doctoral programs. She has chaired seven dissertations and served on 13 other dissertations. She has made state, national, and international presentations. She has also served on national and state boards, in addition to providing service to her community. Menchaca served as principal investigator for a \$12,000 grant to recruit and retain high quality teachers in small, rural districts and recently received the Mentor Award presented by the College of Education.

**Shirley J. Mills, Ph.D.** ([mills@utrgv.edu](mailto:mills@utrgv.edu)) graduated from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in December 2005. She moved to Edinburg, Texas, to work at the University of Texas Pan American (UTPA) in 2007. She was a member of the Department of Educational Leadership as a Tenure Track assistant professor for five years and was granted her title of associate professor in 2012. Mills was chosen to attend a Leadership Training by the Vice Provost in 2013, and after successfully finishing that intensive training,

she was invited to become the Interim Associate Vice Provost for one year. In 2015, UTPA and University of Texas Brownsville (UTB) were disbanded permanently and reemerged as the new University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV). This year Mills has been assigned as the Director of College Readiness Initiatives under the Vice President of Student Academic Success, in which role she works with school districts, community colleges, Region One, and UTRGV officials to create a seamless transition for students moving from high school to higher education.

**Filomena Leo, Ed.D.** ([menaleo68@gmail.com](mailto:menaleo68@gmail.com)) earned her Ed.D. from the University of Texas Pan American. Currently an interim superintendent at Weslaco ISD, Leo has previously served as interim superintendent at Sharyland ISD, Raymondville ISD, and San Benito ISD. She was also one of the first Latina superintendents at La Joya ISD. Leo has taught as an adjunct professor at the University of Texas Pan American. She has made state and national presentations and has served on national and state committees in addition to providing service to her community.