

Dialogue & Conversation on

Tomás Rivera Lecture: Hispanicity &



We are pleased to bring you a series of articles based on presentations and dialogue at the 2009 conference in San Antonio of the American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education (AAHHE), which *The Hispanic Outlook* was privileged to co-sponsor and attend. We begin with the Tomás Rivera Lecture by distinguished scholar Marta Tienda.

Educational inequality affects Hispanics and stirs up a host of questions. Does diversity exist? Even more specifically, does diversity exist in our higher education system? Can we do anything to shrink the widening gap between Latino and White students in their pursuit of higher education success and funding for them to continue? Why is it important to push Latino students into top-tier institutions rather than

community colleges? Can Latino students truly overcome the circumstances surrounding their upbringing and thrive in higher-echelon universities – then give back to their communities?

Each year at the AAHHE convention, a distinguished scholar or national leader is selected to present the Tomás Rivera Lecture, in honor of the late Dr. Tomás Rivera – a son of migrant farmworkers who became an esteemed author, poet and scholar, and who was, at his death 25 years ago at age 48, chancellor of the University of California-Riverside, the first Mexican-American to hold such a position in the UC system. Schools, libraries and the well-respected Tomás Rivera Policy Institute, of which he was a founder, are named in his honor.

Selected this year to deliver the Tomás Rivera lecture at the AAHHE convention, the theme of which was “*Soluciones Para el Futuro: Achieving Hispanic Success*,” was Dr. Marta Tienda, Maurice P. During ‘22 Professor in Demographic Studies, professor of sociology and public affairs, and former director of its Office of Population Research. Earlier, Tienda was Ralph Lewis Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago and editor of the *American Journal of Sociology*. A fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, she earned a B.A. in Spanish from Michigan State University and a master’s and Ph.D in sociology from the University of Texas-Austin.

Tienda’s thought-provoking lecture “Hispanicity and Educational Inequality: Risks, Opportunities and the Nation’s Future” addressed the ongoing gap between White and Hispanic student achievement. She stressed the need for role models who encourage further education for Latinos at top-tier, four-year institutions.

“One of the most important things to know,” she said, “is how widening inequalities are making Latino students fall behind, not only in their

studies but in their aspirations. Where they come from should not matter if they realize their talent, have a support system, are prepared to follow a predetermined path that can help them get ahead – and realize the possible impact they can have on the world.

“This is a Hispanic moment in the history of our country,” she says. “We have to believe that our demography is not our destiny.”

Tienda’s teaching and research interests center on ethnic and racial stratification, population and economic development, poverty and social policy and the demography of higher education. Her many published books and articles include *Multiple Origins, Uncertain Destinies: Hispanics and the American Future*; *Youth in Cities*; *The Color of Opportunity: Pathways to Family, Welfare and Work*; *The Demography of Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the United States*.

Although Tienda’s life work encompasses the Hispanic experience as a whole, it focuses on particular cultures for certain research. For example, immigration, migration and economic status are crucial elements that can affect a student’s progress and success, she said. “There’s a sense that Mexicans can’t be assimilated,” she said. “We are the first universal nation, and we can’t do that? Issues of inclusiveness, of equality and social justice in our education system have to be addressed.”

By 2030, many Latinos will be in the labor force. “We want them to be an educated labor force,” she says. “They are the future of this country.”

Today, a majority, 78 percent, of the Latino school-age population in high schools is U.S.-born, Tienda says. Between 1960 and 2000, fertility increased; births surpassed migration. By 2030, 26 million will be third-generation or more. Assessing generational differences can help provide a better transition into the U.S. general population.

Although college enrollment is at an all-time

Latinos in Higher Education

Educational Inequality

by Sylvia Mendoza

high, the enrollment gap between White and Hispanic students has been widening. After four years of high school, only 53 percent of Hispanics are graduates vs. 75 percent of Whites. There are more demands made of K-12 students. College slots are limited.

Instead of pushing Latino students to attend two-year institutions, she says, they should be encouraged to apply to No. 1 tiered/ranked four-year colleges. Community colleges are not bad, Tienda says, but four-year institutions with stellar reputations will challenge them and help them have a bigger impact on our world after college. But, she points out, the transfer rates from two- to four-year institutions are low. What happens to students then, those who fall through those cracks?

“Low transfer rates will shatter dreams,” she said simply. This must not happen.

The education system has to address generational issues, she says, as well as close the gap between Hispanic native-born and Hispanic foreign-born students. Odds of enrolling in any college depend in part on parent variables. Children whose parents are undocumented and uneducated live in fear of not being able to make it, of not taking their dreams of higher education to the highest levels, Tienda says. The challenges can be overcome, she says, but only if institutions study specific needs and variables of the Hispanic culture – issues of multiple origins, language and the “Hispanic education paradox” – rising education levels but growing education gaps among Hispanics and between Hispanic and other ethnicities.

Currently, according to Tienda, we are not very successful at addressing the issues and thus helping close the gaps. Flaws in the system need to be changed, including the English-Language Learner program, which she claims “just doesn’t work.”

There are other concrete problems affecting Hispanics as well – lower pre-literacy skills, for example, especially in Spanish-dominant homes.



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Dr. Marta Tienda, Tomás Rivera lecturer,
AAHHE Conference, March 2009

And remedial English, says Tienda, is not the solution. Middle school transition, especially in large urban schools, is harmed by poor relations with teachers and an inability to communicate. In secondary schools, there is definitely disengagement, which leads to elevated high school

dropout rates. The question is, says Tienda, *how* do we keep them engaged?

In kindergarten, Hispanics already lag behind. Head Start is good to have in place – but how do you continue the momentum?

There is a great sense of urgency to close the

gap, she says, even starting at the kindergarten level. It is absolutely necessary if Latinos are to have an impact on the economic recovery of the nation and reap the benefits, as well. If they are not prepared, much will be lost, she says.

A lack of passion, direction and connection will alienate students from their potential, Tienda says. “Noncompetitiveness affects everything from employment to home ownership to wealth and well-being.”

The statistics and hard facts challenge educators to inspire their students to higher aspirations. “You have to not marginalize yourself. You can’t just have Hispanics talking to other Hispanics about problems with the Hispanic population. Where’s that going to get us? Go mainstream. How do you know if you can move the needle if you don’t step into another realm?”

The challenge for Tienda to move out of her own comfort zone came once she started studying sociology. A Spanish literature major whose family members, her included, were migrant workers, Tienda was eventually trained at the University of Texas-Austin in social sciences, embarking on a new career.

“It was where I belonged,” she said. Most importantly, she saw that displacement of Mexican farmworkers was extreme, and although the civil rights movement reverberated to the fields and César Chávez offered representation for those who so needed it, the farmworker population had to become proactive and learn the system.

In studying populations, a whole new world opened up to her. “I became fascinated with the lingo,” she said. “I didn’t even know what the ‘Fourth Count’ was, but I eventually learned that it had to do with how many Hispanics there were. It was a different way to approach sociology.”

That kind of quantitative work is where she found her niche. To study the bigger picture of Hispanics in America and Latin American development, she has focused on how poverty, economics and education affect the success of minorities. She has also focused on how women, equality, human migration, death and births were sometimes affected by demographics.

“I didn’t want to ghettoize myself, study myself or the sociology of myself. There’s a broader picture out there.” She studied sociology and was drawn to population centers for demography and ecology at various universities. Her attraction to Princeton, where she currently teaches and does her research, was its strong

population center.

Tienda believes we are at a juncture of immense possibility and change because of the economic situation of the country. The bottom line is that educated youth will be the leaders of this country. Demography and given circumstances should not be an obstacle for students and what they have to offer, if they are determined to make an impact on our communities. However, professors also need to step up to the plate. Representation on campuses needs to change, she says. There is a need for Latinos in Ivy League schools, in four-year institutions, in positions of power and authority where a decision can initiate change.

It can be intimidating to apply to an Ivy League or top-tier school, but that shouldn’t stop Hispanic students from applying or keep professors from urging students to apply. “If you have the talent, the grades, the test scores, you can get financial aid,” said Tienda. “It will be competitive, but if you succeed here, imagine what you can do when you step through the door after graduating.”

The focus on equal education opportunity for Hispanic students is vitally important. Organizations such as AAHHE should be driven to put more of our students into more competitive institutions, she says. There’s emphasis on race and ethnicity, but we don’t want to be put in someone else’s box.

“We cannot be inadequate. It’s an opportunity for our country to invest in that rapidly growing population, the Hispanic population, Hispanic youth. These students with incredible talent can’t be held back. They are our biggest resource for the future, in making an economic impact. They only become a dividend, have a payoff, if we invest in them now. When we do, the widening inequalities can fall behind.”

Tienda believes educators all have an obligation to go beyond teaching and textbooks. They are role models whether they want to be or not. They must be there not just for Latino students but for all students. “It matters to our students who we are and where we come from. It matters that we try to connect with them so they feel they matter. We need to take someone by each hand and turn the hope and aspiration into absolute possibility.”

Listen to what your students are not saying, for those who might feel marginalized. “If they have their tails between their legs and their ears back because of their insecurities, I tell them ‘no,’ not acceptable. I don’t get into identity politics, but I

am sensitive and knowledgeable because of where I come from. But I also speak through my work and actions. Despite everything, it’s what I’ve accomplished that I want them to see.”

She points out professors who make a difference, such as Dr. Richard Tapia at Rice University. She thinks his program has more Hispanics in it than any other because he establishes links between graduate students and undergraduates and strives for equity in education. “We need to pull others along,” said Tienda. “People want to mentor others. If you teach what you know, you learn more yourself.”

In the next five to 10 years, Tienda wants to move into administration, a new challenge in her career path. In the meantime, she works with her students and stats and sees possibilities.

“I’m demanding, but I don’t expect any less from my students than I expect from myself. I know they can do it. I want them to believe that we’re second to none. No group – not one – has a monopoly on knowledge and learning. We need to leave our own imprint. This is a Hispanic moment. We must take it and prosper.”



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