

MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS ORAL HISTORIES PROJECT

ANNE-MARIE NÚÑEZ

By Melissa Bodnar



Anne-Marie Núñez, Professor in the Department of Educational Studies at The Ohio State University, has always believed in the power of higher education. As the first person in her family to receive a bachelor's degree in the United States, Núñez considers herself lucky to have had the opportunity to pursue post-secondary education. Recognizing that not all students have the same opportunities that she enjoyed, Núñez has devoted her professional career to broadening participation for historically underrepresented groups in higher education. To that end, much of her research focuses on the experiences of Latinx students, and the important role Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) play in promoting access and success.

While Núñez's personal experiences as a Latina of mixed heritage background have played an important role in framing her work, she credits her time as a faculty member at an HSI at the outset of her career with defining who she is as a professor, and as a scholar. Upon joining the faculty at The University of Texas at San Antonio, Núñez quickly realized that she needed to explore the institutional context of the school to better serve the students she was teaching. In doing so, she found that very little research existed on HSIs. Núñez had found her niche; the dearth of academic research and information on HSIs, and the students that they serve, is what inspired her to study them and the ways in which they contribute to the success of Latinx students.

To that end, Núñez focused her efforts on exploring the educational experiences and outcomes of underserved student populations. In doing so, she found that academic preparation is one of the most important predictors of success for minority students, including Latinx students. According to Núñez, "Higher education and K-12 haven't really coordinated as much as they could to formulate seamless pathways for students." This lack of college transition programming and academic preparation contributes to lower levels of persistence and attainment among minority student populations. However, Núñez believes that Hispanic Serving Institutions are filling some of these gaps. She notes that The University of Texas at El Paso, and the El Paso School District share data on elementary student progress and proclivity for continued education. In doing so, she contends that the institution is able to identify potential interventions based on data about students in the higher education pipeline. These data then inform the development of college preparation programs to better shepherd underrepresented students to post-secondary education.

In addition to data-driven initiatives, Núñez has found that culturally responsive programming is crucial to Latinx student success. Núñez bases this claim on the work of a former colleague at The University of Texas at San Antonio who established a middle school mathematics program for Latinx students to challenge common stereotypes that Latinos cannot work in those fields. The program has been very successful in cultivating the next generation of Latinx engineers and mathematicians. According to Núñez, "That work was really rooted in being culturally responsive to the local population," which is key to improving access and retention for underserved student populations.

Beyond the work that HSIs are doing to create pathways to success for Latino students, Núñez has found that these institutions also cultivate a sense of support and community for minority students in ways that other institutions do not. According to Núñez, many students at HSIs describe a personalized and supportive environment on their campuses. Núñez attributes this sense of community to the cultural awareness and sensitivity of faculty, who strive to make their students feel at home and supported in the classroom.

<https://cmsi.gse.rutgers.edu/content/msi-oral-history-project>

Núñez's own teaching style has evolved based on a desire to be responsive not only to her students' needs, but to their multiple identities as well. Through her research, she has found the theoretical framework of intersectionality to be particularly helpful in her teaching, especially at Hispanic Serving Institutions: "When I teach..., I try to emphasize the structural, as well as the individual, factors that influence students' experiences and outcomes, and also emphasize that, while identity plays a role in those experiences and outcomes, students can't be reduced to one identity." Núñez's mixed-race background, and her understanding of her own identity lends itself to this theoretical approach to teaching. She is able to relate to her students on a personal level, and her students, in turn, can identify with her as a mixed-race Latina. Núñez believes that diversity at the faculty level enhances not only classroom learning experiences, but also improves role modeling for students and academics at all levels. In her own educational journey, Núñez experienced, first-hand, the lack of diversity in academia. "I had some role models," she reflects, "but...given that only about 3% of all women faculty are Latina, there aren't a lot of role models or people to share experiences with along those lines." As a Latina, Núñez struggled to see herself represented in academia.

While Núñez has been fortunate enough to cultivate relationships with mentors of all backgrounds, she feels strongly that the Latina colleagues she worked with at The University of Texas at San Antonio have supported and advanced her work in unique ways that other mentors and peers could not. Upon beginning her work at this HSI, she found that there was a far larger share of Latina faculty than is typical in higher education. In this environment, Núñez connected with other Latinas who were interested in coming together and supporting each other. In doing so, she found that their commitment to advancing Latino education, particularly in terms of being responsive to the needs of students, inspired her to develop new strategies to enhance her own work. In addition, Núñez's early days in academia were made easier by the system of social support that she created with her Latina peers. She credits code-switching or being able to speak in both English and Spanish, while at work, and connecting on a cultural level with her colleagues, with facilitating her transition into academia. According to Núñez having a support system of other Latinas enabled her to explore her Latina identity while working in an academic culture that did not reflect that identity.

As the nation continues to become more diverse, higher education must adapt to better meet the needs of its student populations. Núñez believes that work should begin with diversifying faculty, and supporting faculty of color. To do so, faculty search committees must be far more intentional about seeking out minority candidates. In doing so, Núñez believes that students will benefit from having instructors at the post-secondary level that they can identify with – role models who they can look to for guidance and support. Núñez has devoted her professional career to raising the profile of Hispanic Serving Institutions in the United States. Her perspective as a Latina of mixed heritage background, coupled with her professional experiences working for HSIs and advocating for Latino students, has paved the way for her innovative work on behalf of underrepresented student populations. Núñez is an advocate for Latinx and minority students across the country, and her research has brought a voice to student populations and institutions that deserve our attention. "How quickly [higher education] adapts, and with what level of quality it responds, to the needs of underrepresented students," she argues, "is going to affect the entire future of this country." Núñez is ready, and eager, to facilitate this process within the higher education landscape.

Minority Serving Institutions Oral History Project

The MSI Oral History Project shares a glimpse into the lives of prominent scholars and leaders across the MSI landscape. This initiative was born out of a class titled "Understanding Minority Serving Institutions," in which students interviewed key figures in higher education who have led Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), work to advocate for MSI inclusion in larger discussion within higher education, or conduct MSI-related research. These important individuals range from faculty in higher education to MSI presidents to those working within nonprofit organizations that support MSIs.