

MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS ORAL HISTORIES PROJECT

DEBORAH SANTIAGO

By Dorothy Villarreal



When it comes to making any sort of decisions, whether on large-scale policy issues or smaller determinations, data inform the decision-makers and equip them with the tools with which to make their judgments. What happens, however, when data are missing? Deborah Santiago, co-founder, Chief Operating Officer, and Vice President for Policy at Exelencia in Education, has been working for more than 20 years to address this issue. I chatted with Deborah in a 30-minute window during her busy schedule about her path in higher education and research, and her insights into next steps for Latinos in higher education. While she has always been interested in the Latinx community, her path to leadership was not always so clear-cut.

Deborah was raised in a military family. Her father was in the U. S. Air Force, and both her mother and father were Puerto Rican. Due to her father's job, she "moved around quite a bit...as he tried to move up in the world, in the Air Force." She recalls, "I was the first person in my family to go to college until I wasn't. My father, after 20-odd years, got his bachelor's degree my junior year of college after he had, like, 192 credits because he did it while he was in the military." Years before finishing his degree, Deborah's father was given a station in Spain. Instead of going with her family, Deborah stayed in the States. "We decided I was going to stay for my senior year so that I could

figure out how to go to college because we didn't know how to do that." She recalls this being a confusing time. "I learned quite a bit about higher education, financial aid, admissions, applications! The faith and trust that my parents put in me to figure it all out is something that still motivates me today; it was such a sacrifice on their part, but they knew it was the right thing to do."

At Mary Washington College (now University), Deborah concentrated in economics and upon graduating, worked in a variety of different sectors as she sought to figure out her fit. "I worked in housing and health care, economics, profit, non-profit, local, state, federal, anything in between! I ended up at an organization called ASPIRA where... everything clicked for me. I needed to get more education because they wouldn't let me manage a program." For Deborah, the desire to directly work on issues led to her decision to enter a master's program at Virginia Tech, "I didn't want to wait ten years to do what I already could." While there, she worked with a professor who had a program serving in Chile and Cuba. Soon thereafter, she took a position as a Presidential Management Fellow with the federal government where she stayed for six years. "I started off in a program office, did policy, budget, legislative work for the Department of Education...I rotated a bit." As she was wrapping up her program, Deborah was ready to be on the ground, working directly with students in California or Texas.

As luck (and hard work) would have it, Deborah had briefly worked with Sarita Brown, who was soon promoted to become Executive Director of the White House Initiative. Within two days of Sarita taking the position, she asked Deborah to lead as Deputy Director at the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics. During her time there, she worked on wide-ranging issues, from K-12 policy to federal government policy. Having realized the importance of data, as well as the lack of it, she decided to begin a doctoral program once her appointment was up. While doing her doctoral work, Deborah took a job at the L.A. Alliance for Student Achievement where she

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

translated data for parents so that they could advocate for their children. “For so many people, policy is all about the data. It’s the language of policy, right? ...Parents needed to advocate for their young people using the language of the policy folks.”

As she did the work, however, she remained in touch with Sarita. “[We] just kept thinking about higher education... the conversation in D.C. would talk about student success, but never about who the students were. Rarely were we talking about Latinos from a policy perspective. And if there was any mentioned, it was very deficit-based; it was high school dropouts, English language learners, undocumented immigrants...and while we were all of those things, the majority of Latinos are not those.”

This dissonance led to a decision. “The lack of focus on the strengths and needs of the students who are up and coming...that was a heck of an opportunity! I saw...a lot of people solving for issues that were not even accurate or appropriate for students going through it.” She and Sarita decided to do something about it, but not without a few stumbling blocks.

Deborah, still in her doctoral program in California and just diagnosed with breast cancer, and Sarita in D.C., pooled resources and started Excelencia in Education. “It’s not good enough to have a conversation. I love data, but data has to have a purpose. We’ve been able to get people thinking about Latinos in a more asset-based and constructive way. We focus on what we can do to improve and support, rather than just analyze and criticize.”

In 2018, Excelencia celebrated their 14th year anniversary and they show no signs of stopping. “When we started, we took a chance. Next year is our quinceañera and we need to push institutions to do more. We’re in the steps of developing something we’re calling our ‘Seal of Exelencia’...looking at schools that are truly serving [their students], not just enrolling [them]. It’s a big challenge,...[but] we are taking it on. We’ve made that decision that for however long we’re going to be fortunate enough to keep on doing this, we’re gonna keep on pushing.” In our conversation, Deborah’s enthusiasm was infectious. She’s insistent that we need to hold our institutions accountable and push them and ourselves. When asked what motivates her, Deborah didn’t hesitate, recalling the lesson her parents taught her, “It’s...humbling because when people give you their faith, their trust, ...you have to follow through. We have to stay true and be worthy of that trust. That continues to guide me.”

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.