

## MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS ORAL HISTORIES PROJECT

### EMILY CALDERÓN GALDEANO

By Melissa Bodnar



A native of the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, Emily Calderón Galdeano, CEO of Elevate Consulting Group and former Director of Research for Excelencia in Education, has over twelve years of experience in government, academia, and public policy. Her experiences in each of those areas have helped shape her perspective on higher education, and her passion for advancing research on Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) and Latinx student success. Her personal experiences as a Latina student, alongside her time spent as a faculty member at a Hispanic Serving Institution, are the primary motivation for her work.

In pursuing an undergraduate degree, Calderón Galdeano left the Rio Grande Valley to attend a private, liberal arts institution. She was not a first-generation student, but her time at Southwestern University was not without its challenges. In terms of student demographics, Calderón Galdeano recalls that she was one of approximately 80 Latinx students on campus. With such low Latino enrollment, limited resources were allotted to support services for Latino students, which led Calderón Galdeano and her peers to establish a Latino student organization on campus, with support from the lone Latino staff member at the institution.

In addition to the lack of Latino support services on campus, Calderón Galdeano found that there was a proclivity for cultural insensitivity among some instructors at Southwestern. As a first-year student, her calculus professor openly questioned her ability to learn the course material because she was a woman, and a Latina. “The system,” Calderón Galdeano quickly

realized, “was going against me.” Though she faced skepticism about her ability to learn and succeed early on in her college career, she also found a mentor who challenged her, and pushed her to reach her full potential. Calderón Galdeano recalls an International Relations professor who would always call her “Calderón.” When she asked why he referred to her in that way, he responded, “I call you Calderón because I see that you can do this, and I see you in that field and I want you to get used to it.” For Calderón Galdeano, who had not previously considered pursuing a doctorate, that professor changed her life, and her career trajectory. Having someone in a position of power and influence believe in her and her ability to succeed was crucial for Calderón Galdeano, who confidently asserts that she would not be where she is today without that encouragement.

After a productive career working as a legislative aide in the Texas House and Senate, Calderón Galdeano found herself back in the classroom as a professor at The University of Texas-Pan American (Pan Am), an HSI. Pan Am, which is located in the Rio Grande Valley, serves a large proportion of Latinx students. Despite the demographics of the student body, Calderón Galdeano was surprised to find that she was the only Latina faculty member in the Political Science Department. She shares, “Being that the Valley is an area in Texas where, my gosh, probably the high schools are 90% Latino, and then to go to the University that is...in their community, with a faculty that does not necessarily reflect that, particularly in the Political Science Department, was eye-opening.” Realizing the impact that having a faculty member who came from their community, and who understood their life experiences and culture, had on her students, Calderón Galdeano made it her goal to do more to advance underrepresented students in higher education.

Throughout her career, Calderón Galdeano has worked to integrate research, policy, and practice to facilitate Latino student success. She reflects, “People tend to assume that they know what is best for the students, rather than asking the students what they think.... It is my responsibility, getting my degree and working in this field, to represent those who can’t be at this table.”

Over the years, Calderón Galdeano has represented parties on all sides of that figurative table. As a faculty member at an HSI, she

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interacted with Latino students directly, gaining a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of underrepresented students in post-secondary education. While working in the Texas House and Senate, she developed a firm understanding of how bills become laws, and gained experience drafting legislation. As the Director of Research at the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU), Calderón Galdeano represented, and advocated for the interests of, Hispanic Serving Institutions across the country. Prior to joining HACU, she had developed a very Texas-focused approach to her work; joining a national organization made her consider what it meant to be a Hispanic Serving Institution more broadly. Today, at Excelencia in Education, Calderón Galdeano's work focuses on identifying best practices at Hispanic Serving Institutions, and considering the ways in which those initiatives can be scaled and replicated to meet the needs of students across the country.

Through these experiences, Calderón Galdeano has developed a unique perspective for studying the intersection of public policy and higher education, particularly in regards to Latino students. As a Latina, she feels a responsibility to accurately represent HSIs to the public in ways that other researchers might not. "There is a pressure in that I want to make sure that I am representing them well," says Calderón Galdeano, "and that I am advancing understanding of this concept." In particular, Calderón Galdeano believes strongly that the term "Hispanic Serving Institution" cannot be applied without considering a college or university's unique characteristics (i.e. 2-year/4-year, public/private, urban/rural, etc.). She feels that "HSI" is often used as a blanket term for institutions that serve Latino students, and that such applications of this designation fail to accurately portray the range of institutional identities that comprise the HSI population in the United States.

To combat such ill-informed notions of what it means to be a Hispanic Serving Institution, Calderón Galdeano strives to promote the idea that HSIs are the future of higher education. She estimates that HSIs educate over 60% of the Latino population in the United States and, as the number of Latinos in the country continues to grow, post-secondary institutions should look to HSIs as examples of how to serve this student population. Calderón Galdeano believes that, as a country, we need to respect the work that HSIs are doing, and learn from them. As the demographics of the country's student population shifts, it is important that colleges and universities look at their students, and consider how best to serve them. According to Calderón Galdeano, HSIs have already made great strides in this area, and should be looked to as role models for how to meet the needs of diverse student populations.

Emily Calderón Galdeano's passion for advancing Hispanic Serving Institutions and promoting Latino student success is hard to ignore. Her unique experiences as a Latina student, along with her professional journey in the classroom, legislature, and policy arena, have shaped her perspective and her work in higher education. With an eye towards the needs of Latino students, Calderón Galdeano has devoted her professional career to the intersection of higher education policy and practice. Her deep knowledge and understanding of the Latino student experience has guided her research work, and made her a strong advocate for the student voice in government and policy. For Calderón Galdeano, there is so much more work yet to be done on behalf of Hispanic Serving Institutions, and she is ready to lead the charge.

## 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.*