People of color are often changed by higher education, but now institutions themselves must change in order to accommodate culturally diverse student populations.

From the Barrio to the Academy: Revelations of a Mexican American "Scholarship Girl"

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It was during my first year of graduate school at the University of Michigan, far away from the Laredo, Texas, barrio where I spent my youth, that I read Richard Rodriguez's (1975) poignant essay, "Going Home Again: The New American Scholarship Boy." Reading this story of how the academy changes foreigners who enter its culture (more than it is changed by them) inspired a powerful emotional response in me. My own odyssey through higher education had taken me along an unusual path—from a community college to one of the nation's most prestigious research universities. Engaged in Rodriguez's revealing thoughts and feelings in a dark library reading room, which I presumed to be much like the British Museum where Rodriguez had worked on his dissertation, I, too, began to experience, although not quite fully understand, the pain that comes from cultural separation. I began to think about how the rewards of academic success were in stark conflict with most of my past. And I began to empathize with the portrait that Rodriguez had read about in Richard Hoggart's (1970) *Uses of Literacy*—the image of a scholarship boy who can attain academic success only if he replaces allegiance to his native culture with loyalty to a new academic culture. "In the end . . . he must choose between the two worlds: if he intends to succeed as a student, he must, literally and figuratively, separate himself from his family, with its gregarious life, and find a quiet place to be alone with his thoughts. . . . For the loss he might otherwise feel, the scholarship boy substitutes an enormous enthusiasm for nearly everything having to do with school" (Rodriguez, 1975, p. 17).

To become an academic success, Rodriguez, too, had learned that he must sever his ties with the past. For example, he discovered that he had to forget the Spanish language in favor of English. He began to believe that assimilation into the mainstream culture was the key to total success. He described the regrets his parents had about how education had changed him and had "put big ideas into his head." He recounted the anguish of feeling uncomfortable with his parents when he went home with his newfound identity. What had been intimate conversations now became polite interviews.

The parallels between Rodriguez and me were obvious. Both of us had Mexican American parents who wanted their children to have a better life than they did. Our parents had never acquired a firm command of the English language but understood that learning English was essential for social advancement. Nonetheless, my parents did not understand what higher education could offer (or even take away), as they had only received a second- and third-grade education. Both Rodriguez and I were unique within our families. Rodriguez had conducted research to obtain a Ph.D. in English Renaissance literature, and I was working on a doctorate in higher education administration. As the first in my family to take this long journey into the mystifying world of higher education, I asked myself, if Rodriguez was the new American "scholarship boy," was I the new American "scholarship girl"? Did I really need to reject my past in order to attain success in the present? Was there some way in which to reconcile days gone by with my contemporary experiences?

For the young scholar who first experiences academic shock—a feeling of alienation that moves the student from concrete to abstract experience and that takes the student from an old culture that is vastly different in tradition, style, and values to a new world of unfamiliar intellectual conventions, practices, and assumptions—these questions are not easily answered. I did not know at the time that the barometer the academy uses to differentiate the academic elite from the mediocre is precisely the measure of how well young scholars negotiate academic shock. If the student, like Rodriguez, silences the past and humbly waits to be confirmed into the community of scholars, the academy swiftly offers its greatest rewards. If the student persists in using past experience to affirm himself or herself, not only do rewards become more difficult to attain but the student is also riddled with the guilt, pain, and confusion that arise from daring to live simultaneously in two vastly different worlds while being fully accepted in neither.

My Own Journey

My early beginnings are in stark contrast with my present. Recently, as I was being recruited for a faculty position at a southwestern university, I

was told that I was one of the most marketable Hispanic females in the field of higher education. I sometimes wonder how I merit such praise. My trip from the barrio to the academy has hardly been silky smooth. I still remember the first time I actually made a decision to attend college. I was thirteen and in the eighth grade when a counselor came to my English class and announced that on that day we had to make a decision about whether we were going to be on the academic or the vocational track. When I asked the counselor to explain the difference, she forthrightly explained that the academic track was for those who were going to college and that the vocational track was for those who planned to get a job after high school graduation. I had always dreamed of being a teacher, so the choice was an easy one for me. I remember going home that afternoon and proudly telling my mother of my decision. Her response triggered the first painful feelings of academic shock. Dismayed and frustrated, she said, "*Estás loca. Como piensas ir al colegio si nadie de nuestra familia ha ido? Eso es para los ricos.*" (You're crazy. How can you think of going to college if no one in the family has? That is for the rich.) For my mother, the choice would have been clear. In our family going to college was not an option; it never had been and it never would be. Higher education belonged to the elite, the wealthy, and we clearly were not in that group.

My pain and disappointment did not, however, interrupt my plans. I persisted in following my dream, and on graduating from high school I promptly enrolled in my local community college. Little did I know then that despite its self-proclaimed magnanimous goal of being a "people's college," the community college has also served to ghettoize people of color. In general, Hispanics, Native Americans, and African Americans tend to enroll in community colleges as opposed to four-year institutions. People like me, whom Madrid (1990) describes as *flor de tierra* (plants whose roots do not go deep), are not likely to enter higher education through the front door. We do not apply to wealthy liberal arts colleges or to institutions whose prestige is unquestioned. With Madrid, I believe that most students like me enter higher education through its windows, only to find that all around us are walls that keep us secluded and marginalized. Nonetheless, Laredo Junior College became for me the first access point to the world of higher education.

At Laredo Junior College I found both the comforts and discomforts of attending college with my friends; we were not only uncertain about our future but perplexed about what it would take to succeed in this new world of higher education. It was here, in this illusory intellectual oasis of the Laredo community, that I experienced some of the sensations of academic shock, as I faced new academic demands and tried to reconcile my new world with my old culture. I knew that my mother was feeling angry and frustrated with my tenacious desire to go to college, although we never really talked about it. It was a subject that was broached in different ways.

She would explain that she was tired of being a waitress. She would be irritable that she had to work night shifts in order to sustain the family (my two sisters and me). I knew that for her the ideal daughter would promptly, after graduating from high school, get a job so that her mother would not have to work anymore. Even today I often find myself trying to make up for the fact that I did not fit this ideal vision.

My friends at Laredo Junior College not only shared my family's experience of economic hardship but they also seemed lost in this new world of abstraction. Suddenly, our professors expected us, with no guidance, to have clarity about our vague dreams and goals, to express ourselves in rational, analytic forms, and to put aside our personal anxieties and frustrations so that we could be successful college students.

The few of us who tried to transfer to an institution away from home experienced the pain and conflict of academic shock even more acutely. My parents told me that if I must transfer, I should go to a nearby institution. I felt, however, that I needed to get further away, to experience something dramatically different. The pull of the academy was overwhelming. During my sophomore year, due to poor counseling, I found both that it was too late to apply to a four-year institution and that my local community college was not offering any more courses in my program of study (English and journalism education). Feeling the need to stay on track and continue my studies, I transferred to San Antonio College. It was here, 150 miles away from home, that I first experienced the loneliness that often overcomes scholarship boys and girls. In this community college, I felt isolated and disconnected. None of my professors were minority, and the other Mexican American students also seemed lost and alienated. I felt that my white professors did not recognize my academic potential. None made any special effort to encourage me to perform at my best. In San Antonio, I not only felt alienated from my family but I found myself being perceived differently by them. Living away from home was, indeed, changing me. To cope, I found comfort in reading, and I was especially intrigued by what I read for my philosophy class. Yet I never talked about Sartre or Plato with any of my family members. These new ideas seemed to belong only within the confines of the collegiate environment. Subconsciously, I must have felt that the language of college did not belong in my family life. The two were separate and incompatible. Reflecting on new learning while at the same time coping with the feeling of not belonging made me more introverted.

When I transferred again to the University of Houston, the pain of separation became even greater. My mother, wanting to be certain that I was living in a safe place, took the long bus trip with me to Houston. She wept when I told her that I had gotten a grant, that I had a dormitory room, and that everything would be all right. It was in Houston that I came face to face with being a minority. Academic shock was compounded by ethnic

and racial shock. In Laredo, a community of over 90 percent Mexican Americans, we were all the same, but here I was keenly aware of being different. At the University of Houston in 1968, during the thick of racial and social unrest, there were few Mexican American or black students. I met no Mexican American professors, and there was only one black faculty member who taught journalism on a part-time basis. My dorm roommates were white, but despite our differences, we learned from each other and became good friends. Coping with academic life was difficult and exacerbated by my separation from my family and culture. When I would call my mother and explain how busy I was, she would encourage me to come home and give up everything. *"Vente, hija"* (Come back daughter), she would say, *"ya deja todo eso"* (and leave everything behind). It was her motherly duty to protect her child from the unknown.

When I graduated from college, I wanted to stay and teach in Houston, but my parents insisted I return to Laredo. "You have much education," my father explained, "but you lack experience," emphasizing that experience was necessary for coping with real life. Once I asked my mother why she resisted my leaving home to be by myself. *"Tengo miedo, hija"* (I am afraid, daughter), she would say. When I asked her what she was afraid of, she simply responded, *"No sé"* (I don't know). I sensed that deep in my mother's soul she felt resentful about how this alien culture of higher education was polluting my values and customs. I, in turn, was afraid that I was becoming a stranger to her, a stranger she did not quite understand, a stranger she might not even like.

Connections with the Past

Today, I am asked to speak to educators about people like me, people of color who come to the academy as strangers in a strange land. And often what intrigues them most is not what I have to say about how education can best serve these students but how my own journey progressed. "How did you succeed?" they ask. "If you succeeded, why can't others?" While these questions are often asked out of genuine curiosity and concern, I sometimes become irritated because they seem to me to be tied to the belief that if only students like me were not lazy, if only they would shed their past, if only they would be truly loyal and dedicated to schooling, they, too, could succeed. "Pure" academics who subscribe to Euro-centered rationalism and objectivity do not wish to read personal, emotional, or intuitive essays like mine that focus on the past. To them, these recollections are, at best, primitive and self-serving and, at worst, romanticized nonsense. True scholarship "boys and girls" would focus on objective modes of expression, on the present and future, and if the past must be recalled, it must be only as something that should be left behind or neatly put away. To succeed we must assimilate, become one of "them," and learn what Rodriguez (1975)

calls "the great lesson of school"—that in order to have a public identity, we must use only English, for if Spanish or other foreign languages are employed, feelings of public separateness will be reinforced. The academy is set up so that students most likely to succeed are those that can successfully disconnect from the past and turn over their loyalty to the conventions and practices of the academy. Yet, academic success can be attained without total disconnection, and many educators either do not want to accept this or fail to recognize this.

Certainly there are many times now when I feel alienated from the world from which I came. What keeps me separate are my education, where I live, who my new friends are, my career, my values, and my command of the English language. For seven years I lived away from the Southwest. When I lived in Virginia, South Carolina, and North Carolina, I was invariably asked what a person like me was doing, living in the South away from my culture. But I have never been totally separate, and I never really will be or want to be. Leaving Texas led to a deeper appreciation of the world from which I came, to an enhanced understanding of other cultural values and ideologies, and to a stronger commitment to conducting research that could help two- and four-year colleges enhance the educational experience of students of color. I have learned that the past is always with me. What connects me to my past is what gives me my identity—my command of the Spanish language, the focus of my research, my old friends, and my heritage. What makes Laura Rendón an individual is not only who she is now but what happened to her along the way. What gives me strength is my newfound ability to trust and follow my own natural style and to encourage others to do the same.

Lessons to Be Learned

What is to be learned from a Mexican American scholarship girl/woman who felt intense pressure to assimilate into the academy and who is now a university professor who publishes in juried journals, attends meetings comprised predominantly of white males, and addresses predominantly white audiences? I contend that the most important lesson to be learned is *not* that higher education must increase access for new scholarship "boys and girls" or must offer them better financial aid packages, more role models, and better counseling and mentoring. These standard solutions, while important, do not focus on the larger and more important issue, which is that higher education must begin to think in new ways about what constitutes intellectual development and about whether the traditional manner with which education prepares new students is appropriate for people of color as well as for white women and men. The model that higher education now follows is based on what the authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986) describe as the

"masculine myth." In this model, the scholarship boy/man is admitted into the fraternity of powerful knowers only when he has learned to think in complex, abstract ways, when he has learned to recognize that past experience is a source not of strength but of error. Once certified as a thinker who thinks like "them," students have learned that doubt precedes belief. The great lesson learned is that separation leads to academic power.

This paradigm validates the portrait of the "scholarship boy" with which Richard Rodriguez identified. If this model most appropriately describes the course of male intellectual development, where confirmation to a community of scholars is calculated to occur only at the end of a program of study, then so be it. But I believe this model is not appropriate for women or for people of color. For us, it is important that from the beginning of our college career, our professors express their sincere belief that we are capable of learning and can be taught to learn. Often we enter higher education consumed with self-doubt. We doubt our intellectual capacity; we question whether we really belong in the academy; we doubt whether our research interests are really valid. This doubt is reinforced by the subtle yet powerful messages that higher education institutions communicate. For example, we hear loud and clear that only white men can do science and math, that only the best and the brightest deserve to be educated, that white students are inherently smarter than nonwhites, and that allowing people of color to enter a college diminishes its academic quality.

When I entered the University of Michigan, I remember being overwhelmed by its intellectual ethos. I recall listening to my white graduate student counterparts talk about their undergraduate experiences in liberal arts colleges and prestigious universities that appeared to be of higher quality than the institutions I had attended. I wondered whether I could compete with these students whose experiences were so different from my own. One white woman graduate student actually found the courage to reveal her stereotyped views of Hispanics and said, "You know, Laura, you're pretty smart. I'll have to admit that when I first met you, I thought you were kind of dumb." Higher education often requires not only that students be humble but that they tolerate humiliation. I remember wanting to study Chicanos in community colleges and wondering if the focus of my research would typecast me as a unidimensional (and therefore less worthy) scholar, capable of studying, writing, and thinking only about minority issues. I also wondered why, even when I had penetrated the walls of an esteemed university, I continued to focus my research on community colleges. I remember one of my friends telling me, "Why are you studying community colleges? I mean, community colleges—who cares?" He did not understand that I cared because community colleges were where people like me were gaining access to higher education, and because, unlike me, many of these people entered college, got nowhere, and left.

Nonetheless, I asked myself why I wasn't breaking away from this niche and studying other kinds of institutions.

My story's lesson is that it is not only students who must adapt to a new culture but institutions that must allow themselves to be changed by foreign cultures. A few years ago, I read Galarza's (1970) perspective on institutional deviancy. Institutions become deviant, he explained, when they inflict pain on individuals, when they begin to depart from their moral and statutory commitment. There is no doubt in my mind that higher education has inflicted great pain on students of color.

To become academic success stories we must endure humiliation, reject old values and traditions, mistrust our experience, and disconnect with our past. Ironically, the academy preaches freedom of thought and expression but demands submission and loyalty. Scholarship "boys and girls" are left only with what Rodriguez (1982) calls "hunger of memory," a nostalgic longing for the past—the laughter of relatives, the beautiful intimacy of the Spanish language, the feeling of closeness with one's own parents.

How can institutions change? It is my belief that institutions must consider past experience, language, and culture as strengths to be respected and woven into the fabric of knowledge production and dissemination, not as deficits that must be devalued, silenced, and overcome. We need to validate students' capacities for intellectual development at the beginning, not at the end, of their academic careers. This means that early on we must communicate that students of color are capable of academic thought and expression and that we believe and trust that their experience will guide them as they develop their intellectual capacities. An ideal classroom is one in which the teacher allows students to write about their culture and experiences, where the learning climate encourages creativity and freedom of expression, where teachers help students see the connection between what is taught and what is experienced in real life. We must find ways to change the linear model of teaching, where knowledge flows only from teacher to student. Instead, we must focus on collaborative learning and dialogue that promotes critical thinking, interpretation, and diversity of opinion.

We must set high standards, while helping students to reach them. Most faculty fail to give students the support they need in order to break free from belief systems that stifle their creativity. For example, many nontraditional students who come to college believe they cannot succeed, that their academic skills are not well developed, that they cannot compete with other students, that their perspectives are not valued in college, and/or that they will be "just a number" in college.

When I talk with college faculty, I often hear how they are tired of spoon-feeding students, how they have had to lower their standards, how students aren't motivated, how students don't care. Yet when I tell them

that they must help and nurture these students, they balk. Most faculty believe that college students should be held accountable for their own actions, no matter what their past experience has been. While there is some truth to this, I agree with the authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986) that we need to find ways of caring that make the ones we care for stronger rather than weaker. Taking care need not necessarily equate to taking over. We need to create ways to look after our students so that they may develop the strength needed to assume responsibility for their own learning.

Most important, we must stop inflicting pain on students by demeaning and devaluing their past. If I had allowed myself to be molded into a student who rejects her past in order to attain success, I never would have been able to give something back that would strengthen my community. Recently, I decided to return to the Southwest, in large part to be closer to the people and the issues to which I am most committed. My academic success has made my parents proud of me, even when they don't fully understand what I do or what I write. And I am most proud of them for enduring an often agonizing experience with me.

Today we are witnessing the power of diversity. If higher education has up until now been able to validate scholarship "boys and girls" only when they have paid the high price of disconnection with their culture, it will become increasingly difficult to continue to do so. There are more and more of us (including white men and women) who are not buying into this flawed model of academic success. In the 1990s, as our numbers multiply, our power grows. If the academy refuses to change, we will change it. We will claim the curriculum, for we have always been a part of history, science, math, music, art, and literature. We will change teaching and learning to accommodate diversity. We will find our voice and use it to assert our rights and control our destiny.

I do not hunger for the past; it is always with me. Instead, I yearn for the future and believe that the time will come when higher education will be served by caring faculty, counselors, and administrators who know that they must do, not what is "politically correct," but what is morally and ethically the right thing. Many more like me will come to partake of the academy, classic scholarship men and women who leave home to find success in an alien land. We will change the academy, even as the academy changes us. And more and more of us will experience academic success—with few, if any, regrets.

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