

# Latinas in College: *Contra Viento y Marea* (Against Winds and Tides)

Gabriela Díaz de Sabatés

*"Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed.  
You cannot uneducate the person who has learned how to read.  
You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride.  
You cannot oppress people who are not afraid anymore."*  
César Chávez

## Introduction

With the rapid demographic changes that we are experiencing in the United States in general and in the state of Kansas in particular, our educational institutions are challenged with a gigantic task: to educate a very diverse population with multifaceted linguistic and cultural backgrounds, needs, and challenges that is growing exponentially. To illustrate this demographic "earthquake", I will use data from the 1990 and 2000 U.S. census. From 1990 to 2000, the total U.S. population grew 13.2 % while the Hispanic population grew 57.9%. In the state of Kansas during the same period of time, the total population increased 8.5 % while Hispanic population experienced a 101% growth. In its 2006 estimate, the U.S. Census Bureau projected that from 2000 to 2006 Kansas's population will grow by approximately 70,000 inhabitants of which 49,200 will be Hispanic, 10,000 Asians, and 10,000 of other races.

It is essential that we respond in a timely and adequate manner to the multifaceted needs of our growing, diverse population. If we want to provide an excellent learning environment, the change must start at home. We educators must become learners ourselves, diving into and exploring others' realities. Now is the prime time for creativity and openness to detect outdated educational recipes that only constrain people in rigid and dehumanizing categories and replace them for appropriate educational policies and practices. In this study, I focus our attention on the college experiences lived by Latina women in a Midwest state university campus. Latinas' voices are brought to the surface with the aim of opening a window into their lives, strengths, and unique abilities, needs and wants, hopes and dreams, with the ultimate purpose of learning about and from them so we can build a more comprehensive and equitable socio-educational environment in our institutions of higher learning.

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## Latinas' College Experiences

Latinas suffer some degree of academic and social oppression while in college. In my experience, it is the general assumption of many institutions of higher education that Latinas come to college under-prepared, have no clear goals, and are surely bound for academic failure. It is ingrained in the minds and actions of many administrators, professors, and majority students that Latinas always have "problems," that they are students inevitably bound for academic failure. Commonly claimed reasons for Latinas' social and educational "problems" are:

- Coming from a different culture;
- Being females;
- Speaking English as a second language;
- Coming from poor socioeconomic backgrounds;
- Lacking understanding of the U.S. educational system;
- Lacking intelligence and preparation;
- Being lazy;
- Not having the motivation and determination to succeed.

These attributed factors offer an overly simplistic and often stereotypical diagnosis of a complex socioeconomic and educational reality that Latinas inhabit on a daily basis. Clearly, this is not a one-sided problematic. The reality is that Latinas' college attrition is not the result of one isolated factor, but a triad where institutional, academic, and student elements interplay intimately effecting either centrifugal (expelling) or centripetal (bringing in) forces. According to Jalomo (1995), institutional and academic factors that influenced Latino student attrition were:

limited class offerings, few Latino faculty, a curriculum which often ignores multicultural perspectives, antiquated teaching styles, and restricted tutoring assistance...rising tuition and registration fees, inadequate financial aid offerings, improper counseling and advising, few Latino student service personnel...and an over-reliance on student-initiated involvement in academic and social activities occurring on campus. (p. 7)

Student-related factors were: "poverty, unemployment, lower social class origins...inadequate preparation in high school, weak study habits and the lack of clarity in defining academic goals, self-doubt, low self esteem, anxiety and cultural separation" (p.7).

Such a lethal combination of multilayered obstacles acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy. In addition to the socioeconomic and educational barriers Latinas face, they are also often times treated as *lacking* students and beings where very little is expected from them socially and academically. Their culture and language are constantly devalued and considered *inferior*. Consequently, Latinas lower their academic standards because no matter what they do, they will never get an "A"; they will never graduate. In turn, they expect very little of this academic experience, feel isolated and diminished, therefore removing themselves from a hostile environment by dropping out.

In an educational system where the concept of academic success is univocally understood as a high GPA (Grade Point Average), where true leadership only applies to those who exhibit traditional White European male individualistic traits, where being different from the norm is penalized, and where the Latino culture is viewed as inferior, there is no doubt that Latinas are seen as *lacking* something. They are perceived as failures because they do not comply with what is expected from a typical student. They are seen as burdens rather than as individuals who have a traditional and nontraditional wealth

of knowledge ready to be shared, who question the status quo, and challenge institutions to advance in non-traditional directions. González (2001) illustrated very well this complex interplay:

What is problematic is the...pervasive view about Mexicana/ Chicana/Latina students as 'Hispanics dropout problem' [President's Advisory Commission, 1996]. Rather than looking at the ideological and structural realities manifesting inequities, the gaze is filtered through a conventional wisdom about Chicana and Chicano's students' incapability of higher level intellectual thought, the deficit of the Chicano/Mexicano culture, a history of social marginality and economic exploitation, and Chicano/Mexicano parents' lack of regard for education. (p.642)

In the end, layers and more layers of constant and relentless oppression instill in Latinas' minds that no matter how well they do, they are *not worth it*. Further, I fully agree with González (2001) when she asserted:

I situate my research with an affirmation for a contestatory critique of hegemonic laws and practices prescribing social formations, identities, and cultural narratives to one shifting the focus from a pathological view of Chicano/Mexicano/Latino youth to a critical view of discriminatory educational and social practices guised by prevailing notions of educational fairness and neutrality in educational and social research, policy and practice. (pp. 642-643)

Along similar lines, Yarbro-Bejarano (1999) went further and stated:

The need for an analysis of multiple oppressions and multiple privileges in racial/ethnic identity is greater than ever, in order to help channel the energies of cultural nationalism ... [to an] awareness of the ways both our social formations and ourselves as subjects are structured in and through the overlapping experience of race, class, sexuality, culture and gender. (p. 340)

### **Latinas' Voices, this Study, and Myself**

There is an increasing body of literature around Latinas, dealing primarily with issues related to their personal experiences in college, educational successes and limitations, bilingualism, and cultural roles. I present this study as a tool to learn about Latinas' multifaceted realities while they pursue their education at a Midwest state university. There is a scarcity of spaces at our institutions and the surrounding communities for Latinas to openly express their selves, to voice their knowledge and opinions, to learn and to teach us, to thrive and to bloom. Instead, they are frequently captive within the externally imposed *pobrecita* syndrome ("you poor little thing") self-fulfilling prophecy, where it is pressed upon them since the beginning that Latinas are not *college material*.

The purpose of this analysis is to open up a space where Latinas' voices can be heard. This space is constructed as a major avenue to validate their experiences by encouraging them to present themselves the way they want to do so, without suffering the imposition of a biased way of understanding of their realities, needs and goals. These Latinas' voices bring awareness about something so obvious and at the same time so invisible and complex to grasp: people's multilayered and dynamic cultural frameworks.

For many years, I have been involved in the education and lives of Latinas who decided to attend Kansas State University to further

their education. They are my students, advisees, acquaintances, and friends. Some are also my colleagues, professors, and mentors. The experiences lived by Latinas are fully intertwined with my own, a Latina, creating a rich, complex, and powerful reality that we all inhabit every day. Therefore, this study does not intend to attain aseptic objectivity. Rather, I am professionally and personally involved in Latinas' issues; thus I write from my own point of view, that of a middle class Latina woman, born and raised in South America, mother, spouse, daughter, sister, friend, doctoral student, and colleague. I am a Latina who came to the U.S. 16 years ago with very limited proficiency in English, who attended an Ivy League university when her mastering of the English language was still shaky, a mother who raised a daughter bridging two cultures, a woman who is still existing in and within two different cultural worlds, a person who deeply believes in true collaboration and communication.

### **Study Format**

In order to find out about Latinas' college experiences, Jeff Zacharakis and I conducted a two hour-long focus group with six Latina/Hispanic undergraduate senior students at Kansas State University (KSU). These Latinas were individually chosen and invited to participate in this focus group and received a thorough explanation of its objectives and methodology. Five of the students were majors in elementary or secondary education with an emphasis in English as a Second Language (ESL), and one student was changing majors at the time from education to anthropology. Three had entered the United States illegally crossing the Rio Grande River. Three first learned English in adult learning centers and earned their GED (General Educational Development) degree in southwest Kansas. Two had worked in meatpacking plants, and only one was born in the United States—her father and mother immigrated here before she was born, and her father attended English classes at their local adult learning center.

The purpose of the focus group was to learn about the realities of Latinas on campus, their personal educational experiences (including that of their families), their college experiences, their dreams for the future, and their advice to other Latinas on campus. All students in the focus group spoke Spanish as their first language, and all of them were bilingual with different levels of English proficiency. During the focus group they were welcomed to speak in Spanish or English, whichever language they most comfortable, expressing their issues and perspectives. The meeting was conducted on a Thursday night on campus after classes were over, and the women were provided with a culturally sensitive dinner (not pizza, but a generous offering of quality Mexican dishes selected upon their requests). The six women signed an agreement to participate in the focus group, and were aware of their right to withdraw from the group and conversation at any time without being penalized for it.

Prior to our Thursday meeting, we developed questions that would guide our conversation. The students knew each other and felt comfortable enough to share experiences, comments, and opinions, so the conversation flowed easily. There was very little need on the part of the interviewers to elicit answers. The analysis of the audiotapes identified six main themes that were repeatedly mentioned by the Latinas: (1) Their families; (2) their education and that of their parents; (3) their reasons for coming to college; (4) their self-determination; (5) how they felt oppressed; and (6) their college experience.

## Latinas' Voices

### *Theme One: Families*

Voice A: I'm from Mexico, I'm a mother of three children, the two older ones are already grown-up, one is 19 and the other one is 17, the other one is only one year old. I'm returning to school after more than 15 years, I stopped school when I was just starting ninth grade, and from then I came here to this country and I worked for three years and went back to school.

Voice B: My family consists of my parents, and then I have two older brothers, and younger brother, and myself. I was the only girl... so that was fun (laughs). My dad completed all the way to middle school, and my mom got to ... sixth grade I believe. My older brother graduated from high school and went to tech school and got his degree there, and I'm here and my little brother is going to tech school as well. So I'm probably the only one that's going into higher education. Both of my parents studied in Mexico.

Voice C: My family is my parents, and my two sisters, and one brother, and myself. My dad made it to third grade, and that's it, when he was 13 he came here to work on the field. My mom, she only did second grade, and it's even to this day that she still has trouble writing. It's really hard for all of us. My other two sisters got all the way to high school. One of them graduated from high school and got married right away (at 18) so she could not continue her education. The other one got married when she was 16 and had a baby, so all she completed was high school as well. And my little brother, he's 14- so he's finishing middle school right now, so he's going to be in high school next year, and he wants to be a policeman, so we'll see how that goes.

Voice D: My family is going to be big (laughs). I have two brothers and three sisters, and my mom and my dad. My mom never went to school, and my dad ... I think he only went up to second grade, so he knows how to read and write and do some simple math. My dad studied those two years in Mexico and we moved here at different times. The men came first and then we came. The first one to go to school was my sister, the one that's younger than me, so she's a nurse. She didn't study every year here in the United States. She started in Mexico until ninth grade and then she continued here. The other one, she started at a younger age, she was ten when she came to this country. So I'm actually the oldest of them all, I was also the last one going to school. None of my brothers have any degrees, the oldest started in Mexico, but that's it and that was many years ago. So actually only the girls are...or we only have some kind of education. My sister has a Bachelors and my other sister has a nursing degree. I have three kids, and my oldest daughter is here at the university. This is her second semester, my other daughter is in high school, she's in the eleventh grade, and my son is in third grade.

### *Theme Two: Parents' Education and Their Own*

Voice A: I have two younger brothers, my mom and my dad. My dad ... I think he completed up until sixth grade, in Mexico. My mom only made it through ... I think it was fifth grade. She had a really, really bad time, and I think if she had to write a letter, I don't think she could do that, it would take her a lot to do that. Even if it's just writing down a simple phone number she'll take forever, and we have to repeat the numbers, like 50 times. My dad, even though he just completed to sixth grade, I see him as a smart, smart man, sadly he didn't have the opportunity to go to school because he got married at a very young age. It was 15 years when they got married. Then

they moved here, I came here when I was eleven, for like a year, and went back to Mexico, and then came back when I was 18, I believe. I went to high school for a couple of months I think, then got married, forgot about school, worked for...what was it?...for about eight years, and then came back and got my GED, and went to a community college in Garden City, and now I'm here. I am the only one that has reached this far, my youngest brother, he completed his high school and I think he did two semesters of ... business, some type of business. That was it, he got married and he had to work for his family, and he had to quit school. I think that that is pretty much it, I can go a little bit further ... my mom and my dad have big families, like eight to ten kids in each one, and I believe that just two of us out of the whole family are actually attending school. The other one is my cousin, he's in the army and he's trying to be an officer. That's pretty much it, out of a big family only two of us are going to school.

### *Theme Three: Coming to College*

Voice A: The reason that I decided to come to school was because I always liked school. Before that I had the experience of working at a meatpacking plant. It was hard, and even the simplest job that you can see there, is a very hard job. So I just thought of myself, I was like: "do I want to do this the whole time or do I want to get out and at least get my GED. first, and, you know, continue with my education?" That was basically the thing that encouraged me to come to school, because I noticed that I needed to be educated so that I could set a good model for my daughter, and I didn't just want to spend the rest of my life working eight hours a day and pretty much 24/7.

Voice B: I didn't know anything about college. We're from a small town in southwest Kansas. Everybody knows everybody, and there was one girl who made it to college who was Latina-Mexicana, and other than that nobody knew anything else. And it was ... "This is just a girl who wanted to leave and wanted to be crazy" ... it is pretty much what they thought of me. My parents were open about me going to school because obviously they wanted me to get a better education, and the reason I really wanted to go is because my parents would come home and something would hurt just from working so hard, and so my mom would tell me "you don't want to end up like me." But you know they didn't really have a choice there, so it wasn't like my parents did everything that they did just for me to end up in the same position. But my parents wanted me to go to a JUCO (a local junior college), just so I could stay close to home, and drive 30-45 minutes everyday back and forth, just so they could keep me close. But I came to K-State anyway, and that's why I'm here, I didn't really know anybody but it was good. It's been an awesome experience.

### *Theme Four: Self-Determination*

Voice A: That I'm crazy! Now they really like it, because even back home there's probably like three or four girls that are still in college, because like I said, everybody knows everybody, and other than that ... like I'll go home and the girls that I used to baby sit have kids now, it's just crazy to go to church and I'm the only one that doesn't have a kid. And some people might be like "well, you're still not married? How old are you?" And I'll be like "No" and it's not just my parents anymore, it's like the whole town and community that is like "you keep going forward, because look at these girls," and it's not so much them sitting there and saying somebody's better than somebody else or not, it's just that even when I go home, and I see the position that

some of the girls that I grew up with, or that I babysat, and I listen to their stories, and like I think that I'm better off than what I would have been staying there, even if it sucks being away from my family, but at least I'm not in that position.

Voice B: I always knew I was going to come to college, I always knew. Since I was nine, I've always talked about when I was going to go to college. I just knew I was going to. Whatever I could do to get in I would do. When I got out of high school ... well that summer I won a scholarship, and that summer the president of WSU (Wichita State University) called me and told me that I had a scholarship to go to WSU, and my mother said I had to take it. She said "you can't go to K-State, and so if you go to WSU you'll be closer to us." But my dad told me to go to Texas because he knew their schools. I came here ... because in Mexico it's just hard (gets emotional, cries silently) ... it's so hard to talk about, I've been talking about it for years, and it's so hard to see my dad go to work not wearing a tie, instead he has a helmet or boots and it just kills me. So that's why I came here, because I thought, "you know what, they did this for us, so I'm going to go to school." My brother and sister did not have an option, they had to go to school, and they talked to me about ... "well, you know, I'm going to go and I'm going to work for about a year and make some money and then maybe I'll go to school." And I said no. And I literally had to drag them here. They did not want to go to school.

#### *Theme Five: Experiencing Oppression*

Voice A: A lot of girls in my senior class are married now with kids, and I didn't want to see my siblings just stay in that environment and to just kind of follow the example that was being set for them. So I told them that we had to do whatever it takes to get them here, and they hated it when they got here, they hated it, and now they love it! Especially my brother because he's been here for longer, and it's just my sister's second semester, and she's getting used to it. But I told them, "Our parents made such a big sacrifice and now they are working at a meatpacking plant" ... and I just can't wait until they walk out of that place and they don't go back. And their work just gets harder, and it's just really hard to see them like that. It was really hard for me seeing them walking around with their work uniforms on, all dirty, and all bloody. Especially in the summertime, I mean seriously and honestly I avoided them. It was maybe two times out of eight years, maybe, that I actually saw them walking out of there. They worked "A" shift, and I worked "B" shift, so I knew the time that they would get out, and I went to the locker rooms, I went to the office, I went anywhere else, but never where I knew they were going to be. Not because I felt embarrassed, but because it was really hard for me to see them walking out of there and just imagine, the summer here is really, really bad, but imagine being in a small space where it's over 100 degrees, yeah! ... and they walk out of there all sweaty and you can see that their clothes are all sweated through, and it's just really, really hard. My father always asked me why he never saw me at work, and I would always tell him that I was busy. And he would say, "Well, I saw you, I saw you walking out", and I would say: "I didn't see you."

Voice B: When I came here, I worked for many years, and as I said, I worked in many different places. I first came here as an illegal, it was really hard. Working so many hours, I remember I used to work in a restaurant in Topeka from 7 a.m.-12 a.m., so it was more than twelve hours. They paid us the minimum wage at that time, and I

used to make four dollars an hour. That was more than ten years ago, but they didn't pay us overtime or anything, so you couldn't say anything because you're an illegal. You just have to take it. And then after that, I worked in the plants for more than ten years, and it's really, really hard working there. The people treat you really bad. They don't care if you have a life, you just have to work there whether you like it or not, and if not go work somewhere else. So that and seeing my sisters—who went to college and are starting their career—I said to myself, I don't want to stay here all my life working like this. And when I was working at the plant it was really hard, the easiest job that you see is really, really hard. You don't have breaks like if you're sitting in a chair, or anything, you have to stay there working at the speed of the machines. That's the problem, working at the speed of the machines, not your speed. So I thought that if I was having problems in this work, what was going to happen when I was going to be 40? They would kick me out because they wouldn't need me anymore. So I said I need to go back to school, and I know it's going to be really hard because I need to start from the very, very bottom learning English, and I only did school until ninth grade, and I also need to show my mother that she was right, and I'm going to show her that not only my sisters listen to her, but that I do too. And that it is important and even for my children that I keep telling them go to school, how come you didn't go to school? So that way they can't say, well if you say school is so important, how come you didn't go to school? So many reasons!

Voice C: When we were in Mexico we were poor, and I came here and I didn't have a chance. So I had three jobs, and that was really hard. But then I started to go back to school, because my son was embarrassed that his Mom didn't speak any English, and that I spoke Spanish in front of his friends. And helping him with homework and talking with his teachers ... it just was the barrier right there. So that's why I decided to go back to school. So I could learn the language and do something that I wanted to do when I was in Mexico but couldn't. So I took the chance now that I was here and I did it.

Voice D: I got only to seventh grade in Mexico, and then I came here and started eighth grade, and eighth grade was difficult, it was the hardest year in school. Pretty much because I didn't know the language, so at that point I decided not to come to college, and I thought I'll do what I have to do and get done what the law requires me to. And I got to high school and it was a complete difference when I was there, and I never said I wanted to go to college, because for me I didn't want to say something that I would not complete. I was scared that I wasn't going to make it. And my senior year I was done with my classes, I only needed one credit hour. And I got a really good GPA, so I was able to go to cosmetology school, so I went to cosmetology school, I went to high school for one hour, and I worked two jobs. I worked at restaurants, so I would close one and go to the other and open it. My eleventh year my older sister left the house, because of problems, and when I was a senior my little sister got married, so when that happened my parents decided not to let me continue my education. So they told me "you're done with high school, and you have to work most of the time." Well, I didn't want to do that. Before my sister left they were pushing me to go to college and they would say, "go to college to get an education. We don't want you to be like us." And my mom was more of the one that said that, because even though she can read she has troubles writing. So she always told me "I don't want you to struggle like I did—go to college, get an education." And when my second sister left the

house it was completely different, my parents couldn't go anywhere. They needed someone to be there with them all the time. And I told them that I was decided to go to college, and that's when I decided to come here. But they turned their backs to me and they told me: "You're leaving us! You are not our daughter anymore." So it was really hard to start coming here without my parents' support, because of money, even though I worked two jobs, so I could get money to come here. Now ... it's different now ... they are like, "O.K. you're there, you should get it done. But it's like I don't have their support like I used to when I was little."

Voice E: When I was in Mexico I got married at a very young age, I was 15. I always wanted to go to school but sometimes traditions get in the way, like, if you got married you had to stay at your house, plus then the father of my girls didn't let me go back to school. I always wanted to go to school, and especially because my mom always told us that we had to go to school.

#### *Theme Six: College Experiences*

Voice A: I had no idea that the dorms were so small, and I had no idea that there were six of us, girls, in one room. And we used to joke about it, "oh, we're Mexicans so they think that we can pack us in everywhere" and we would just joke about it. And we were all paying for the exact same thing (as everybody else in the dorms) but six of us would have to be in one room. I guess when you don't have an expectation, then you really can't say that it was or wasn't what you expected.

Voice B: I was born here and I grew up here, so my English proficiency is a lot better than my Spanish one, but around here it's just like appearances, like if you look one way ... like even to this day I can't go anywhere without at least one person being like, "*Hola, cómo estás?*" and I'm like, "Why do you automatically assume this, or that?" And I am very defensive about it, and when we go out and people are like, "What's your name?" I just say María, or Juana [not her real name]. And it's just like people expect you to be like this and that, and like all of my roommates are Hispanic and we all go through the same experiences, we can't walk through somewhere without people turning around looking at you because I'm not Caucasian or Black, or whatever. And that like almost never happened when I lived in southwest Kansas. There, Mexican and American kids grow up speaking English and Spanish, whereas here [Manhattan] when I speak English people are like, "Where did you learn to speak English?" And I'm like, "Southwest Kansas", and they are like, "No, but where are you from?" And I'll say: "I was born in southwest Kansas."

Voice C: I was taking a summer Kansas' history class, and there was a bunch of students in my class and we were talking about immigrants coming into Kansas. In southwest Kansas, where I grew up, it was almost all immigrants. So I hear my class talking about them, and not in a good way. I'm just standing there listening, and the teacher is doing nothing about it. We got points for being active in our class, and we had like a chat room type thing where you could post things on the internet and it was just ridiculous. People were just like "English is the first language they shouldn't be doing this, they shouldn't be doing that." I was in a class full of people that were totally ignorant, and the sad thing was that most of them were education students (preparing to be teachers). They would sit there and argue about the dumbest comments and then, when I said something, they would say that I was different, and I would say, "You

don't know me, how am I different?" I would get so upset about it, and I ended up walking out of class because of that. We had a field trip in Topeka where we had to go in a canoe and I didn't even go because I was like, "I'm not going in a canoe with any of you."

Voice D: Having kids and being a single parent is really hard. You have to manage your time with your children, your house, with the school and with a job, because you have to find a way to support your family also.

#### **Observations (just to get started)**

Even though what was transcribed above is a fraction of what was said during this focus group, the Latinas' voices eloquently illuminate the complexities of their educational experiences. They reflected upon the continuous strength that they must have to braid the multiple cultural realities that they face with patience and perseverance while tending to their daily responsibilities. The more I read the transcription of the focus group, the more it amazes me how much these women had to go through and against in order to be where they are and to project themselves, *contra viento y marea* into a future life quite different from what they were told they were destined.

Most of the Latinas' parents didn't attend school beyond sixth grade in their home countries, and yet these parents managed to give a clear message to their daughters about the value of learning: that getting an education was extremely valuable and worthy to be pursued; that education is possibly the only way out of social oppression and poverty. Yet, even though the ideal was a positive one, the Latinas' journeys were paved with surprises, improvisations, lack of support, misunderstandings, and devaluing circumstances emanating from the college environment and their own families and communities.

Due to the lack of schooling, Latinas' parents were unable to guide them through the educational system in the U.S., leaving these women to find help and guidance on their own. Also, because their families were unaware of the rigors of higher education, the familial requirements many times clashed with the academic ones, creating conflicting sociocultural and educational situations for Latinas that they had to confront and resolve to stay in college. One student mentioned that she had to choose between keeping a relationship with their parents and staying in college, and she chose the latter in spite of the negative psychological and economical consequences for herself. "Latino students often break, not continue, their family 'traditions' when they enroll in college ... College going for them means coming to terms with sometimes difficult and painful issues such as changing their identity, being perceived as different, leaving old friends behind, separating from their families, breaking cultural ties, and breaking family codes of loyalty and unity" (Jalomo, 1995, p.8).

One student spoke about her fight against being labeled in college, revolting against academic traditional expectations of a Latina woman. She did not want to be identified as someone who spoke only Spanish, or a woman whose name had to be a Spanish one, or a recent immigrant, or a Latina because of the way she looked. Another student was outraged at the open xenophobic feelings expressed and the sheer ignorance that her classmates expressed in front of her in a history class regarding Latinos and her teacher's inaction about the verbal abuse that she was suffering. This experience alienated her to the point of not only dropping the class but also changing majors altogether, and she was most eloquent when she said, "We had a

field trip to Topeka where we had to go in a canoe and I didn't even go because I was like, I'm not going in a canoe with any of you." If the canoe is taken as a symbol or metaphor for community, this woman was clearly expressing her feelings of isolation, oppression, and her preference to being alone rather than in bad company. She obviously felt alienated, rejected, and devalued, which generated in her a total lack of trust in her fellow community members and an absolute lack of desire to belong to the community.

A crucial element to note in everyone's experience is that every single Latina spoke of a person or group of people whose support was instrumental for the Latina's academic perseverance. These Latinas maximized the utilization of every bit of encouragement to push forward. They also openly acknowledged this supportive network because it is understood as strength rather than weakness in their personalities. This shows the important role that collaboration and true support play in Latinas' advancement, and how they use this help to attain their goals in a collaborative way.

### Conclusions

The voices of these Latinas are multilayered vehicles through which their experiences are validated. Listening intently and effecting positive change further asserts the value of Latinas' lived experiences. Listening to Latinas also provides the opportunity for people around them to reflect upon their own cultures, assumptions, and prejudices; to be more conscious about diversity around us; and to become dynamic social actors that strive toward social justice and educational equity. These voices are not, by any means, the voices of victims. Through their experiences, Latinas ascertain the importance of "doing" in collaboration with and for others, of fighting peacefully with a clear goal, of giving life, of raising children, of governing and working in the fields or packing plants, of studying and empowering others to do the same, of fighting inequalities, extreme poverty, and oppression.

The violence of the institutional interpretation resides in the imposition of an external "understanding" as if it were an objective tool—which we know is always culturally and socioeconomically biased—of a reality that can speak by itself. In this case, Latinas' voices belong to women who are active *pensadoras* (thinkers) (González, 2001, p.641). Latinas, immersed in a world which they are making into their own, are brave enough to open their mouths and minds to express themselves. They have strong self-determination to create a new place of thinking and doing for their own and everybody else's benefit. They are defying the status quo and cultural "assumptions" with tenacity, revolting against oppressing social order and searching for purpose. Their only option is to assert their right to be in school and to bring their distinctive cultural assets to it. In sum, these women are "power-plants", relentless generators of wisdom, imagination, and courage.

Therefore, we must develop new, creative ways in which we will respect, understand, and educate our current learners with equity and purpose to ensure social justice for all. Equally important to this ongoing process, we must as advisors and teachers continually educate the university community about the realities of our students. Educators within this university community are ingrained with *el lugar del saber* (we have "the knowledge"), and the belief that education is, for the most part, a one-way street—teacher to student. In order to have a campus where meaningful educational exchanges continu-

ously flow among its individuals, we need true communication and collaboration among students, faculty, and administration.

If we really open up and make Latinas and other disenfranchised groups participate in their own education, we will have an educational institution that acts upon its commitment to our communities and which serves its purpose with dignity and courage. This, of course, implies moving ourselves from the "place of knowledge" and surely involves risks that we cannot even foresee, but that will surely yield gains for all of us that now we can only dream of.

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