Pathways to the PhD: A Study of Women Faculty in One ADVANCE Institution

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The Study

- Examines the differing pathways to the doctoral degree and initial academic appointments among women in the 18 academic departments under the auspices of an ADVANCE grant (Institutional Transformation for Faculty Diversity)
• 57 interviews were conducted; 55 were audio taped and analyzed in this study.

• Transcripts were analyzed using QSR NUDIST software.

• The interviewees were all tenured or tenure-track women--27 Anglos, 18 international faculty, and 10 Latinas.
The Findings
Expectations Regarding Higher Education

- Latina interviewees:
  - Did not view themselves as engineers or scientists while growing up
  - Received little preparation in school for those careers compared to male classmates

- Anglo and international faculty started thinking about college during, or before, high school.
• “No one in my immediate family had ever gone to college, and so no one really encouraged me to go to college even though I had done well in high school.”

• “I went to college right away. My parents...made sure I was on it, and thinking about college from the beginning of high school.”
Educational Background

• Most Latina faculty
  - came from families with little educational history at the post-secondary level. However, as one Latina observed:

• “In my immediate family my parents graduated from UTEP... And I have two aunts that are PhD’s. And education has always been very important in my family...
Most Anglo and international faculty:
- Had college-educated parents, as well as some grandparents.

“Both my parents were college educated, so that was always on my horizon that I would go to college.”

“My whole family went to the same college, and so it was expected that I would go there since I was five years old.”
Community Influences

• The majority of Latina faculty:
  - came from small close-knit communities without colleges and few college graduates
    “The thing is we grew up in a really small town, and in that town there were no opportunities for higher education.”

• Other interviewees:
  - went to high school in larger communities and often in urban areas where institutions of higher education were located.
Familial Support

• Continuous family support (e.g. parents, siblings):
  - Influenced motivation to attend college
  - Was one decisive factor in determining if the woman received a doctoral degree.

• Latinas sometimes felt pressure not to leave home for advanced education, because of the close-knit nature of many Hispanic families.
• One Latina interviewee explained:
  “When you are Mexican and you are growing up, it is not necessarily that they don’t want you to succeed, but they don’t want you to leave.”
  It seems to be an attitude that says:
  “don’t step above the group; stay close, stay tight and don’t excel.”

  (This may have more to do with the focus on keeping a family together as a collective, rather than trying to undermine the goals of one individual.)
• Another Latina’s experience was different:

“My father had to drop out of school when he was a freshman in college and my mother had to drop out of school when she was in eighth grade. So their vision for their children...is that we would all have a college education...All of the girls had to finish college before they could get married.”

All 5 children in this family graduated from college, including the three daughters.
• Anglo and international faculty also mentioned receiving material and financial support from their family members while pursuing their studies.
• More references were made to fathers than mothers as a source of social support, guidance, and as a first adult role model.

• According to one Latina: “If I would have told him I’m going to take over the world tomorrow he would have said, ‘What time? Because I want to be there.’ He was always (saying) ‘you are the best, you can do whatever you want, you are a great woman’...He was a very educated man...but he only went to...the 11th grade in high school.”
• For single parents, support came from
  - Best friends
  - Parents
  - Their children

  “My daughter still tells people: ‘You don’t know what I went through to put my mother through that PhD’...We were always struggling for money...and [now she says] mom, it was worth it...But I think--the cost, I wonder, was this awful to my daughter?”
Spousal Support

• Spousal support:
  - Seen as critical throughout an academic career

• Lack of spousal support:
  - Usually resulted in conflict
  - For most of interviewees, ultimately divorce.
“I hit thirty and got divorced and the most awful day of my life was the day after my husband moved out and I realized that I could no longer blame my parents, I could no longer blame my husband; my life... [was] solely in my own hands, and if I didn’t make anything of it now, there was nobody to blame but me.”
Majority of interviewees, however, praise their husbands’ support.

“He was great at housework. He was great at baby sitting. He was great at going to the grocery store [and]... providing his support.”
Mentors:

--Were mentioned by almost all interviewees as providing critical informal and formal support

--Are particularly influential in graduate students’ careers as dissertation/doctoral advisers

--Were mostly men

--“I have had absolutely fantastic male mentors ... All along the line they were all men. Now, it wasn’t because women refuse to do it. It was because there were no women around ... I would not have gotten a PhD, had it not been for [him]. I just simply would not have done it, and I would have had a miserable life.”
“I’m still in contact with him [the mentor]. Whether I have an issue about a grant or this or that, I can call him up and say ‘what do you think?’ … He was just a total inspiration and … when I first met him, to me he was Einstein. I just thought this guy is the most brilliant guy and how could I ever be a scientist like that, in that I’m never going to know as much as he does.
Support Groups

• Friends, neighbors and classmates were the main sources of informal social support during college years, apart from family members. Such was particularly the case during graduate school.
• “We just went to a professor and said we want to learn chapters x, y, and z...Would you just monitor or examine us so we can teach each other this?...It was extremely motivating to do that and it was positive.”

• “I made a lot of good friends and I lived in the dorm and that made a big difference because I immediately had a little cluster of friends, and so ...I had a pretty instant support network.”
Financial Need

- Anglo and international faculty tended to work during grad school in research assistantships or held fellowships.
- “...I was really lucky, he [father] was paying for all my tuition, most of my expenses. So I worked part-time to have the experiences. I tutored and babysat.”
A Latina interviewee notes that economic difficulties were always a problem even after she had a family of her own:

“We were always strapped for money. Because my husband was enlisted, we never had any money, we never had any extra things. [When] we needed to buy a tire, or the car broke, it was like a major sort of setback so I tried to maintain little jobs.”
Another Latina faculty recalls having a full-time job, and having to save for future graduate studying:

“I didn’t take vacation. I didn’t have a car... My objective was clear. I was not going to spend. I [had] to spend money buying good clothes because [when] you go to a company you cannot be with jeans... and a t-shirt. So I had to buy suits, and all that stuff. That’s it. That was all.”
Institutional Financial Support

- Scholarships, fellowships, and assistantships gave the interviewees a chance to complete their education.
• “I actually got... a three year fellowship from the National Science Foundation for the doctoral programs for minority students. So I had a full ride actually. The university didn’t have to pay anything.”

• “I always wanted to be the one that was managing the millions and billions of dollars and figuring out how that should be used to more effectively help minorities become scientists.”
Identity Formation

• Included:

  - Adjustment to college life
  
  - Increased self-awareness in a diverse social environment
  
  - Becoming aware of socio-economic class, as one was exposed to stratified social groups
• “It was the first time that I realized I was middle class or that I wasn’t, or that class became an issue because people could afford to do things that I could not do... A lot of the people that I went to school with had brand new SUV’s, cars, or they would go skiing on the weekends, which were things that I could not afford to do. And then I would work in the summer and a lot of them did not have to do that, that they could do study abroad...

• “It was a social class adjustment. It was difficult. I did not like it [at] all because it was very different attitudes... Most of them come from really well off families, and I wasn’t and so I just did not connect very well.”

• “I feel like my world is split in two. I have my friends from graduate school, or who I’ve known from my graduate school experience that know me in a completely different light than my friends that I grew up with. My friends that I grew up with don’t get it. You’re working so hard and you don’t have time off. It’s very frustrating for me that they don’t get it. But I understand.”
• “As an Hispanic...what I was always looking for was someone to say, ‘okay, you should go on.’ And that’s what happened to me when [he] came up to me and said... ‘you should go on.’ But why did I have to wait for someone to say that to me? I’m really still puzzled by that.”
Gender Consciousness

• Gender-conscious individuals:
  - were particularly sensitive to prejudice and discrimination against them in their academic career.

• Individuals who look to other factors for their identity (e.g., ethnicity, social class, position):
  - tended to interpret instances of unfriendly behavior toward them as a reaction to their ethnicity, class or position.
• “Women that are successful have people around them that are cheering them on... A women needs a supportive husband; a woman needs a supportive mom... a woman needs a very supportive mentor. I have seen women that go with male mentors that are not supportive-- they don’t make it... And so all of those factors being there, a woman is going to flourish.”
Observations To Date

• Expectations about their futures varied significantly among the women interviewed in this studied, as did the educational backgrounds of their families and the opportunities for education in their communities.

• Familial and spousal support, as well as that from close friends or fellow grad students, was important to the success (attainment of the PhD) of these faculty.

• A mentor was critical to the educational and professional development of these women. Most, although not all, were men.
• Institutional financial support was critically important to the Latinas and international faculty in the study.

• Interactions with family, friends, professors, spouses, children, and anyone with whom we have ongoing communication, help shape our identities.

• What people tell us, especially ABOUT us, is important to the development of identity. As young women go through school and college, teachers and professors must be aware that what they say affects the perceptions young people have about themselves and their potential for academic success in the future.

• This is particularly true for minority women, who may already have negative self-perceptions about themselves generated by the society around them.
Memorable Messages

- Are statements made to us that we recall for many years, that may initiate life changes
- Were rarely recalled by the study’s interviewees, at least initially
- Were remembered as “memorable interactions”