Pathways to the PhD:

A Focus on Latinas at One ADVANCE University
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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.
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
“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...
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.
• 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.
• 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.”
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.
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.”
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.
“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.”
“Women that are successful have people around them that are cheering them on... A woman 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.