

Latina Faculty Reshaping

by Susan Feinberg

Hispanic enrollment is surging at U.S. colleges and universities. From 2009 to 2010, the number of Hispanic college students in this country rose 24 percent, according to a Pew Hispanic Center analysis of recently released data from the U.S. Census Bureau. Hispanic women faculty members play a key role in helping these students recognize the full range of their academic and career possibilities and guiding institutions to broaden their understanding of their mission and methods.

These pioneering Latina professors around the country are making outstanding contributions in their fields as scholars, researchers, authors, and social activists and are reshaping higher education.

Christine Ortiz – Massachusetts Institute of Technology



Dr. Christine Ortiz is the dean for graduate education and a professor of materials science and engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). As dean, and as an active scientist and researcher, her primary goal is to facilitate a transformative, holistic, rigorous, supportive and exciting educational experience for MIT graduate students. She hopes to empower them “to push the boundaries of their disci-

plines ahead by generating new knowledge and understanding it in a broad context, establish lifelong mentors and colleagues, and develop self-confidence and important transferable skills such as communication, collaboration, tenacity and critical thinking.”

Ortiz obtained a BS from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and an MS and Ph.D. from Cornell University, all in the field of materials science and engineering. After graduation, she was granted an NSF-NATO postdoctoral fellowship, which she used to carry out research in the Department of Polymer Chemistry, University of Groningen, in the Netherlands.

Ortiz’s research program focuses on the ultrastructure and nanomechanics of structural biological materials (musculoskeletal and exoskeletal), with the primary goal being to quantify and understand new nanoscale mechanisms, phenomena and design principles and how they determine function, quality and pathology. She has more than 140 scientific publications in more than 20 academic journals, and has presented more than 120 invited lectures, many of them international.

Ortiz has received more than 20 national and international honors, including most recently the National Security Science and Engineering Faculty Fellow Award. She was a Lady Davis Fellow and Visiting Professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Israel, where she received the Hadassah Appreciation Medal. She was also awarded the MIT Martin Luther King Jr. Leadership Award; a recognition award for “Outstanding Alumni” by the National Consortium for Graduate Degrees for Minorities in Engineering and Science, and the National Science Foundation Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers, presented to her by President George W. Bush at the White House.

Marietta Vázquez – Yale University

Dr. Marietta Vázquez is an associate professor of pediatrics (general pediatrics) at Yale University. Her research interests include evaluating effectiveness of pediatric vaccines – varicella vaccine, Lyme vaccine, pneumococcal con-



jugate vaccine, influenza vaccine and rotavirus vaccines; assessing the long-term outcomes of children infected with Lyme disease; and describing the clinical epidemiology of newly diagnosed respiratory infections in children. She is involved in research collaboration with University of West Indies, Jamaica, evaluating the seroepidemiology of newly discovered respiratory viruses in pediatric patients in Jamaica.

Vázquez earned a BA from Yale University and an MD from University of Puerto Rico. Prior to that, she served as a fellow at Yale University School of Medicine, Pediatric Infectious Diseases (1997-2000), and did her internship and residency at Yale-New Haven Children’s Hospital, Pediatrics, from 1994 to 1997. Vázquez was honored with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Minority Medical Faculty Development Award (2000-04); the May Gailani Junior Faculty Award, Department of Pediatrics, Yale University (2004-05); the Charles C. Shephard Science Award, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2007); the Morris Y. Krosnick Award; and the Children’s Hospital of Yale-New Haven Residency Program Award (1997). She is board-certified in infectious disease and pediatrics.

Higher Education

Clarissa Rojas – California State University-Long Beach



Dr. Clarissa Rojas, professor in the Chicano and Latino Studies Department at California State University-Long Beach, first encountered racism when she immigrated to Chula Vista, Calif., from Mexicali, Mexico, with her family. She was 12 at the time.

“I arrived at a junior high school yard just across the border in Chula Vista, Calif.,” she said. “It was there that I first came across a slew of racial epithets that classify Mexicans as an inferior class of citizens in the U.S. I struggled to make sense of this bitter homogenizing racial tactic and ran home to my mother asking her to explain what ‘we’ (Mexicans) were. She spoke of the complex histories, cultures and peoples that make up México and affirmed their gifts, their brilliance. It sparked a profound desire, born perhaps out of an interest in reclaiming my own humanity, to better understand the ways injustice maps itself onto the social landscape. This inquiry has taken me to pursue ongoing study in ethnic studies, women’s studies, sociology and decoloniality.”

Prior to her current academic appointment,

Rojas taught for nine years in *raza* studies, ethnic studies, urban studies and sociology at San Francisco State University. She also served as a faculty member at the University of San Francisco and at University of California (UC)-Davis. Rojas’ current research explores young Latinas’ experiences with and conceptualizations of multiple and intersecting manifestations of violence. Her transdisciplinary research and teaching interests include: violence; sex/gender/sexuality studies; race/racialities; Chicano, Latin, Latin American, Zapatista, Transnational, Decolonizing/Post-Colonial, and women of color literatures.

Rojas co-edited *Color of Violence: the INCITE Anthology*. Her article “Fighting Violence Against Women and the Fourth World War” appears in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: The NonProfit Industrial Complex*, which was awarded the 2007 Gustav Myers Outstanding Award for Advancing Human Rights. She received her Ph.D. in medical sociology at UC-San Francisco. She holds an MA in ethnic studies from San Francisco State University and a BA in women’s studies and Chicano studies from UC-Santa Cruz.

A long-term community activist and organizer, Rojas’ community work has focused on resisting and transforming violence against and within *raza* and communities of color. She has been invited to speak throughout the United States and internationally, and co-founded INCITE: Women of Color Against Violence.

Iraida Carrión – University of South Florida

Dr. Iraida Carrión is an assistant professor in the School of Social Work at University of South Florida’s College of Behavioral and Community Sciences. She first perceived the needs of the poor while living in housing projects in the South Bronx in New York City.

“As a clinical social worker, I have been committed to serve oppressed and underserved communities,” she said. “As a researcher and educator, I now have the privilege of conducting collaborative scholarly research which impacts policymaking in elimi-



nating health disparities among Latinos living in the United States. My goal is to instill my passion, commitment and determination in social work students so that they too may impact the world. Due to the foundation laid before me by other Latinos, I now have the opportunity to influence and provide leadership for the next generation of scholars.”

Carrión’s research focuses on issues of aging and health disparities among Latinos, with areas of concentration including end-of-life care, palliative care communities and health care decision preferences of patients with an end-stage cancer diagnosis. She is currently collaborating with colleagues at H. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center, the Department of Aging and Mental Health Disparities, and in the Department of Anthropology.

Carrión received a BSW and MSW in the School of Social Work at Adelphi University, and went on to earn a Ph.D. in applied anthropology at the University of South Florida. Among her many awards and accolades, she was named Educator of the Year 2011 by the Florida Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers. And received the 2008 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s New Connections Emerging Scholars Second Annual Symposium Award.

Maribel Vázquez – City College of New York



Dr. Maribel Vázquez is a founding member of the City College of New York (CCNY) Department of Biomedical Engineering, established in 2002. Her research focuses on the usage of microfluidics and nanotechnology to examine the migration of cells in the nervous system. She has received numerous federal funding awards from the National Cancer Institute, the National Institute of General Medical Sciences, the National Science Foundation, and the Pediatric Brain Tumor Foundation.

Vázquez received a Doctor of Science and Master of Science in mechanical engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and a Bachelor of Science in mechanical engineering from Cornell University. She worked in industry as a mechanical engineer for Intel Corporation for several years, and completed internships with NASA research centers as an undergraduate. Vázquez has published numerous articles in journals such as *Analytical Chemistry*, *Nanomedicine*, the *Journal of Nanobiotechnology*, *Journal of Biomedical Materials Research*, and the *Journal of BioMechanical Engineering*. She has presented several invited seminars to audiences in universities such as Yale, Columbia, Pennsylvania State, City University of New York and State University of New York campuses, as well as to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the New York Academy of Sciences. A native New Yorker, Vázquez was raised in Washington Heights by a family of immigrants from the Dominican Republic.

Agnes Lugo-Ortiz – University of Chicago

Dr. Agnes Lugo-Ortiz, assistant professor of Latin American literature at University of Chicago, is a specialist in 19th-century Latin American literature, and in 19th- and 20th-century Caribbean cultural history. Her work focuses on questions concerning the relationships between cultural production and the formation of modern sociopolitical identities. These are the subjects of her book *Identidades imaginadas: Biografía y nacionalidad en el horizonte de la guerra (Cuba 1860-1898)* and of her current book-length project “Riddles of Modern Identity: Biography and Visual Portraiture in Slaveholding Cuba (1760-1886).” She also is the author of numerous essays that address the interconnections between queer sexualities, gender and anti-colonial politics in 20th-century Puerto Rico. Since 1994, she has been on the advisory board of the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Project, and is co-editor of *Herencia, The Anthology of Hispanic Literature of the United States, En otra voz. Antología de la literatura hispana de los Estados Unidos*, and *Recovering the US Hispanic Literary Heritage*, vol. V.

Lugo-Ortiz earned a BA from University of Puerto Rico-Rio Piedras and an MA and a Ph.D. from Princeton University. She received the Ford Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship for Minority Scholars and the Mellon Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship. Prior to her appointment at University of Chicago, Lugo-Ortiz taught at Northwestern University and Dartmouth College.

Norma Cantú – University of Texas-Austin



Dr. Norma Cantú brings exceptional practical and policymaking experience to her new joint appointment in the Education and Law Schools at University of Texas-Austin. Cantú was influenced early in her life by the words of Barbara C. Jordan: “Let each person do her part.” She discovered the part she would play when she attended an underfunded, overcrowded high school in South Texas in which 5,000 students were crammed into a building designed for 1,500.

“Despite the dropout rates for Mexican-Americans exceeding 50 percent, my dream as a teenager was to earn a graduate degree so I could work in an air-conditioned court room, not in an overflowing, humid, poorly maintained classroom,” said Cantú. “With my law degree in hand, I advocated for minority and low-income students in offices which included the courts, classrooms, congressional hearing rooms, and parts of the West Wing of the White House. My part, it appears, included advocating for equitable and adequate funding for students in schools and colleges. Today I am honored to serve as a role model for lawyers, teachers and administrators.”

For eight years, Cantú was assistant secretary of education for civil rights in the Clinton administration, where she oversaw a staff of approximately 850, implementing governmental policy for civil rights in American education. Within the first two years, her office increased the number of illegal discrimination complaints resolved by 20 percent; more than a third of the cases were disposed of without adversarial proceedings based on voluntary corrective action. By her final year in office, the number of cases resolved each year had risen almost another 20 percent.

Prior to her service as the nation’s chief civil rights enforcer in the education arena, Cantú worked for 14 years as regional counsel and education director of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund. In that capacity, she litigated scores of important cases affecting educational funding, disability rights, student disciplinary policies, access to special services for English-language learners, and racially hostile environments.

Cantú graduated from the University of Texas-Pan American at age 19, taught high school English, and then enrolled at Harvard Law School, where she graduated at the age of 22. Her areas of specialization include education law and the Americans with Disabilities Act.