

A Higher Calling: Toward a More Spacious Role for Academic Advisors

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Introduction of Dr. Rendón by Barbara Smith

Good afternoon, everyone. It is my honor and privilege to introduce an amazing, passionate woman and professor emerita from the University of Texas at San Antonio, Dr. Laura Rendón. Dr. Rendón is nationally recognized as an education theorist, activist, and researcher who specializes in college preparation, persistence, and graduation of low-income, first-generation students. She is a native of Laredo, TX. Her passion is assisting students who, like her, grew up in poverty with hopes and dreams but not knowing how to realize them. She is credited with developing the theory of validation, which colleges and researchers have employed as a framework for working with and affirming low-income students. Dr. Rendón is a teaching and learning philosopher and thought leader. She authored a book where she developed a pedagogic framework called *Sentipensante* (Sensing/Thinking) Pedagogy that emphasizes intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual student development, along with social activism. She is an active scholar whose research has been published in key education research journals. Dr. Rendón is the coeditor of several books and monographs, including *Transforming the First Year of College for Students of Color*, *Educating a New Majority*, *Introduction to American Higher Education*, and *Race and Ethnicity: Ethnic Diversity in Higher Education ASHE Reader*. Formerly, Dr. Rendón was codirector of the Center of Research and Policy in Education at the University of Texas at San Antonio, where she engaged in research that informs the education community about critical factors that affect the academic success of key student groups. She is also one of the founders and former board chair of the National Council for Community and Education Partnerships focused on providing access to college for low-income students. She has served on the Board of Trustees at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado. Dr. Rendón is a fellow of the Mind and Life Institute and serves on the Board of Directors for the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education.

Keynote by Dr. Rendón

I'll begin by saying a little bit about how I enter this inquiry regarding academic advising and its role in fostering student success, especially for vulnerable student populations. I am a border woman who was born along the U.S.-Mexico border in Laredo, TX. My first language was Spanish. I am a first-generation college student from a family where no one had attended college before me. Here is a picture of me on my sixth birthday. To the right is my little sister, Ileana, and to my left is my cousin, Elma. Behind us you can see an old, run-down house where we used to live. Certainly, those were extremely tough times. Growing up in poverty really impacts your life, but I've never forgotten my early beginnings. I've never forgotten the fact that there are so many students in dire circumstances even today, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic.

One thing we've learned during this remarkable time of the pandemic is that we are transitioning to a new normal, a normality that we are actually creating together. While this new context has a significant number of challenges, the time also carries great possibilities. As advisors who are interested in the success of all students, we have to really look at our role in terms of what's coming up next in higher education. What do advisors need to understand in order to work with vulnerable student populations? What constitutes a more spacious view of academic advising?

Understanding Structural Inequalities and Being an Advocate for Justice and Equity

One of the first things that advisors need to understand is the unjust structures in society and how they create persistent inequality. There is a false narrative in higher education, and it is not necessarily written anywhere, but the narrative goes something like this: All students begin college at the same starting line with equal opportunities to succeed. That's simply not true. There is a difference between wealthy, privileged students who have had a head start in life and low-income students who are disproportionately impacted by societal inequalities. The children of wealthy,

mostly White elites do not have to worry about finances. Advantaged students have families that can pay for study abroad opportunities in Europe or other foreign countries. These families can also transfer their assets and help their children secure coveted internships that lead to well-paying leadership positions (Rendón, 2020c). The situation is quite different for low-income students who face formidable challenges (i.e., high rates of poverty, lack of health care and proper nutrition, discrimination, etc.) that existed long before COVID-19. In fact, nearly forty years after I earned a doctorate, it is getting harder for students who grow up like me to transition from poverty to middle- or upper-class status. *The Huffington Post* reported that “America has a social mobility problem. Children born in 1940 had a 90% chance of earning more than their parents. For children born in 1984, the odds were 50-50” (Hobbes, 2019, p. 2). Below, I highlight some of these unjust structures that create and perpetuate inequality.

Unequal Schooling

Schooling inequalities begin early in a student’s life. For a long time, persistent school funding inequalities have created a situation where low-income students are getting less of a quality education than students from high-income communities. The non-profit organization, Ed-Build has noted that: “nonwhite school districts get 23 billion dollars less than white districts despite serving the same number of students” (2019, p.1). Yes, that’s 23 billion dollars less! I attended some of these poorly-resourced schools in Laredo, TX with teachers who did not necessarily have teaching credentials from top colleges and universities, and yet I succeeded. But it was a challenge for me to move ahead. And while I’m one of the lucky ones, I’m also an exception.

Segregated Schools, Colleges and Universities

Black and Latinx students are more likely to attend schools with mostly poor students, while White and Asian students typically attend middle-class schools that are well-funded with state-of-the-art tools and resources, which can facilitate college preparedness and access to highly skilled, well-paying jobs. If you happen to live in a low-income community, unfortunately, you’re likely going to attend a poorly-resourced school. You are not going to attend schools that have well-equipped laboratories and high-end technology tools, and you are not going to have well-stocked,

well-staffed libraries or Olympic-size swimming pools. Similarly, colleges and universities are increasingly stratified by both race and class. According to Carnevale and Strohl (2013), Whites have captured most of the enrollment growth at the 468 most selective and well-funded four-year colleges. Conversely, enrollment growth for African American and Latinx students can be found at increasingly overcrowded and under-resourced open access two- and four-year colleges.

Wealth Inequalities

Low-income African Americans, Latinxs, and Native Americans have assets of less value than Whites, and their families have little or no income or business assets that can be transferred to their children. Unfortunately, when I was growing up, my parents did not have any financial assets they could transfer to me. They were struggling to survive. After my parents separated, my mother was a waitress at a local restaurant, working the night shift from 10:00pm to 6:00am. She worked Monday through Sunday for \$15/week, plus tips. After graduating from high school, she expected me to work to make sure bills were paid and food was on the table (Rendón, 2020b). Resources some of us take for granted are not available for poor students. Not every student has access to well-educated parents, outstanding schools, high-speed Internet, books, laptops and tablets, food and nutrition, health and child care or family care. The digital divide still exists in America, especially in rural and low-income areas. Even before COVID-19, low-income students were struggling with challenges such as helping put food on the table, attending to sick family members, and taking care of more than one child at home. What I want you to keep in mind is that when you meet with a student, please take the time to really get to know that student and his or her background. It is important to know where students come from and the challenges that they’re experiencing because not all students initiate college at the same starting line.

Recognizing the Changing Nature of Higher Education’s Student Body

The future is touching us now. A new normal is emerging, and part of that new context is the changing nature of the higher education student body. We need to move away from the false narrative that all students are pretty much the same

and should be treated alike. The new counter-story is that demographic changes are adding complexity to the college student body along with several other factors including racial/ethnic identity, citizenship status, age, gender and sexuality (Rendón, 2020b).

There are four demographic firsts that are going to add to this complexity. The first is that we are heading to a situation where between 2045 and 2050 a clear majority race will not be identifiable. That is already happening in some states including Hawaii, New Mexico, Texas, California, and Nevada (NACME, 2013). The second demographic change has to do with migration increases. Despite the fact that we have a politically-charged narrative against immigration, we are going to see migration as a primary driver of population growth in the United States. Advisors will be working with more immigrants in higher education (Vespa et al., 2018). A third shift is that single-race identity is becoming obsolete. Consider that about ten million people (and growing) in the U.S. classify themselves multiracial. With a multiracial and biracial population, we cannot operate with binary ethnic/racial classifications such as Black or White. Instead, we need an intersectional perspective to the study of racial/ethnic identity. What we are dealing with now is a multidimensional, mixed-race student culture that is not trapped in binaries and that embraces not one or two, but several aspects of their identity. A fourth change is that the U.S. population is now getting older. The median age is expected to grow from 38 today to 43 by 2060. Within a couple of decades, older people will outnumber children for the first time in US history. Hence, advisors will be seeing increasing numbers of older students as time goes by (U.S. Census, 2018).

There will also be radical changes in the conceptualization of gender and sexual orientation. In terms of gender, binary classifications are on the way out. It's not just he or she anymore. Advisors will be working with students using gender terms that will evolve over time. For example, today we hear terms such as: genderfluid, genderless, transgender, trigender, and cisgender. Advisors will be also be working with evolving definitions attached to one's sexual orientation. Additionally, we are moving beyond the binary classification of heterosexual or homosexual and even straight or gay. New terms referring to sexual orientation, including asexual and pansexual, among others, are being employed, while others are likely to emerge in the future (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.).

Understanding Differences in How Students Experience College

Nearly one-third of undergraduates are first-generation students (EAB, 2018). I remember when I made my first decision to go to college. The most important decision of my life was made in the eighth grade. I was in my English classroom, and the counselor came in one day, forms in hand, and said: "Today I want you to select the academic or the vocational track." I raised my hand and said, "Tell me the difference." I didn't know. I had nobody to guide me. The counselor explained that if we selected the academic track, we were going to college. If we checked vocational, we were going to get a job straight out of high school. As poor as I was, I always wanted to be a teacher, and I selected the academic track.

I went home quite excited. My mom was there tired and sleepy from her night waitressing, and I said to her: "*Voy, a ir al colejio!*" She looked at me and said, "*estas loca!*" You're crazy! Who do you think you are? College is for the rich. College is not for us. That was definitely not the message that I wanted to hear. Yet, at some level, I understood that was all she knew because no one in her family had gone to college. She had only gone to maybe the third grade. So how could she guide me? How could she understand my hopes and my dreams? Regardless, I kept on going, and I figured eventually she would understand.

A false narrative is that the college experience is typically the same for all students and that college advisors should treat all students the same way, placing the responsibility for being informed squarely on students regardless of background. Advisors need to work with a different narrative because the college and the life experiences of first-generation, low-income students are not the same as wealthy, privileged students. Our role as advisors and educators is to understand the distinct differences between the college experience of wealthy, privileged students and underserved students.

EAB (2018) has compiled seven facts about first-generation students. These students are:

- 1) More likely to attend a community college. I attended two of them: Laredo College and earned an A.A. from San Antonio College.
- 2) Less likely to graduate on time.
- 3) More likely to choose careers that give back to their communities. Giving back

is a phenomenal strength that is not well understood by many educators.

- 4) Not earning as much as their peers.
- 5) Less likely to have a mentor.
- 6) Most likely to lack financial support.
- 7) Often unaware that they are first generation and could lose out on resources available for them. Advisors need to steer them toward those resources.

Recently, I was engaged in a research project (Rendón et al., 2014) with Latinx students at the University of Texas-San Antonio. We wanted to learn the positive and negative aspects of attending college for first-generation Latinx students. We also wanted to identify the assets students had employed to survive and thrive in college. How were they succeeding despite facing challenges that would preclude them from having any kind of success?

We interviewed forty-seven students, employing a focus group methodology. Out of those forty-seven we did one-on-one videotaped interviews with six students. We learned that there is an upside related to attending college. Students were excited about meeting new friends, interacting with diverse students, hearing new perspectives, and having new experiences. This made me think back to 1968 when I transferred to the University of Houston. The large metropolitan city of Houston stood in stark contrast to my hometown of Laredo, which was such a small city at that time. I remember walking around campus mesmerized with squirrels and big trees and just the whole aura of a big university campus which did not exist back home. I had just seen the movie, *The Graduate*, with a Simon and Garfunkel soundtrack, and I was thinking about the lyrics: “*Are you going to Scarborough Fair?*” and just picturing myself in a movie about a college student. It was so exciting and different. I was so very happy to be there. And certainly, that excitement was there for the students we interviewed. This was their moment, their time.

At the same time, there is a downside to college attendance that hardly anyone addresses or takes the time to understand. The downside is what Latina feminist scholar, Gloria Anzaldúa (2012) calls “*un choque*,” a cultural collision. The downside is marked by liminality, being in an in-between space, *ni aqui ni alla*, neither here, nor there. In this liminal space, students have one foot in the world of family and community and another foot in the academic world of college. During the transition to college, students discover that they have to negotiate new

college traditions, customs, and values that stand in stark contrast to their home realities.

Also problematic was that students reported experiencing separation anxiety. When students left their family to enroll in college, they found themselves feeling guilty. For instance, a male student might have become the man of the house in his father’s absence, but he could no longer be present to help his mother. Similarly, some women had been caretakers of their brothers and sisters. They were not home any longer and felt guilty about their absence. Another issue was related to the process of dislocation and relocation. Students were dislocating from their home realities and relocating in the new world of college, often with little assistance and very few educators really understanding what they were going through as they transitioned to college.

Students also reported experiencing what are known in the research literature as microaggressions. These are quite hurtful words and actions directed at students and can be racist in nature. For example, students could be asked, in a rather disgusting way, questions such as: What is that food you’re eating? Why do you speak with an accent? How come you’re talking to your mom in Spanish? These are all microaggressions and they can happen even beyond the first year of college and all the way to graduate school. For example, when I was a doctoral student at the University of Michigan, I submitted a research paper. The professor called me to his office, and he told me: “This is a very well written paper. Do you write like this all the time?” Of course, the subtext of his comment was that perhaps someone else had written the paper for me. Regardless, I responded, “Yes, I write like this all the time.” Apparently, the professor did not believe students who looked like me could submit exemplary papers (Rendón, 2020b).

Learning to Be a Validating Agent Who Works With An Ethic of Care

Advisors need to understand the importance of becoming validating agents. In the 1990s, I developed validation theory and stressed the importance of validating in- and out-of-class agents taking the initiative to affirm, enable, and support students (Rendón, 1994; Rendón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011). A false narrative that permeates higher education is that to find academic success, all students have to do is pull themselves up by the bootstraps and succeed on their own with minimal to no support. I believe the counter story relates to what NACADA is advocating: “No student is an

island.” The critical point here is that relationships, validation, caring, and empathy are foundational to student success, especially for first-generation low-income students. It is important to understand that placing all responsibility on students during the advising session is not going to work for underserved students, especially at the beginning stages of the advising relationship. The reason is that these students face multiple challenges, which I explained earlier, that are not well understood by many educators who themselves come from middle-to upper-class backgrounds.

There is a new book that reinforces what I’m saying titled *Relationship-Rich Education* (Felten & Lambert, 2020), and the authors’ whole point is that human connections drive success. The advisor role here is to learn to work with a validation-rich academic and student support system (Rendón et al., 2019). Advisors need to understand the importance of assisting students in overturning the invalidation they may have received in the past and to believe that they matter, are valued, and are important. Advisors need to work with an ethic of care that fosters a sense of belonging and validates student “voice,” the whole notion that the ideas students bring to college are valued, regardless of the student’s background. Advisors also need to validate students in a way that enables them to believe in themselves and to internalize and articulate the belief that: “College is for me. I belong here. I can do this.”

I suspect many of you are doing online advising. There is a new book by Costa (2020), and the title is *99 Tips For Creating Simple and Sustainable Educational Videos*. One of the premises of the book is that research indicates that online learning works best when we take care to build regular positive and interactive relationships with students. The whole idea here is to show up not just as an advisor, but as a caring human being. It is important that we convey care and support for students, praise their success, validate their ability to be successful, be reassuring, and remain accessible. How about using videos to capture our care and empathy? How about letting students know that we are aware of their situations, especially during this very difficult time of the pandemic?

One of my favorite TV programs is CBS Sunday Morning. Recently, a segment on Lizzo was featured, and many of you know that Lizzo is a hugely popular Grammy Award winning singer/songwriter. Lizzo is also an accomplished flutist, and was *Time Magazine’s* 2019 Entertainer of the Year. When the reporter asked Lizzo who influ-

enced her success, she remembered her high school band director, Manny Gonzales. Lizzo left school a long time ago, but she always goes back to crediting him for her now phenomenal success. Manny Gonzalez is clearly Lizzo’s validating agent. What Manny Gonzalez did for Lizzo was to see in her something that she could not see for herself at that moment in time, in those formative years of her life. The power of validation is that it lives in students for a very long time, and this type of affirmation is extremely important, especially for underserved student populations.

Working With an Asset-Based Framework and Leveraging Student Strengths

There is yet another false narrative that low-income, first-generation students have too many challenges rendering them unlikely to succeed, and that it is not really worth the time to work with students with so many odds stacked against them. A new counter-story is that these students have hidden talents that propel them to succeed. These strengths need to be acknowledged and leveraged so that all students have a real chance to succeed, despite their socio-economic background. The advisor role is to avoid working with deficit views of students and to engage the advising relationship from an asset-based perspective.

What are the key strengths of low-income, first-generation students? Recently, I was engaged in a study of Latinx STEM graduates who were asked to write an essay about their journey into a STEM field of study (Rendón & Kanagala, 2017; Rendón et al., 2020). We employed Tara Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model to analyze the essays and to identify the strengths that fostered their success in STEM. One of the key strengths was determination, what famous high school math teacher, Jaime Escalante, in the film, *Stand and Deliver*, called *ganans*. Students really wanted the STEM degree. They were focused. They were resilient. They kept going despite all obstacles.

Another important asset was navigational competence, the students’ ability to maneuver themselves in different cultural and academic contexts and to figure things out, oftentimes with little to no assistance. For example, some students had left their native country, as well as their friends and their family behind, and they learned to survive and thrive in a new American culture. Others had transferred from a two- to a four-year institution and learned to negotiate both academic contexts, while others had changed majors and learned to

adapt to requirements and courses in their new program of study.

One of the STEM graduates' most formidable strengths was that of "giving back" (Salis-Reyes, 2018). Students wanted to be of service to the Latinx community and the greater society. They wanted to address inequities related to the underrepresentation of Latinx students in STEM. What these students wanted to do went beyond simply earning a college credential to hang on the wall. They wanted to use their STEM education to make this world a better place to live and to be role models for those coming behind them. They were concerned with addressing social justice challenges such as water quality, forest fires, virus outbreaks, declining infrastructures, and diseases such as cancer and diabetes that ravage low-income communities. Another key strength for STEM students was that even as children they had a sense of curiosity, a sense of wonder and discovery. Advisors need to know that low-income, first-generation students have formidable (often hidden) personal assets that, when complemented with academic ability, can give students agency and ultimately foster success.

Attending to Self-Care and Well-Being

Finally, I want to acknowledge the unprecedented moment which we are all experiencing. During the COVID-19 world crisis, we find ourselves living in what Gloria Anzaldúa (2012), calls *nepantla*, a liminal, in-between space. We find ourselves in the middle of two realities, with one foot in the old world as we used to know it and another foot in the new world that is emerging before our very eyes. But the middle space, with all its possibilities, can also be a space of tension and trauma. I encourage you to attend to your self-care and well-being and to be gentle with yourselves as we are dealing with sudden change, loss, and suffering.

One of the things that the pandemic did for me was to bring out my poetic voice. In March, like many of you, I found myself feeling a strangeness in my body, with a sense of confusion and anxiety. As I watched the pandemic unfolding across the world on TV and on social media, I tried to put the pieces together to make sense of the dramatic shift that was taking place. My reflections resulted in a poem I called *Realm Shift* (Rendón, 2020a).

Realm Shift
And so it is that

Now we are being forced to do
What we could not imagine doing before.
Abruptly, almost without warning, and with
our old, outworn practices and belief systems
We find ourselves entering a total shift of
realms.

It is time to evoke the wisdom of our
ancestors, philosophers and sage prophets.
Anzaldúa, she would say we are now living
In *Nepantla*, in liminality, straddling
The old and new normal.
Atwood would admonish:
The truth is not irrelevant.
Indigenous people would remind us
That the universe is an inseparable whole.
Mama, she would say
Ten mucho cuidado mija. No salgas.
All precious wisdom.

The virus, the fear, the uncertainty
The chilling tales of
Other nations have migrated to us.
An unfamiliar strangeness has taken over our
bodies.
Every day begins to feel like a week,
Even a month, some say.

Yes, there is the uninvited darkness
That has crept into our lives.
But Jung would remind us that
The other side of darkness is light.
Yes, the virus kills and fear creates chaos.
But it is at precisely these moments
Of extreme crisis that our human spirit
Presents itself in uniquely soft, endearing
ways.

Light, hope, community, sacredness.
It's in the balconies of Italy and Spain that
Burst with song.
It's in the women who are
Sewing homemade facemasks for doctors.
In the two-minute prayer
Requesting a miracle
Recited at the same time
Across the world.
In the teachers who take
To their cars to drive in neighborhoods
So that kids can see they are still there
For them.
In a little girl's social distancing birthday
With friends driving cars by her house

With signs and banners.
 In the parents who choose to eat dinner
 Every night in the hallway
 Close to their quarantined daughter.
 In the people who set up Christmas lights
 And cooked Thanksgiving dinner in March.
 In the people volunteering
 To bring groceries and medicine
 To those in need.
 In the therapy dogs who go
 To comfort senior citizens outside their
 windows.
 In ordinary people who read children's stories
 online.
 In virtual watch parties and happy hours with
 friends.
 In the first responders who risk their lives to
 save others.
 In priests who walk the streets of Laredo
 To offer comfort and blessings.

Let us remember that darkness
 Can bring forth our finest hour.
 In this realm shift
 We come to know
 That a new reality is in store for us
 A reordered promised land,
 As Luther King would call it.
 Now we learn that the I is about the We.

And so it is that
 We find ourselves at the verge
 Of spaciousness—expanded possibilities.
 Those who are coming behind us
 Will surely ask the questions of the heart.
 How did we cope?
 What did we not get right?
 What did we learn?
 Is it really true that we can:
 Isolate in our togetherness?
 Socially distance to save our relationships?
 Work in a context of uncertainty, confusion
 and fear
 And yet find a sense of stability?
 Break open from our rigidity
 To find a new foundation for humanity?

I have hope that
 We can, as Rilke suggests,
 Live the questions now as we stumble
 Into the vast territory of answers that
 Defy a choice between one or two options.

I have hope that in this

Realm shift we will journey to re-connect
 With things that really matter—
 Our humanity, our communities, our loved
 ones,
 Our sense of purpose in this life to find
 Our perfect centeredness in a shifting reality.

Final Thoughts

I end by noting that in this realm shift advisors have a higher calling. Advisors do much more than dispense information. We are advocates for justice and equity, as well as guides, translators and mediators for students. We understand that we need to work with a complex student body in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, age, nationality and sexual orientation. We stay cognizant of differences in the ways diverse students experience college. We are validating agents who affirm that all students can succeed when given proper resources and opportunities. We enter the advising relationship with an asset-based framework, as well as recognize and leverage the wide array of assets students bring to the college experience. As we transform student lives, we take time for our own self-care and well-being. When we do all of this, when we respond to a higher calling, our words and actions will stay in our student's hearts and minds for a very, very long time.

I love you, NACADA! Thank you so much.

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