Foreword

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In reading through the chapters of this volume, one is tempted to conclude that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Certainly, some of the particulars are different: Mexican-origin males and females have changed places since the 1970s so that today they are the mirror image of each other's college representation of forty years ago. Women are now about 60 percent of the college freshmen and getting about 60 percent of the college degrees, whereas it was men who garnered this larger share forty years ago. And today a larger percentage of the Mexican-origin population is immigrants or the children of immigrants, which changes the college-going dynamic in important ways. But the major challenges facing this population have not changed greatly. Poverty, unequal K–12 schooling opportunities, low parental education, and low expectations of Mexican-origin youths' abilities and educational prospects remain endemic.

Even though we have recognized for some time the barriers that keep these young people from going to college, and especially from completing college degrees, little has been done to address these barriers. In fact, it is fair to say that as the population has grown, there has been an erosion of those policies that fostered the first large wave of Mexican American (and other “minority”) youths' entry into higher education during the civil rights period of the 1960s and early 1970s. Active recruitment and targeted financial support for these youths largely dried up with the passage of anti-affirmative-action legislation in some key states and the belt-tightening of budgets for higher education across the nation.

It has been widely touted that Mexican Americans are *going* to college in higher percentages than ever (in fact, even at slightly higher rates than of White students), but this statistic can be misleading. Mexican Ameri-

can students go to very different “colleges” than other students, primarily two-year institutions, from which they only rarely transfer to a four-year college and get a degree. As a result, degree completion is inching up very slowly, and the gaps in completion between Mexican-origin students and other groups are actually getting wider (see chapter 3). And, too many of these students are left with heavy debt but no degree to show for it.

Forty years ago the undereducation of the Mexican-origin population was a minor problem from a national perspective. Today it is a national disaster in the making. In this sense, things have indeed changed. Latinos generally, and Mexican Americans more specifically, are occupying a larger role in the nation’s present and future. “Hispanics” (two-thirds of whom are Mexican-origin) have grown by 600 percent since 1970, from 9 million to 53 million persons in 2012. In California and Texas, the two states with the largest numbers of Mexican-origin youth, these young people now constitute more than half of all students in the public schools. It matters very much how they fare; they will be the backbone of the economy in the Southwest (and increasingly in other urban areas around the country) in a few short years. And they are the least likely of all major subgroups to complete a college degree. Studies in California project that as a result, the state by 2025 will be *at least* a million college degrees short of meeting its labor force requirements, and Texas is similarly poised for a significant shortfall in college-educated workers.

So, why have things changed so little in terms of policies that could stimulate and increase the educational level of Mexican Americans? The civil rights era was not only a period of opening doors to spaces that had been virtually closed to Hispanics, such as elite higher education, but also a period of *investment* in education. The states built public schools to meet the needs of the burgeoning postwar baby boom, and they built colleges and universities to satisfy their growing aspirations for postsecondary education. But beginning with the recessions of the mid-1970s and early 1980s and a more conservative federal government, both the states and Washington, DC, began to pull back. The 1973 Supreme Court decision *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* found that education was not a fundamental right protected by the U.S. Constitution, thus laying the foundation for a growing inequality in the nation’s public schools. Without legal protections against vastly inequitable funding of schools in poor communities versus those in wealthy areas (because poor children were not found to have a *right* to equal schooling), schools serving the Mexican American population have been routinely underfunded. The antitax crusade that began in California in 1978, following on the heels of

the mid-1970s economic recession, and that subsequently swept the nation, left declining funds to support public services such as schools. And increasing income inequality (the top 1 percent hold about 23 percent of the nation's wealth compared to the bottom 90 percent, who hold less than half¹) means that while the wealthy hold on to more of their income, the poor get poorer and their neighborhood schools become even more unequal, more segregated, and more bereft of the capacity to prepare students for college. Immigration from the Southern Hemisphere, especially Mexico, also began to increase sharply in the early 1980s, and so more students in need of equalizing opportunities were crowded into the schools that were least equipped to provide those opportunities. As always in our history (as recounted by Victoria-María MacDonald and Jason Rivera, chapter 2), as immigration grew, the outcry to close the borders and punish those who came here seeking to take the jobs of "real Americans" became louder. Anti-immigrant sentiment over the last several decades has been closely tied to anti-Mexican sentiments, with many people seeing them as one and the same (although historically this is not the case). All the more reason to not open our pocketbooks for the schools and services that would serve "those children." It is especially ironic that Americans' negative attitudes toward immigration have mounted in the face of a growing body of research that finds that immigrant students often outperform their native-born peers in schooling because of the "immigrant optimism" that their families bring with them.

Thus, while we have known for a long time that poverty and inadequate schooling are core causes of failure to enter and complete higher education, there has been little motivation on the part of many policymakers to attack these problems. Increased immigration also meant that parents of Mexican-origin students in the schools were more unlikely to have any experience with or understanding of the schooling system in the United States, or grasp the importance of returns on higher education. Increasingly heavy costs, a lack of understanding of the higher education system or how to finance postsecondary education, and the absence of individuals in the schools who could or would provide this information left many Mexican-origin families on the margins. Of course, it bears mentioning that since immigrants do not normally vote, their concerns are often overlooked by politicians seeking support in the next election.

In spite of this dreary history, there has been progress for Mexican-origin youth with respect to educational attainment, and this volume is filled with chapters that herald that success and illuminate the pathway to a better future for this population and, as a consequence, for the na-

tion as a whole. Beginning with chapter 4, where the authors posit a new lens for examining the plight of Mexican-origin youth in higher education, the volume takes a turn toward the optimistic. The authors note the shift in the literature from an almost wholly deficit perspective that chose to blame the victim to a more critical lens in recent years that began to identify the structural determinants of the undereducation of Mexican-origin youth. Corroborating my own research (Gándara 1980, 1982, 1995, 1999b), others began to study and document the resilience of this population and the cultural *strengths* exhibited by these families. For example, in researching my book *Over the Ivy Walls*, I had been impressed by the stories told by Mexican mothers of their families' noble histories, pointing out to their children that they were *destined* to be successful because they came from a "*buena familia*." The mothers interpreted the often dire poverty in which the family was living as a temporary condition that did not define them or their aspirations. This formed the backbone of the resilience that these educationally successful Mexican-origin young men and women would take into the world of higher education. Similarly, as in chapter 5 of this volume, I, too, found that the gender stereotypes were not nearly so inflexible as often described in the literature, and both the mothers and the fathers of educationally successful Mexican-origin women were almost uniformly supportive of their daughters' educational aspirations, albeit in different ways. This, of course, is not to say that gender bias did not or does not exist in Mexican-origin families, but in those I have studied that saw themselves as upwardly mobile, the families clearly saw that their daughters were as worthy of support as their sons, and mothers were very influential in family decisions. It seems there is a "magic key" in these findings. Nurturing the aspirations of low-income Mexican-origin families may be one effective way to reduce gender bias—in favor of both sons and daughters. But as I will argue a little later, this must be in the form of social policies that provide *real* support for these youth and families, not simply exhortations to try harder to conform to Anglo-American ideals.

In fact, the challenge that is set forth in chapter 9 regarding the stagnation of progress for Mexican-origin men may also be addressed by this same strategy—supporting the aspirations of Mexican-origin males through more enlightened social and education policy. In my own research, I have concluded that the men are often more pragmatically driven than the women. Mexican-origin young men feel very keenly the duty to help support family and to declare economic independence early, even at the cost of their own education. Bringing home a paycheck and demon-

strating both their independence and their ability to share the burden of family support are important markers of manhood. These expectations are often not quite as high for the women—though they may be expected to provide family support in other ways that can take time and energy that could otherwise be devoted to study. Nonetheless, like Ruth Enid Zambrana and Rebeca Burciaga (chapter 5), I found that one important way families supported their young women was in protecting them from too many household duties. The women I have studied, on the whole, have felt more freedom to choose education, and, being more protected (less independent), they were also less likely to get off the education track than their brothers. Luis Ponjuán and Victor B. Sáenz (chapter 9) argue that increasingly strict “zero tolerance” policies in public schools lead to disproportionate rates at which Mexican-origin males are suspended. This almost certainly factors into their estrangement from school, reducing their chances of graduating and going to college. At a time when costs of higher education were lower and financial support was greater, it was more possible for young men to demonstrate independence and even help the family in limited ways while also continuing their education. Today, this has become nearly impossible. It should also not be forgotten that while Mexican-origin women have outpaced the men in college-going and degree completion, they have not kept pace with women from all other major subgroups. Mexican-origin women remain the least likely to get a college degree.

Ultimately, the value of this book will rest not just on the description of the problems associated with the lower attainment of postsecondary degrees of the Mexican-origin population but also on the “magic keys” provided herein that may turn the situation around. As I noted at the beginning, little has changed with respect to policies that might make significant inroads, except to the extent that proactive, effective policies have been eliminated or reduced. Yet, as Frances Contreras asserts in chapter 10, the situation will not improve without better policies and greater investment of our resources.

Several authors allude to the dearth of teachers from the Mexican American community. There is now considerable evidence that more highly qualified Mexican-origin (and bilingual) teachers would make a difference in the educational outcomes of this population. Their better understanding of the resources that exist within these students’ communities, their greater ability and desire to communicate with students’ parents, their greater likelihood of investing their careers in these neighborhoods, and the important role they play as models of authority and

educational accomplishment all make them highly desirable teachers. Why has there been no targeted national and state-level policy to recruit and support young Mexican-origin individuals to become teachers? Likewise, why has there been no concerted effort to recruit and support Mexican-origin individuals into the higher education faculty pipeline? Individual efforts exist at some university campuses, but this is largely a bootstrap operation that is headed by one or two people who are deeply committed at a personal level and who constantly struggle with limited resources.

As the United States has fallen further and further behind in the rankings for percent of population who are college graduates—now at about fourteenth—the reason for this is clear. Countries that have wanted to boost higher education enrollments and completion have supported their youth in getting a college education; tuition is free or nearly free, and oftentimes living stipends are also provided. And most of these thirteen other countries have poverty rates lower than ours. That is, college would be less of an economic challenge for more of their citizens. Those nations have seen completion of a college education as an important social policy priority and have made impressive and rapid gains. We have not. We have bemoaned the fact that we are dropping in the rankings but have done comparatively little to make it possible for a Mexican-origin (or other) low-income student to forgo a regular paycheck and dedicate him- or herself to higher education. If we were truly dedicated as a nation to equalizing opportunity and strengthening the national economy, we would make it possible for ambitious low-income students, of which Mexican Americans form a significant percentage, to go to four-year colleges and complete degrees without the constant worry of paying tuition or basic living expenses. The students would not have to choose between paying the rent and buying the books for class. And, we would not saddle future teachers, social workers, and other public service personnel with nearly insurmountable debt for the privilege of dedicating their lives to creating a better society.

Contreras (chapter 10) also challenges quasi-governmental bodies such as the President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, of which I am a member, to do more to push for these policies. She is right. While the commission is only "advisory," it is important to remember that these are opportunities that should not be wasted. There is progress, but it is still too little and too slow to make a significant dent in the problem. It is my sincere hope that this book, by illuminating the challenges and suggesting ways to address them, will help push the college-completion agenda for Mexican-origin youth forward.