

Latina Faculty: *¿Si se puede?*
By Theresa Alfaro-Velcamp and Myrna Santiago

As Latinas teaching Latin American history at institutions having recently become Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI)¹ we wondered what larger percentages of Latinx students mean for our institutions and our departments. Seeing more Latina professors in our subfield at the same time, we wondered how much our numbers had grown, how we were experiencing the academy collectively, and whether that increasing number of Latinx students would find familiar faces in Latin American history. We spent nearly two years researching and asking those questions and here is what we found.

The good news is that there are, indeed, many more Latinas teaching Latin American history than when we both received our degrees in 2001 and 1998 respectively. With the help of undergraduate students, friends, associates, and historically-minded organizations, we found 80 Latinas teaching Latin American history in the United States as ranked faculty, although it was not easy to discern how many total positions there are in Latin American history overall due to the contingent nature of many of them. We have no information about Latinas who are lecturers, either, and no way even to speculate on their numbers. Nevertheless, we contacted all 80 Latina professors. We sent them a survey, interviewed some individually, and held a focus group at the 2017 AHA conference in Denver, Colorado. Forty-seven women responded to our queries, over half of the 80 we identified. Of those, forty-nine percent are U.S.-born, including Puerto

¹Hispanic Serving Institutions claim that full-time students of Hispanic background make up 25 percent of the overall student population.
<https://www2.ed.gov/print/programs/ideshsi/definition.html>

Rico; 44 percent were born in Latin America; and seven percent declined to state. Of those born abroad, the largest percentage, 22, were from Mexico. In terms of rank, 44 Latinas responded: 19 associate professors, 12 full professors (including the two of us), and 13 assistant professors. The employment locations of the Latina full time scholars were concentrated in California and Texas, as could be expected, but a second group congregated in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts. Four of the 12 full professors work in the California State University system. The doctoral programs that appear to have had the most success in placing Latina historians of Latin America in tenure-track positions are the University of California, San Diego, the University of Arizona at Tucson, the University of California, Los Angeles, and the University of Wisconsin, Madison. We also discovered that from our original total of 80 professors, 13 teach Latin American history at the top 100 research institutions (based on the 2016 Quacquarelli Symonds [QS] international rankings). All of them were born in Latin America. When we expanded the numbers to the top 300 ranked U.S. institutions, we found three U.S.-born Latinas taught Latin American history.

This was a surprise. We knew just from our friendship circles that the majority of Latinas, both US-born and Latin American-born, were not at research institutions. What we had not realized was that women born in Latin America had a higher likelihood than U.S.-born Latinas of landing positions in Latin American history at research-friendly universities. Latinas born in the United States are overwhelmingly at teaching institutions. When we asked individuals whether they had a preference for research or teaching schools, the results are not as cut and dry as the data suggest. Some women consciously selected teaching over research, especially if they were at institutions with a

significant Latinx student population. They hoped to be role models and mentors for Latinx students, besides sharing their passion for Latin American history. But other US-born Latinas would not have minded doing research; they just did not land jobs at such institutions. One professor born in Latin America, happy with the position she held, by contrast, expressed her frustration that Latinx students did not seek her out despite her best efforts to make herself available to them. The students, she thought, did not believe she could relate to them because of her class background, despite the fact that she, too, was an immigrant. The complexities of national origin, class, and cultural experience in the United States were more complicated than we had imagined. Latinx students seemed to differentiate, not seeing US-born Latina professors as interchangeable with Latin American-born faculty. Institutions, however, seem not to make those distinctions, as it often happens with African-American and African-born scholars. Not surprisingly for the two of us, many Latina professors told us they longed for a scholarly community as they were often the sole Latina in their departments.

Our small sample showed good news on a different front. Latinas who finish doctoral programs and end up in tenure-track positions have been very successful securing tenure and promotion. Of the 44 Latinas who responded, 31 had tenure.

As many of the Latinas we surveyed told us, however, the road is not easy. On many campuses, Latina professors face disproportionate service demands. Many feel compelled to serve on multiple committees, to become community spokeswomen, to provide mentoring and advising to first-generation and minority students and their organizations, and to become the voice of “diversity” in a variety of spaces. This is in addition to regular expectations of university and departmental service, publishing, and

teaching. An additional demand our colleagues highlighted, as many feminist scholars have pointed out but is rarely expressed among Latinas, is family obligations. Latina faculty, like other first-generation citizens and immigrants, are often responsible for taking care of multiple generations, including parents, grandparents, their own children, and other extended family. The general lack of information about university life that the families of first-generation college students face also afflicts the first-generation Latina professor. Families believe faculty have summers “off,” for instance, and are expected to take on additional familial obligations because flexible schedules seem to allow for it. The emotional and economic components of honoring and reproducing culture weighs heavily on the minds of Latina professors we talked to as they navigate their careers in the academy.

Our colleagues also expressed a desire and a need for effective mentoring. Like us when we started out, they missed seeing Latinas further ahead in the profession. They often felt that they had no one to ask questions to and find helpful advice from without fear of revealing doubt or vulnerabilities. For instance, assistant professors peppered the two of us with questions: How to evaluate publishing expectations when they were not explicit at their institutions? How to manage teaching in areas beyond their immediate expertise, such as world history, if they had not been trained in them? Could they say “no” to teaching Latino history, i.e., United States history, in addition to Latin American history, and not jeopardize promotion and tenure? How could they find mentors if their departments were not forthcoming? How did we navigate supporting Latinx students in addition to all other demands on our time? The most difficult issues were how to combat being perceived as an affirmative action token rather than a fully qualified hire and how

to do the work of advocacy our students and we ourselves expected without being labeled as “difficult” or “angry” or “whiny”?

Faculty of color, of course, have wrestled with these questions for a long time. Despite the growing number of Latinas in institutions of higher learning, “tokenism” continues to be a problem in the academy, in general, and Latinx can feel “rage” about the “isms” they encounter in the academy on a daily basis.² In a provocative editorial in September 2016, for instance, Professor Marybeth Gasman described how search committees tend to recruit faculty who look like themselves and to disqualify scholars of color who fit the requirements often on grounds of not being top “quality” or “a good fit” for their departments. Gasman argues there is not a desire for substantial change thereby perpetuating institutional racism (“An Ivy League professor on why colleges don’t hire more faculty of color: ‘We don’t want them,’” *The Washington Post* [September 26, 2016]). Whether there are exclusionary hiring practices or not, Latina professors do feel the pinch of diversity work. As schools like ours come to embody being HSIs, the pressures on Latina faculty is bound to grow. As national student protests about diversity in the last couple of years have demonstrated, the disconnect between student experiences and institutional discourses is real. While some colleges and universities have managed to make progress in diversifying the student body, no one has made sufficient progress in doing the same among faculty. If our findings are any indication, some institutions, in fact, have done a better job at internationalizing their faculties than at hiring historically under-represented minorities.

² See Salvador Ortiz, “Latinx in the Academe,” <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2017/09/22/scholar-describes-his-rage-about-diversity-work-campus-essay>

Thus, our colleagues have much in common with our Latinx students. Junior faculty need to see reflections of themselves in their environments as examples of success (*si se puede*). And while achievement is possible without role models, most of us excel when we find mentors and colleagues to show us the ropes, including people who look like us and share our experiences. As Latinx students keep reminding administrators, they thrive when they can identify with their faculty. The same is true of Latina professors: our scholarship and our teaching benefit when our institutions work hard to retain and support us, both on campus and at meetings and conferences where we can find other Latinas to engage, learn from, challenge, and befriend. Latina faculty and Latinx students need not be isolated and alone in our academic pursuits. The question is: are our institutions, particularly HSIs, up to the task of creating the environment necessary to be inclusive of Latina professors, both US and foreign born? How much longer before we leave all tokenism behind and we are able to tell Latina colleagues and Latinx students that, yes, they can achieve in the academy at all levels?