

**Re-membering, Re-framing, and Re-imagining Latino Leadership in Education:  
Reflections on Community, Higher Learning and Higher Education**

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## Setting of the Story

This essay employs a dynamic critical storytelling process that shares an intergenerational story about higher learning in multiple settings that range from community to elementary school, high school and higher education. It attempts to rehabilitate the concept of higher education through several forms of expression and includes the act of renaming it from higher education to higher learning. This disruption becomes evident as the authors *re-member*, *re-frame* and *re-imagine* the lived stories of the ancestors who brought the authors to a particular community in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. They came at different times, but they all sought the same thing: an opportunity for their families to live healthy and happy lives. This article has been many years in the making. Its authors have been in close personal relationships as students and teachers, friends and collaborators, and as people who were raised in the same south Texas rural towns of Edcouch and Elsa, two communities that comprise a school district—the Edcouch-Elsa Independent School District.

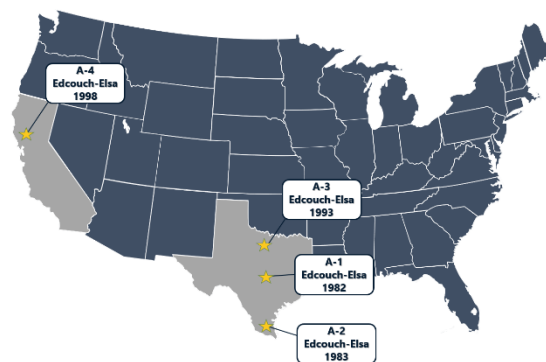


Figure 1. Map of where authors work.

We have deep roots in this place and find them to be an important source of strength and sustenance as Latina and Latino professors and administrators in higher learning and education. We envision a better day for Latinos in higher learning and education because we have been conditioned by the intense hope and sense of purpose by growing up in Edcouch-Elsa. In short, we find community, family and relationships as the anchors that have allowed us to experience a measure of success. Two of us are brothers, so we have shared rooms, books and tortillas since our beginning, and two were students of the brothers in the 1990s at Edcouch-Elsa High School. We have maintained our relationships, nurtured relationships with our families and have built our sense of familia in the academy. We write together, build programs together, and together experience the peaks and valleys that come with establishing our places in higher education. The chronology that guides this article takes the reader on an almost century-long retrospective through stories that are intergenerational, place-based and informed by local narratives. It deviates from traditional deficit-driven paradigms by building upon good work that is assets-based and that builds upon community cultural wealth (Gonzales, Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992; Yosso, 2005). It decenters the conversation from the normative concept of higher education and employs the concept of higher learning to highlight effective practices that shape future relationships at the individual, organizational and community levels (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson & Militello, 2016). It is guided by four Latino scholars who grew up in this rural community and who work in higher education in different parts of the country. A polyvocalic approach moves the narrative from a first person point of view when two of the authors tell their stories, to second person when the brothers tell their stories, to third person when offering context, collective reflections and recommendations. The family of Author 3 (A-

3) and the family of Author 4 (A-4) find their point of entry into the community timeline during the first part of the 20th century. The families made their way by toiling in the agricultural industry, and as the families grew, the institutions that would wield the greatest influence would be the family itself, the local school system, economic opportunities and the local church. The brothers would enter the community the last day of 1968 when their family emigrated from the northern Mexican state of Tamaulipas to the Edcouch-Elsa community. The brothers, Author 1 (A-1) and author 2 (A-2), graduated from Edcouch-Elsa High School (E-E HS) in 1982 and 1983 respectively, A-3 graduated in 1993, and A-4 in 1998. Beginning in the 1990s at E-E HS A-2 and A-1 mentored A-3 and A-4 as teachers through an organization they founded called the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development. As high school and college students, A-3 and A-4 became part of the Llano Grande community-based college preparation program, but the broader work has been more a way of life than a program. This Llano Grande experience serves as an important anchor for what this article refers to as higher learning, phraseology that intentionally challenges the more constrained meaning and conventions of higher education. The Llano Grande work nurtured a broader sense of teaching and learning, of lines of inquiry, and of finding our way in university environments: all this born out of the epistemological and ontological realities of our lived experiences (Gujardo, F., et al., 2012). The higher learning process has been shaped by lessons learned through the oral histories of our elders, community-based research initiatives, historical writing, asset mapping exercises, ethnographic research in the community, and continuous critical self-reflections (Gujardo, 2017; de la Trinidad, et al., 2017; Salinas, 2018). This family and community-based process has been the foundational training for all of us, as we navigate our lives in higher education.

## **Reflections on Context**

Epistemologically, this article departs from the traditional positivist norms, as it is grounded in personal and relational dynamics. It is based on the strengths and assets of a Mexican American community located along the borderlands of South Texas and builds on the ideas, stories and lived experiences of its four authors. It is a borderland fraught with pain and suffering that has chronically existed as “una herida abierta” (an open wound), as Anzaldúa (1987) poignantly described. But it is also a borderland of possibility, a laboratory for the imagination, as we exist in the cultural, historical and political in-between spaces of *Nepantla*, *y con esperanzas grandes*. The theoretical position challenges the conventions of higher education, it pushes the parameters of learning to a community context, and it tests the formality of authorship and voice. In terms of voice, vis-a-vis this article, we move from second person to first person to third person points of view and write collectively. The polyvocalic range is part of the message (Rabinow, 2008; Guajardo, M., Guajardo, F., Locke, 2018). We have learned that there is power in the stories of our parents and community elders, as they continue to remind us of the hard work, the sacrifices and the purpose of their struggle. This work is about re-membering, re-framing and re-imagining the world of higher learning.

## **Research Question & Road Map**

In addressing the topic of the next generation of Latino/a leaders in education, as participants in that environment, and as agents of higher learning from the same community, we use this opportunity to examine the formative stories of our development. We look at our sense of *Latinidad* that is forged in a community setting, and we look at stories that shape us

individually and collectively. We are thus guided by the question: what does successful higher learning for Latina/o education and development look like and feel like in action?

The popular claim that 1968 changed the world holds true for the community where the authors grew up, as it marked the year of the historic high school walkout of 1968 when students used their agency to address social and educational inequities (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2004). The authors argue lessons learned from community activism shaped how they have engaged in higher learning and in creating opportunities for Latinos from this small South Texas community. They, and those they have mentored, matriculated from a low-income community of 99% Mexican American residents to some of the most prestigious universities as student, faculty and administrators. Their stories, values and experiences shape the document through almost a century retrospect with stories that are intergenerational, place-based and informed by local narratives that set the context for the students' dreams to form and come true. We de-center the discourse from the normative concept of higher education and employ the concept of higher learning to highlight effective practices that shape future relationships at the individual, organizational and community levels (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2016).

We are committed to modeling our lived values through our work, the theories that inform our work, and the relationships that fuel, sustain and keep us accountable. This document follows a history of place and people. This work is an effort to cross boundaries, celebrate the assets of a community, and scaffold the reader through stories of higher learning, education and development in a community that represents the geographical, theoretical and racial borderlands of the United States. We bring these stories to the forefront of higher learning as a vehicle to re-name the language we use, re-member the stories and values of our elders and re-imagine the

future of Latinos in our institutions of higher learning and education. We find that to create change, we must re-member, reframe and re-imagine our work and the lives we want to live.

## **Reflections on Inquiry**

When we pose the question, what does successful learning look like, we seek wisdom from our elders, from the community and from the stories therein. The rhythm of these stories is grounded in history, as stories are presented at different periods in time. The realignment of the historiography to privilege the local Mexican American community is an important aspect of remembering the stories of our elders and recognizing the shoulders on which we stand. The act of remembering rehabilitates the power of our community from a low-income border town to a proud, hard-working and committed people.

## **Multisited Ethnography**

We use multisited ethnography to connect the cyclical, genealogical network that has informed the logic model guiding our work in higher learning and education. This work is critically grounded in the process of conversations and *pláticas* that began before any of us were born (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013). We dive into the stories of our elders, the history of our community, the landscape of development and higher learning. In this South Texas community that we call home, very little is conventional compared to the development of mainstream society and whitestream institutions of higher education. Within this framing, we employ a methodology for investigating ourselves, our organizations and our communities that aligns with this reality. The goal is not to convince the readers of the next best thing but to help us explore the stories our ancestors and their big dreams for the future of their children and community in South Texas.



Multisited ethnography provides the methodological venue to look inward as we explore our gifts, while simultaneously documenting the external challenges we faced in the educational and developmental process. We use multiple strategies to document, analyze and make meaning of our lived experiences with our families, our schools, our community and our journey of becoming *personas educadas*. We use historical writing to identify critical moments in this South Texas community related to settling the area and documenting the watershed moments, such as the student walkout of 1968. Story is used to narrate the lived experiences in an autobiographical genre, while visual and artistic symbols aid us in re-membering and re-framing our collective narratives. These artifacts include family pictures, artistic designs, maps, historical timelines and other archival data.

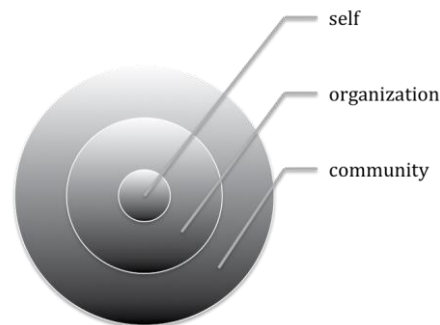
While multisited ethnography gives us a non-linear methodology for telling stories of our community at different places, spaces and times (Marcus, 1995; Pierides, 2010; De la Trinidad, Guajardo, Kranz, & Guajardo, 2017), it also invites a framing of the collective ontological position of the authors as we inform and interpret the values, curiosity and construction of these narratives. We do not claim to be objective. But we feel compelled to be transparent in our methods, not for others to copy, but in the spirit of the scientific process (Maturana & Varela, 1992), and as an invitation to the reader to employ these dynamic, critical pedagogies and methods in their communities (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2016). We invite researchers and educators to journey to a different place, space and time where they can remember the struggles, the values and search for the hope within their history and family stories that can invite different ways of being in the process of higher learning. The multisited



ethnography is guided by five axioms that inform our thought and work as student researchers, educators and scholar-activists (Guajardo, Guajardo, & Locke, 2018):

- Learning and Leadership Are a Dynamic Social Process
- Conversations Are Critical and Central Pedagogical Processes
- The People Closest to the Issues Are Best Situated to Discover Answers to Local Concerns
- Crossing Boundaries Enriches the Development and Educational Process
- Hope and Change Are Built on Assets and Dreams of Locals and their Communities

These axioms are presented within an ecology of knowing that scaffolds and organizes the lived experience into a rhythm that is interdependent and oscillates between the I/We dynamic within a space or position necessary to sustain a level of ambiguity that invites others to witness and contribute to their own development and to inform the collective construction of stories of becoming.



*Figure 2.* Ecologies of Knowing (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2016).

This method is embedded in our pedagogies for teaching, learning and leading that emerge as a hybrid between the stories of our elders and neighbors, and the construction of a

space for higher learning and education. This is the space for higher learning with our context, as we propose to re-frame, re-imagine and re-construct the future of higher learning and education.

## **Reflections on Methodology**

Einstein wrote that the problems of today will not be solved with the same consciousness that created them. This invites us to employ a methodology that helps us make the familiar strange. Specifically, we look at an ethnographic approach that looks at stories by different people, at different times, but in the same locale. This multisited ethnography invites us to look at ourselves and our families as actors within the chronicle of our community. In a personal conversation with the founder of educational anthropology, George Spindler, once suggested to us that when we go to school in the United States, we learn about everyone else except ourselves. We take the Spindler critique to heart and shift our teaching and learning to begin with understanding the self; we then move to understanding the organization, and then move toward understanding community. A different methodology is required to shift the focus of study and to adjust the epistemological approach. As practitioners engaged researching higher education (and higher learning), we invite others to consider the opportunity to reframe and reimagine knowledge-creation processes to include the voices that have historically been marginalized. We see Latino families in communities, but we miss them many times when they are on our campuses. Vigilance in our research methods is necessary.

## **Context of Stories: History, Values and Politics**

### **A-3's Family Story: Creating Community**

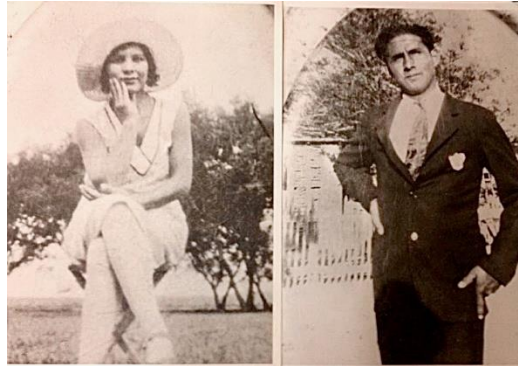
In the early twentieth century in South Texas, land ownership was rapidly transferring from Mexican to white hands. Despite the dislocation, violence and social turmoil that occurred,

Mexicans were also moving into the region to supply agricultural labor for the new crop-based agricultural economy. This migration included Mexicans crossing the border, and Tejanos from other border counties responding to demands for labor. The families of my grandparents left the small border town of Salineño, in Starr County, Texas, where their families had lived for two generations, to become part of this agricultural labor force. A-3's grandfather remembered traveling as a young boy with his family by covered wagon pulled by two horses to Yorktown, Texas, in Dewitt County in the late 1910s. They often had to walk alongside the cart as it rumbled over bad, sandy roads, to spare the horses. It was common for several families to travel together in his various migrations over the decades. He recalled a caravan of eight or ten wagons making the month-long journey to Yorktown (A-3's Grandfather, 2002.) By traveling together in family or kinship units, migrants not only increased their safety while on the journey but could more easily establish communities in a new geographical setting.

In Yorktown, A-3's grandfather's father planted cotton on halves while working on the land belonging to a German landowner. In Yorktown, located in Southeast Texas, Mexicans and African Americans were sharecroppers, parting with half their crop to landowners, and Whites tended to be tenants, renting land from owners for one quarter of the crop (Foley, 1997). Tenants and sharecroppers alike planted cotton in a state that was becoming a dominant textile producer. The system of sharecropping and tenancy, which replaced slavery after the end of the Civil War, would itself be replaced a few decades later by seasonal migrant wage earners, paid by the hundred weight of cotton each worker picked. A-3's grandfather's father and his wife stayed in Yorktown and sharecropped for five years until A-3's grandfather's father's wife died of an

unnamed stomach ailment. Upon her passing, A-3's grandfather was nine-years old, and the family returned to Salineño.

Throughout South Texas, and including the Rio Grande Valley, Mexican migrants settled into newly-created towns, towns such as Edcouch and Elsa which were built along the freshly-laid railroad line. These towns were platted atop the old Spanish *porciones*, transforming the physical and social geography of the region. The new towns were named after land developers and their families, the new place markers also representing a different cultural order. Edcouch, for example, was named after Edward C. Couch, who was a large landowner and a former County Judge, and Elsa was named after Elsie George, a Scottish immigrant who had the first established mercantile store in the upstart community. When the Southern Pacific Railroad track was laid in 1926 and 1927, the town sites of Edcouch and Elsa, respectively, held their founding auctions, and the towns were established. In keeping with the spirit of westward expansion, the socio-cultural and political landscape resembled the Jim Crow South (Limerick, 1987; Montejano, 1988; Salinas, 2018; Woodward, 1955). Both Edcouch and Elsa were founded as racially segregated towns. As was typical throughout the Valley, they each used the railroad to separate the white and Mexican sections of town (Najera, 2015). In the advertisement for the new town of Elsa, the legend on the bottom right corner showed a designation for the "Mexican colony," to be distinguished from the "residence lots" and the "business lots." A-3's grandfather migrated to Elsa, Texas in 1938, as a newlywed, with his wife still in Salineño.



*Figure 3.* A-3's grandfather and his wife's wedding.

He came to Elsa to work at the Vahlsing plant, a large vegetable-packing shed that packed and shipped produce such as cabbage, broccoli and cucumbers to markets across the country. A-3's grandfather worked as a foreman in the packing shed, preparing cabbage for market. Though Mexican workers were central to regional boosters' dreams of creating an agricultural empire, the "Magic Valley," as they termed it, was not fashioned for Mexicans (Brannstrom & Newman, 2009; Foscue, 1934). It was for White migrants from the Midwest, who visited the valley on special excursion trains and were persuaded to buy farmland in these new communities. Picture-laden brochures and carefully choreographed tours touted the modern edifices lining the new "Main Streets," such as hotels, banks, Protestant churches and schools. For those prospective buyers who might worry about Mexicans inhabiting those same social spaces, they were reassured that Mexicans "prefer to live by themselves and do not try to mix up in other society." Another publication touted modern Valley schools and also mentioned the "exclusive building, just as good as the others," built for Mexican children in the Mexican neighborhood, referring to both educational and residential segregation (Salinas, 2018).

Mexicans did indeed create social, political and cultural institutions within these segregated South Texas towns. Mutual aid societies, known as *mutualistas*, proliferated throughout South Texas during the early decades of the twentieth century. Beyond the specific benefits that mutualistas offered their members, such as insurance benefits and widows' funds, they also supported and financed programs, services and institutions that benefited the larger community. They sometimes formed libraries, published newspapers, and notably, established private schools to serve the children of the community (Zamora, 2000; Cohen, 2008). The members of these civic-minded organizations were community leaders subject to codes of moral conduct and respectability as judged by their peers and community. "Members of mutual aid organizations saw themselves as important members of their communities. They viewed their decision to contribute to the moral uplift and material advancement of fellow Mexicans as the most responsible and honorable responsibility that anyone could assume" (Zamora, 2000, p 100).

Even outside such official, deliberate measures of formal leadership and community building, Mexican residents formed bonds of community and practiced the values of reciprocity. When A-3's grandfather moved to Elsa in the late 1930s, he was joined by many people he knew from Salineño. While perhaps unable to recreate the communalism that of his youth in Salineño, the presence of so many familiar people in his new surroundings must have been comforting. About his early years in Salineño, A-3's grandfather recalled the reciprocity they often practiced. "The people were very humanitarian. Well, it was all the same people. They would kill a cow and share the meat, a different piece to every family. Every day we had fresh meat" (Salinas, 2002). Reflecting on the tranquil existence he lived in Salineño, he expressed similar feelings



about the residents of the Mexican neighborhood in Elsa. “It was the same in this town [of Elsa] when we first got here. A lot of good people. There were no fights” (Salinas, 2002).

In the bustling 1940s, as the Mexican sector of town expanded, the new Catholic church, built with old wood from a torn-down barracks, and made possible through the concerted efforts of the Mexican residents of Elsa, represented the bonds of community that tied people together. In the late 1940s, A-3’s grandfather and his wife purchased land in Elsa in the northern edges of the Mexican section. The Catholic diocese had also purchased land right next door, with plans to build a new church. The Church also purchased the lumber from a decommissioned army barracks that was being torn down in Harlingen, about thirty miles away. A-3’s grandfather hauled the lumber from Harlingen in his truck to bring the raw materials for the church to Elsa. He also donated a lot to the Church to augment the space of the church grounds and to allow for a parking area. For his family, as for many Mexican residents of Elsa, the Catholic Church was a central part of their lives and community. The church bells produced a rhythm to their days and provided a reminder to the children that it was time to fulfill their obligations as altar boys.



*Figure 4.* Altar Boys with Priest in Front of Church.



The church was an important site to mark the celebrations and sorrows of the Mexican community in Elsa. A-3's grandfather was not particularly religious; in the rare occasions when I saw him attend church, he seemed ill at ease and not particularly happy to be there. Thus, it was probably not an individual religious belief that persuaded him to donate land and haul the lumber to build the church, but more likely a recognition of the importance of the church to the community and a desire to serve the community, something he did believe in.

### **Reflections on History**

The Salinas family history sheds light on an important part of the historical record that has generally not been documented. Stories of hard work, resiliency, commitment, sacrifice and love for community constitute important lessons that guide us. While the community history describes practices and conditions of segregation, those narratives seldom tell a story such as the Salinas family gifting a plot of land, so the Catholic Diocese could build a church in Elsa. This kind of community service can be found in stories of many local families, and all those share the same social DNA that give rise to a vibrant civil society. As the Salinas family raised their children during a time of exclusion, segregation and disenfranchisement, A-3's grandfather and his wife challenged those precepts through a sheer act of generosity, and love. The segregationist practices did not distract Mexican American families from building their anchor institutions. The commitment to *mutualista* practices of interdependence, autonomy and resistance provided an alternative disposition that stood next to difficult economic, social and institutional challenges. The family and community were essential for survival. We learned this through personal experiences and by engaging in higher learning, as we observed our elders.

## **Weaving a Social Fabric: Transitions and Identity Formation Years—Stories from A-1 and A-2**

When we came to this country on the last day of 1968, our parents were fleeing a tough life in northern Mexico. Our father, Papi, worked as a *canalero*, an irrigation man. In mid-1968, a large landowner threatened Papi with his life, if he did not provide more water to irrigate his fields. We experienced a palpable push to leave Mexico. Mami felt the pressure to leave too. She simply wanted her four boys to go to school. Having been raised in a rural, isolated village in the state of Tamaulipas, she had never attended school and didn't know much about it. Papi understood school a little better because he managed to negotiate his way to the fourth grade in a rural school in the state of Nuevo Leon. When our parents brought us across the border and landed in the small town of Elsa, they did so almost blindly, not knowing what awaited them regarding employment, housing, or even schooling for their kids. But their faith was strong, unabated, and they possessed a strong sense of hope that they would find a better life. Higher education was not on the radar for Papi and Mami, at least not in the sense we speak of in our current environment, but higher learning was. Papi's life personified this understanding in myriad ways. We find tangible evidence in his autobiography, which he penned cuando sus hijos estudiaban en la universidad in the 1980s. He wrote that he had gained higher learning through the greatest higher education institution he knew, what he called "La Universidad de la Vida" (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2017). For Papi and Mami, higher learning was not only tantamount to higher education, but it may have been an even higher achievement. Que estudiaran en la universidad era importante, to be sure, pero que fuera el bien, si por ese mismo proceso, se alejaban de la familia, o de la comunidad. Instinctively, they understood that working for the well-being of the family and even for their neighbors was a primary purpose and going to

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college would be couched within that higher calling. This was a higher level of education, a more important purpose for learning. The values Papi and Mami expressed throughout their lives screamed as much, as lessons of respect, taking care of family, building strong relationships, ser cumplidos, and doing the public good constituted the most important curriculum. It was the very definition of higher learning.

We started elementary school at Edcouch Elementary in the fall of 1970; we were five and six years old, respectively. We didn't know English, but one of us had the good fortune of having Ms. Martinez as a kindergarten teacher, while the other had Mrs. Blankenship. This was the year after the Bilingual Education Act had been passed by Congress. While the state of Texas passed similar legislation, public schools such as the Edcouch-Elsa school district took time before they enacted bilingual education practices. For Ms. Martinez, teaching students in their native tongue, or Spanish in our case, was an easy proposition. In Mrs. Blankenship's classroom, the sink or swim method guided the teaching and learning process. The result was that one of us got a head start in school because Ms. Martinez taught in ways that made cognitive, linguistic and academic sense. We have often reflected on the differences between the teachers' pedagogical approaches, with one being plainly more careful, more sensitive and more loving. Ms. Martinez was also able to communicate with our parents about the learning process, and our parents witnessed the higher level of learning that took place in that environment, while Mrs. Blankenship never had the good fortune to engage our parents. Qué lástima.

During our elementary years, an air of activism and change enveloped the community. Some of the vitality could be ascribed to the broader socio-cultural and political milieu of the times, as the Civil Rights and Anti-War movements persisted into the early 1970s. In our rural

corner of the world, however, local political activism shaped the spirit of the day in tangible ways. In this context, the high school walkout in November of 1968 emerged as a watershed moment (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2004). The walkout changed everything. It changed the school board, municipal leadership, the local economy and the local political consciousness. The impulses of change also filtered into the schools. Bilingual education practices, for example, were being experimented with at Edcouch Elementary. At the high school level, guest speakers called attention to the Chicano Movement. We learned of issues championed by Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers and La Raza Unida Party's push for solidarity politics. Our school district even introduced Mexican folklorico dance performances (Nájera-Ramírez, et al., 2009).

Our parents felt that Elsa was a good community for their kids to attend school, even as they complained that school open house events tended to marginalize Mexican immigrants. On their first open house, school personnel spoke mostly in English. Our parents left early because they did not know English. Years later, they attended another open house. On that occasion, school staff communicated in Spanish, but our parents found the school's values somewhat in contrast with their views of children and family. "They wanted to teach us how to be good parents," complained Papi and Mami. But Papi and Mami believed they were good parents. "If they only got to know us," Mami said, "they would know that our children are the most important thing in our lives. If they knew that, they could be more helpful" (Guajardo, J., 2018). Eventually, school leaders figured out ways to be more culturally responsive.

People in the community seemed to have a keener sense for the realities of children and families. Esperanza Salinas was one such person. Esperanza got to know our parents and understood that we had only one wage earner in the family. Papi worked as a laborer on the

Galloway dairy farm, while Mami stayed at home. Esperanza knew we faced economic hardship, much like other families in the community. When the Rio Grande Valley was hit with a harsh winter in the early 1970s, Esperanza found a way to secure federal government vouchers so that the A-1 and A-2 could acquire winter coats. She did that for us, just like she did for so many other children in the community. Esperanza, a young mother herself, graduated from high school and was attending college. She knew English, understood the system, and wanted to help. Years later, when conducting an oral history with her, Esperanza reminded us that she helped us get winter coats, not as an act of charity, but because she loved the children and families in her community (Salinas, E., 1999). She did it because she stood in solidarity with all of us, particularly those who most needed just a little bit of help. She was such a gift to us, and to the community. She nurtured in us the meaning of her name and helped us find hope. Esperanza mentored in the ways of higher learning.

Esperanza's husband, Jorge, similarly acted for the public good. In 1968, Jorge and other 20-something year-old Chicano leaders mentored local high school youth when students determined to stage a walkout. Jorge continued his advocacy role when he successfully ran for a seat on the school board and then when he took the job as director of the Elsa Housing Authority. In Jorge's early years as director of Housing, Papi and Mami applied to secure an apartment unit for our family. When Jorge approved the A-1 and A-2 family application, the Elsa Housing Authority provided a safe and positive living environment for our entire family.



*Figure 5. A-1 and A-2's Family in front of 302 W. St 3<sup>rd</sup> St.*

While Jorge administered subsidized public housing in the community, the dutiful Esperanza led an effort to organize the Elsa Public Library—right across the street from our housing project on West 3rd Street in Elsa. During hot South Texas summers, when we weren't working in the agricultural fields in Michigan, California, or the Texas Panhandle, we would spend long hours nestled between aisles in the Elsa Public Library that Esperanza built.

Esperanza and Jorge gave the gifts of housing and books. It is no accident that A-1, A-2 and their two brothers graduated from college—and three of them became PhDs. Our community leaders were pivotal figures in our lives. Our parents and our community played equal roles in ensuring that we slept in appropriate quarters, had access to books, and that we could hope for good lives.

On the other hand, Jorge would also become one of Papi's most erstwhile nemesis. One day, after eight years in public housing, Jorge sent Papi and Mami a letter. Jorge attempted to raise our rent by 300%. Our parents were shocked! They could not afford the increase with their current employment. Nonetheless, Jorge maintained that the rent increase would go into effect in a year's time. Papi and Mami felt pressured to pursue an alternative strategy. They would save



money to buy a piece of land. They achieved their goal and bought a trailer home to place on the new piece of land. Before the end of the year, we moved out of federal housing and into an old trailer home in a startup colonia, just outside Elsa. For many years, Papi held a grudge against Jorge but as he got older, he credited Jorge with pushing our family to forge its own way—in our own home, in our plot of land. “Pinche Jorge,” Papi used to say, “nos corrió de los proyectos, pero también nos hizo un gran favor.” Indeed, Papi found Jorge as a key motivator in his life.

### **Reflections on Family**

Our family’s experience was similar to that of many immigrant families that cross borders in search of a better life. Non-immigrant Latino families in this community often face both real and metaphorical borders in the form of segregationist practices. Difficult conditions for families can be mitigated by the service and vision of other families in community, particularly when those families embrace values of dignity, mutuality, access, equality and service. We landed in such a community, and our experience teaches us that many Latino communities are like this. The development of a civil society which values the public good, nurtures a strong social fabric, and builds anchor institutions to provide support, housing, education, employment, literacy, and spirituality is critical to the development of children. These institutions also enable youth to pursue opportunities for higher learning after high school.

Our ancestors modeled a social democratic society, as they built the social fabric of our community. In reflecting on the past half century, however, we pose the question: why have our institutions of higher learning, education and development been under attack? We propose it is time to re-member, re-frame and re-imagine the rebuilding of our public institutions. We must engage in a politic that is for the public good, and in the spirit our ancestors exemplified. At the



core, we must invest in institutions for higher learning. Higher learning, education, and development are investments in emancipation. For the Latinx community, this investment must be assets-based and culturally and linguistically congruent with the local culture and context. And as our mother said, “if they only got to know us”! We need to know our students.

### **Cultivating a Social Fabric: Author 4 and her Family**

My father and his siblings were raised in Edcouch-Elsa in the mid-20th century and were influenced profoundly by the community. An entrepreneurial spirit, my dad, and his brother established a joint video store and “snack bar” restaurant located on a property between the two towns. We lived 75 miles away in a town called Brownsville. Here, five of my six sisters were born, but when my parents decided to move us to Edcouch-Elsa. It was like they were bringing us home. Casa Video and Munchies Snack Bar was opened on Highway 107, just east of Mile 4, which is the dividing line between towns. Mile 4, however, served as a unifying border, where Edcouch and Elsa came together. It was also where the high school and the middle school were located. My dad established this new venture within walking distance of the schools so that students could congregate during lunch and after school. Casa Video became a favorite local hangout. For many years it remained a place for patrons to rent the latest movies and get the best burgers in town. Fans could catch a good snack before and/or after the local football game, and community members could catch up in a familial setting. Casa Video was more than just a business; it was a landmark that served a community. Here, relationships were built and sustained, and many of the working-age youth were employed.

Because we lived in a small community, the people of Edcouch and Elsa knew our family well. That is what made it a special place. Later in life, I realized my family’s significance to the

community. My Buelo worked multiple jobs to sustain his family. One of those jobs was driving a school bus, picking up and dropping off hundreds of school kids every year.



*Figure 6. A-4's Grandfather and Family in Front of Bus.*

My grandpa passed away this year at age 95. At his funeral, my parents moved the rosary to the church parish hall to accommodate the number of family, friends and community members who came to pay their respects. I heard countless stories about a man who the community seemed to know better than I did. It gave me great comfort and peace to know that my grandfather and my dad's family were revered in the local community.

The collective community was critical in raising many families, including my family, just as my Buelo was instrumental in raising the community. Despite being labeled poor, when there was need, the community would rally to help each other. It was common for a family to help pay for medical expenses or a funeral by having a chicken plate sale. Other times, community organizations might defray the cost of a trip by hosting a plate sale, a car wash or collecting donations on the corner of the main cross roads. For me, enchilada plate sales helped raise money for our competitive cheer squad to cover airfare to Florida to compete at Nationals.

Through these fundraisers, I learned to help others, even if I had very little to give.

My junior year in high school, I was invited to participate in the annual east coast field trip to visit Ivy League universities. Through the Llano Grande Center, A-1 and A-2 put their research into practice. They proved that kids from rural Edcouch-Elsa, one of the poorest school districts in the state of Texas, could compete on the national level at the most prestigious universities. It never occurred to me how much social (and financial) capital was needed to offer such a life-changing experience. Indeed, we sold many chicken plates to finance the trip, and in so doing, we leveraged considerably our social capital.

On my trip, I met Mercedes, the admissions counselor at Brown University. Mercedes believed in A-1 and A-2's work at the Llano Grande Center and became an advocate for students from South Texas. She would go out of her way to make us feel welcome, to ensure our visits were worthwhile, and took special care of the students from Edcouch-Elsa who matriculated to study at Brown. I was also fortunate to meet Delia, an Edcouch-Elsa graduate, who studied at Yale and made us feel at home when we visited her. On this trip, I was most excited to learn from the experience of my older sister, Karina, a student at Columbia University. Karina and some other Edcouch-Elsa alumni were undergrads at Ivy League schools and took every opportunity to show us the purpose of college life. The trip was incredibly inspirational. For a Latina from rural South Texas, the experience provided a tangible goal for pursuing higher education. The community came together in a caring and loving way to make the trip happen, and then while visiting the campuses, alumni from back home took extraordinary measures to mentor us. It would dawn on me years later as I began working on a college campus just how

unique our experience had been, and how rare the feeling of belonging in such a space was. This experience has remained with me and guides my purpose in leading in higher education, namely creating a sense of familia in academia (Guajardo, F., et al., 2016).

Not all was perfect growing up in Edcouch Elsa, however, because the other truth is that I was often annoyed by the challenge of finding my independence and my own identity. Ironically, the same sources that annoyed me so much ended up saving me. Part of living in a small town meant that news traveled swiftly, both good and bad. It should have come as no surprise to me that my parents found out that I was pregnant before I was prepared to share the news with them. I was 17 years old. My family and my community had just celebrated me for being offered a scholarship to study at Stanford University. It was a dream come true. My disciplined work ethic and my strong desire to make others proud of me were finally paying off, and spectacularly, for a Latina from poor, rural South Texas. News of my “unfortunate” situation traveled quickly, however, and I was summoned to the school to talk to the guidance counselor. My mom, who worked as a business vocations teacher at my high school, had reached out to her circle of support and asked her colleague to talk to me. It was clear that my parents had a plan for me—I would have the baby, live at home, go to the local college, and they would help me raise my child. As much as I appreciated the love and support, I felt limited that a decision was being made for me. I was disappointed in myself, but I knew that I was also disappointing my community, as well. Just when I thought my story was about to be written, I found myself in a different reality. I wasn’t sure what was in store for me, but I knew there was more.

That summer, the Llano Grande Center hired me to transcribe oral histories of community members with whom I had little contact or even knew. The job provided a little

financial support, but deep down it gave me the stories and histories of many generations who came before me who proved themselves through hard work, discipline and overcoming significant challenges. As I listened to the stories of struggles as told by Mexican and Mexican American elders, I also heard a collective triumph; it was a triumph of their spirit. Therein, I found my inspiration from the community that helped build me.

I deferred enrollment at Stanford University for a year to have my baby, and Stanford was surprisingly accommodating. They arranged graduate housing for my new family for the following year. I took on the challenge of becoming a new mom, a new wife and a new college student all at once, and a very different narrative was being written. Through this experience and my research, it became clear to me that my community and my experience with Llano Grande helped set the expectation that attending a college such as Stanford was attainable. I learned that I came from a very wealthy community, perhaps not in economic terms, but certainly in cultural, familial and spiritual terms. My community, including my parents and my sisters, provided me with the foundation to be successful in college and in life, regardless of the challenges that I face.



*Figure 7: Five Generations of Women in A-4's Family.*

When I think about how I could have been a statistic, I realize that there are many reasons for my success—family, community, expectations, work ethic, determination, resiliency—all factors constitute the sources of my higher learning.

### **Reflections on the Safety Net**

In this genealogical narrative, we see the how a community supports families and children in ways that are grounded in a value of dignity and love. This narrative presents the evolution of a community that invested in its youth by providing housing, clothing and health services leading to a higher level of social capital and the ability to navigate the complicated systems of higher education. When everyone in the community knows your family, when your grandparents contribute to the public good, a young person will get the necessary support to transition from a high school student to a teenage parent. Going from rural South Texas to negotiating admissions at Stanford University requires a more specific and nuanced knowledge base. It is quite a leap, perhaps one comparable to the transition one makes from an agricultural society to a postmodern world where one's identity is constantly challenged. When family and community care and support unconditionally, new realities and new ideas help young people survive new challenges, conditions and cultures in higher education. The unconditional support, the mutuality and the social fabric in Edcouch-Elsa helped the girls of A-4's family accomplish their dreams and reimagine a new reality for themselves, their community and their children.

### **Closing Thoughts, Recommendations and Next Steps**

When we graduated from Edcouch-Elsa High School and left to college, we all felt palpably tethered to the lives we were leaving behind. We felt the pull of family, of our alma mater, of friends, and of the kids back home. We expressed our connections by being part of



college recruitment efforts, by remaining connected with teachers, friends and especially with family. We were taught to *procurar una al otro* (take care of each other) by our elders; it was at the core of their (in)formal higher learning curriculum. We founded the Llano Grande Center because of these learning experiences and have engaged in intensive community-building, leadership-development exercises with people back home persistently during the past 35 years. As university professors, we write about our community, our neighbors and our region. In higher education, we build programs that respond to the community that raised us, and to communities that look like Edcouch Elsa. It is in our higher learning DNA. This was the best college preparation we could have experienced. We have learned from the history of social movements that change is a constant, but change will only be sustained if we prepare the next generation of leaders. Therefore, our work has focused on youth community-development issues at the core of higher learning and development. We have also learned from Myles Horton of the Highlander Center who describes their work as an idea—not an organization or a building (Jacobs, 2003). During the past generation, the Llano Grande work has matriculated from public schools and communities to college campuses where we prepare student leaders to become engaged citizens and community developers. Like good theories, this work has legs. It crosses borders and adapts to different places, spaces and opportunities for higher learning.

There is no silver bullet to address the widening opportunity gaps for children from low income schools and communities. We are not proposing a narrative or an analysis as answers to our community and educational needs. What we do claim is a narrative that we have witnessed, where good people doing important work can resolve difficult situations in communities. We have seen that when we honor the wisdom of people, there is a power that is unleashed. People



in the community can advocate for positive change and should be at the center of problem-solving in neighborhoods, schools and university settings. They are fully capable of establishing infrastructures for higher learning that translate directly to getting Latino youth into college, and into helping Latino students find their places within the community economic structures. Good people in the Edcouch-Elsa community launched the four of us into college. We experienced higher learning from them. We are privileged to have been raised by a community that still believes in mutualist values. We are sustained by a social fabric which prevents children and families from falling through the cracks. We have witnessed the powerful stories of our elders. These stories have informed dozens of college admissions essays and informed the higher learning of students in their studies at colleges and universities across the country. Universities, community colleges and technical institutions of higher learning should heed this wisdom.

## **Next Steps**

A different brand of research has informed this narrative (Guajardo, Guajardo, & Locke, 2018), and we find it our responsibility to layout a systematic process for outlining the next steps in this change process. Our commitment during the past generation, first as students, then as teachers, then as Llano Grande, and now as Community Learning Exchange facilitators and educators in higher learning, has been to be in conversation with our past to inform the future. Institutions of higher learning will continue to sustain the status quo unless we act in different ways. The change in this work transpires when we engage the dreams, hopes and assets of our community in relevant and responsive ways. This work has been guided by a theory of change that respects relationships, assets of people, their stories, their place and responsive actions. This theory was informed by the following axioms (a) learning and leading are inherently a social

process, (b) conversations are critical to the change process, (c) local people are the most equipped to figure out the answers to their issues and conditions, (d) this work must cross-borders, (e) and change must be informed by youth, family and community hopes and dreams.

We employ the ecologies of knowing to map out the work in a dialogical way.

Understanding how to navigate through the change process is critical to his work. We begin at the most micro level of self and move to the mezzo organization and lastly to the macro-level forces. This process is guided by a constant conversation between and within those three ecologies of self, organization and community.

We employ ecologies of knowing to guide this meaning making process. Change must happen at multiple levels simultaneously. We invite you to use a framework, to operationalize your ideas and work deliberately and sustainably. Ecologies of knowing have helped us navigate ideas, actions and plans at multiple levels simultaneously.

**Self.** The work of understanding self is critical to the development of an informed citizenry, but also to nurturing a compassionate citizen. Learning our elders' stories is critical for youth to develop their own story of self and their agency for change. As we re-member, re-frame and re-imagine, we heed the values of our elders who created a social fabric of relationships and support systems to raise children; they also built a civil society to advocate and hold the public institutions and families accountable to each other. This also served the purpose of building community, including nurturing a strong sense of self and a spirit of advocacy. This is what catapulted youth to national prominence in their activism and is what has become a cornerstone of what we consider to be a decent society. Higher learning is about building the capacity of citizens to function, to sustain and to cultivate a democracy. This is the role of the Latinx

intelligentsia for the next generation (Trueba, H., & Guajardo, F., 2003). Our role in higher learning and education is to develop citizens. Our commitment is to build models for creating and sustaining a Latinx civil society that rebuilds the imagination and systems for the public good. Questions that might help guide this ecology include:

- What's your story?
- What are your gifts to the world?
- What are your dreams?

**Organization.** The understanding of organizations is critical to developing a systems approach that is relevant, responsive and generative for youth and faculty alike. The development of culturally responsive systems can build a citizenry that humanely and respectfully responds to the needs of its students, its faculty and its community. This organization then becomes the mediating institution where youth are introduced to the community and the world. An organization that adequately and proactively responds to the cultural, political, economic and institutional forces, and responds in culturally appropriate manners is the organization that can steward healthy change. The CLE dynamic-critical pedagogies provide the structures to ask ourselves difficult questions in the community and in the institutions where we work. We have learned that healing old wounds requires re-membering, re-framing and re-imagining possibilities for change. This dynamic-critical pedagogical process affords us the opportunity to inquire about the values of previous generations' commitment to quality, access, equity and excellence, particularly as those compare to present educational values informed by efficiency, choice, accountability and competition. The values our community elders push us to engage in processes of re-membering, re-framing,

and re-imagining. These are important dynamics that shape the process of higher learning. A set of questions that might guide this work include the following:

- What are your values and where do you see them in your organization/school?
- Where are the people that look like you and know your story?
- How do the curriculum and organizational systems support your success?
- When did you feel like you belonged in this institution?

**Community.** The Community Learning Exchange pedagogies have been helpful and fruitful in navigating these points of diversity. Informed by the narratives of our communities, we have designed a process to inform this work while supporting young people, their families and communities. Our work in South Texas (and in partnership with communities across the country) has afforded us the opportunity to couch our higher learning and community change work in a Community Learning Exchange (CLE) framework (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2016). The CLE model has fueled community change initiatives around the country by purposefully building upon the power of place and the wisdom of people. The model is at its best when diverse communities come together. Some of the questions that guide this ecology include the following:

- What are the community stories that inform who you are?
- What are the assets in your community that you bring with you?
- What are the relationships between your community and your school?
- How and where do you see your community in your school and curriculum?

We invite you, the reader, to spend time reflecting on these questions. And we close by asking: What is your story?

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