

Aurora University's first Latina president knows firsthand the challenges immigrant students face

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Susana Rivera-Mills, the first Latina president at Aurora University, said she has found inspiration in student orientation sessions and looks forward to removing obstacles that keep students from pursuing a college degree. John Starks | Staff Photographer

Sitting in a Spanish-language orientation session, Aurora University's first Latina president couldn't help but think back on her college experience.

As a first-generation student whose family immigrated from El Salvador, Susana Rivera-Mills believes a Spanish language session at orientation would have made a world of difference.

"I saw the parents with their students listening to this information, and what I thought about was what if my parents had that opportunity," said Rivera-Mills, who took over as Aurora University's 14th president on June 1. "My parents didn't go to college. ... I was having this experience that my parents could not fully understand."

Rivera-Mills, 52, has spent much of her first few weeks on the job acquainting herself with the staff and community members and finding inspiration at student orientation sessions.

"It was very moving for me to connect at orientation and have Latino parents come up to me, introduce themselves and see a sigh of relief in knowing that they are sending their student to a university that is led by someone who understands," she said.

Rivera-Mills was selected after a six-month national search that included a committee made up of trustees, alumni, faculty, staff members and students. She replaces Becky Sherrick, the university's first female president, who stepped down after 22 years at the helm and was named interim president in June at St. Xavier University in Chicago.

A native of El Salvador, Rivera-Mills came to the United States at age 12 after her family fled a civil war. She says it was a simple but profound word choice in a conversation with a high school teacher that helped her realize anything is possible. The teacher said "when you go to college" instead of "if you go to college."

She started her career in higher education 30 years ago and most recently served as provost for five years at Ball State University. She also served as vice provost of academic programs and learning innovation, dean of undergraduate studies, executive associate dean of the liberal arts college and department chair of modern languages at Oregon State University from 2007 to 2018. Before that, she served as a faculty member at Northern Arizona University for 13 years.

As president, Rivera-Mills heads a university nationally recognized as a Hispanic-serving institution. According to the university's website, 40% of its students are Latino.

Rivera-Mills said the private university's commitment to serving a broad range of students and keeping tuition within reach for students drew her to Aurora.

"It's that public mission that is very important to me," she said. "It embodies access to affordable education and serves a broad and diverse population of students."

In addition to ethnic diversity, she pointed to Aurora University's commitment to students with different needs. Under Sherrick's tenure, Aurora U. became the first institution in the country to have a program and residence hall for students with autism.

"I want to be able to grow that program and integrate it into our curriculum," she said.

She also hopes to expand the university's internship program to provide opportunities to students sooner.

"I want them (students) to start thinking about that on day one so they can become professionals before they graduate," she said.

As a first-generation college student, Rivera-Mills also said she is committed to removing obstacles that keep students from pursuing a college education.

"I have learned a lot about the unintended obstacles that many colleges have in place," said Rivera-Mills, whose current research focuses on issues that affect higher education. "I have dedicated my career to removing as many of those obstacles as I can."

As she jumps into campus life at Aurora University, Rivera-Mills encouraged students to do the same.

"If there is one thing ... I would encourage them to connect with others," she said. "We really can't do life alone and do it well. Don't be afraid to lean in and explore. ... It's amazing where that will take you."

She and her husband, Sean Mills, will live in a home on campus with their dog, Scout. Their son, Daniel, will finish his degree at Ball State University.