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PRESIDENT'S ISSUE

A portrait of Dr. Susana Rivera-Mills, a woman with dark curly hair, smiling. She is wearing a dark blue blazer over a green top, a gold necklace with a blue stone, and blue teardrop earrings. A small blue and white logo is pinned to her blazer.

DR. SUSANA RIVERA-MILLS FROM IMMIGRANT TO PRESIDENT

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Dr. Susana Rivera-Mills: From Immigrant to President

 hispanicoutlook.com/articles/dr-susana-rivera-mills-immigrant-president



by Michelle Adam

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Dr. Rivera-Mills, the first Latina and person of color to lead Aurora University as its president, has brought her diverse background to promote student success and inclusivity through strategic leadership and innovative initiatives.

When Susana Rivera-Mills became president of Aurora University in Aurora, Illinois, this past June, she described it as surreal.

“Being in this position is a bit surreal when I think about having been an immigrant and what my parents sacrificed to give me opportunities they never had,” she said. “As a little girl, I never imagined I’d be sitting here as the 14th president of Aurora University.”

Rivera-Mills recalled when she had sent her parents a university newspaper article about her new position. “My mom texted me back: ‘I read the article to your dad, and he cried,’” she said. “Of all the congratulations I received, that one text moved me so deeply. Personally, and professionally, this is a great moment to be appreciative of my parents and so many others who have contributed to my journey to become president and the first Latino president and of color in Aurora’s history.”

An Arduous Journey

The new president's journey to her current position was far from easy. Born and raised in San Salvador, El Salvador, Rivera-Mills had what many would consider an average early childhood. Her father, who had graduated high school, owned his own construction and trucking business, while her mother, who did not finish high school, was a stay-at-home mom to her and her younger brother. Rivera-Mills also attended a Catholic school for girls.

Yet all that changed in 1982, when she was 12 years old, and violence in her country escalated into a civil war. At first, her family fled to live with relatives in San Francisco, California. Then, when it became clear they couldn't return to El Salvador, they moved further north to Eureka. There, her parents worked 12-hour days for six days a week on a minimum wage, and Rivera-Mills, who originally spoke little English, eventually became their translator.

The president's first college experience was when her Spanish teacher—who had always talked to her as if she were clearly going to college—told her about a summer Upward Bound Bridge Program, which prepared first-generation students for higher education. “Day two, I was sitting on the quad bench sobbing,” she said. “I was so homesick.”

Higher Education

With the help of an advisor, though, she stuck it out, and soon enjoyed her experience. Upon graduating from high school, Rivera-Mills attended Humboldt State University and then transferred to the University of Iowa. Initially, she thought of obtaining a physics and then a business degree, but soon discovered she was the only woman and person of color in most of her classes. Finally, she obtained a Master of Arts in Spanish Linguistics at UI, followed by her doctorate in Romance Languages from the University of New Mexico.

One of the president's greatest motivations behind her educational pursuits was being able to help her parents financially. “My proudest moment was when I received my first paycheck and I could send money to my parents,” she said. “I've been doing so ever since.”

Rivera-Mills soon became a faculty member at Northern Arizona State University for 12 years. Then, she worked at Oregon State University as department chair of modern languages, executive associate dean of the liberal arts college, dean of undergraduate studies, and vice provost of academic programs and learning innovation from 2007 to 2018. Finally, she was provost at Ball State University in Indiana beginning in 2018 before joining Aurora University this past June.

Aurora University

“What a natural culmination of a 30-year career,” said Rivera-Mills. “This is my fourth position at a university. Each position has prepared me more and more to be president of this university.”

Throughout the president's career, she has worked hard to put students first and use strategic thinking to focus on effective leadership, student success and retention, and budget modeling. She's taken her passion for Latino communities, Spanish language and culture, issues in sociolinguistics, and online teaching and learning to implement effective programs and systems that ensure success for students from all diverse backgrounds.

So, when she was invited to become Aurora's first Latina president, her passion and background seemed a perfect fit, especially for this private Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). "I have had many positions in higher education, and it mattered that my background was diverse so I could reach out to diverse students and be an example," she said. "This school also puts students first and looks at the whole culture the student brings with them."

Latino Focused

Within its two undergraduate campuses—the main one in the city of Aurora and its second, George Williams College of Aurora University in Wisconsin—40 percent of the students are Hispanic. This population has steadily grown, with a Latino retention rate of 76.8 percent for the Fall 2021 full-time cohort.

When Latino students arrive at the university, their unique cultural background is considered from the beginning. "We've designed an orientation program for them and their families where information is offered in Spanish," said Rivera-Mills.

In addition, Aurora University provides Latinos an Office of Latino/a Student Initiatives with supportive educational, social, and leadership programs and the Latin American Student Organization. It also has a \$1.4 million grant from the National Science Foundation to help develop a diverse group of teachers in science, math, technology, and engineering fields.

An Innovative Vision

When Rivera-Mills first came to campus in June, she listened to different constituents and learned about the campus culture, as is her leadership approach. She was impressed by the university's innovative approach to degrees and curriculum. "They push the envelope on how they do things differently to meet the students' needs," she said.

The president was also glad to be at a university that is financially sound while providing 98 percent of all undergraduate students' financial assistance. "We are bringing in a larger class this fall and continue to grow," she added.

As a self-described strategic thinker, Rivera-Mills plans to enhance Aurora's many strengths.

"I have been successful in building high performance teams and bringing in diverse and inclusive perspectives," she said. "My job is not just about leading our campus internally, but also engaging our community and creating partnerships."

As a leader, Rivera-Mills wants to expand initiatives around high impact practices and experiential learning. In doing so, students engage in projects connected to community organizations. In addition, faculty help prepare students for the “real world” with soft skills like team building, collaboration, and leadership.

“I want our first-year students to be able to integrate formal knowledge of the classroom with practical realities of what it means to be professional,” she said. “We in education have been out of touch with this.”

Education as Transformation

For Rivera-Mills, college is, and has the potential to be, as transformative as it was for her. But she also knows what it’s like to be an outsider and recognizes the need for effective leadership in a diverse and changing landscape.

“We need courageous leadership that is willing to take risks and try things never done before,” she said. “We need to look at collaboration as a value within and across our institutions.”

Who better to know this than Rivera-Mills, who got to where she is today through risk-taking, collaboration and help from her parents, mentors, and advisors?

“You cannot do life alone,” she advises younger generations. “There will be those who open doors for you, and when they do, be courageous enough to step into those opportunities, even when you are afraid.”