

Chicanx/Latinx Student Success at UC Riverside

Capturing the History of a Thriving
Hispanic-Serving Institution



By Arlene Cano Matute



Arlene Cano Matute (she, her, hers, ella) serves as the Assistant Director of Chicano Student Programs at the University of California, Riverside (UCR). She is currently a doctoral candidate in Higher Education in the School of Education at UCR.



As a first-generation college student, parent, and daughter of a justice-impacted parent, she is passionate about working alongside students and the community focusing on identity development, empowerment, social justice, leadership and equity in higher education. Her research examines the experiences of Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x students at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) with a particular interest in Hispanic-Serving Research Institutions (HSRIs) in the University of California. As a scholar and a practitioner, she is interested in the ways Chicana/o/x, Latina/o/x students, and minoritized students overall, thrive in HSIs with an emphasis on access, retention, empowerment and persistence.



“UCR is more than an institution. We are a comunidad.”—Milagros Peña, Ph.D.

Introduction

Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) enroll 67% of Chicanx/Latinx⁰¹ undergraduate students in the United States (Excelencia in Education, 2019). As a result, HSIs serve as essential sites in creating diverse learning environments while contributing desirable outcomes for Chicanx/Latinx students and other minoritized student populations. Scholars have ongoingly problematized HSI designation, critiquing whether the federal program is enough to serve Chicanx/Latinx students and meet their educational goals. Marin (2019) asserts HSIs have obtained designation “simply based on numbers” and as a result, the mission of these institutions remains unchanged (p. 167). The University of California, Riverside (UCR) has sought to extend beyond traditional institutional performance metrics or the HSI eligibility by broadening its conceptualization of “serving-ness” towards non-academic outcomes and validating experiences for Chicanx/Latinx students beyond enrollment. Through a legacy of intentional efforts and a “long history that led to designation” (Cortés, personal communication, April 30, 2020), UCR has received numerous accolades and is considered a top-performing HSI (Nichols, 2017). As

early as the 1960s, Chicanx student activists and allies created foundational programs and initiatives that established a culture of Chicanx/Latinx student success and *comunidad* (community) at UCR. This brief highlights two of these historic efforts that created a *comunidad* and led UCR to become the first HSI in the UC system.

A Student and Community Centered Foundation

As a doctoral student and current Assistant Director of Chicano Student Programs at UCR, I had a meeting with Dr. Carlos Cortés, Emeritus Professor of History. The goal of the meeting was to collect the oral history of one of the first Chicanx/Latinx faculty at UCR. From this meeting, I learned that he joined UCR faculty in 1968 as an acting Assistant Professor in the History Department. When Dr. Cortés arrived at UCR, he became one of two Chicano faculty on campus, joining Eugenio “Eugene” Cota-Robles, a microbiologist who was hired a decade prior. Dr. Cortés was hired during a time when there were fewer than 100 Chicanx/Latinx undergraduate students out of a 4,500-student body (Baltazar-Martinez, 2020). He was welcomed and inspired by a promising foundational

⁰¹ I use “Chicanx” as a political ideology alongside “Latinx” in this brief in order to honor the long history of activism and resistance of the Chicano movement. The “x” in both “Chicanx” and “Latinx” is used to recognize non-binary gender identity and gender fluidity of students from Mexican, Central and South American ancestry. I also recognize Chicana and Latinas who have strived for visibility throughout this history, using the “x” as one component of their legacies for justice. I will use the author(s)’s and/or participant’s terminology when citing them directly.

culture of Chicana/Latina student success led by Dr. Cota-Robles and Chicana student activists. Dr. Cota-Robles founded and directed one of the earliest institutionalized programs at UCR known as the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), a federally funded program that emerged from the Civil Rights movement which called for equitable access to higher education for underrepresented students. Dr. Cota-Robles⁰² was a leader who embodied a student and community-centered approach. He was invested in increasing Chicana/Latina representation through his work on campus with EOP and in the community. In 1967, he was named “Chicano of the Month” by *El Chicano*, a community newsletter that served San Bernardino and Riverside Counties. The feature highlighted his extensive involvement in Chicana/Latina affairs on and off the UCR campus noting the project closest to his heart was EOP at UCR (*El Chicano*, 1967). When asked why this was so significant to him, he replied, “I looked at the list of graduating seniors, and I noticed there weren’t many with Spanish surnames. I decided we had to do something about that” (*El Chicano*, 1967, para. 5). At the time, EOP was institutionalized and professionally staffed, offering preparatory programs, counseling, and tutoring with a mission to recruit and retain students. Through these efforts, UCR’s Chicano undergraduate enrollment tripled in these initial years (*El Chicano*, 1967).

Dr. Cortés fondly recounts that “Eugene was the person that everyone turned to...When I got here [in 1968], the first thing he asked me, [was to] to get involved in EOP” (Cortés, personal communication, April 30, 2020). Reflecting on these initial years he affirms, “We were a community. We were super active in outreach and in the local community.” (Cortés, personal communication, April 30, 2020). In his first year at UCR, Dr. Cortés became involved with EOP, and later helped advise the United Mexican American Students de UCR (UMAS), became the Chair of Mexican American Studies, and helped establish both Chicano Studies and Chicano Student Programs: one of the first professionally staffed Chicana/Latina resource centers in the UC system.

During this initial building period, Chicano student activists and leaders responded to structural and systematic racism within higher education and the community at large. As a result, these change agents were intentional in serving Chicano students at UCR, and many of these early programs and physical spaces exist today. Grassroots and

collaborative activism led to the “organic progression” of UCR’s HSI identity (Doran and Medina, 2017), a campus with over 50 years of Chicana/Latina student success that enrolls, cultivates and validates Chicana/Latina students (Garcia et al., 2019).

“Students themselves doing the work”: Initial Outreach Efforts

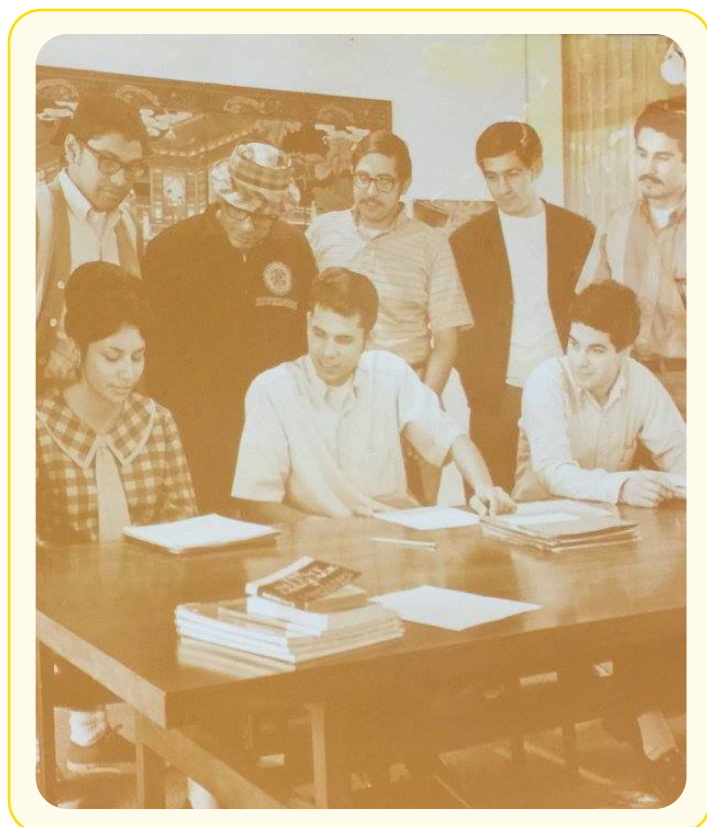
Dr. Cortés recalls “before the administration developed a plan, before they decided to focus on recruiting Hispanic/Latino students, it was the students themselves doing the work,” (Martinez Baltazar, 2020, para. 4). Early student-initiated advocacy, outreach and retention efforts were led by the UMAS de UCR. The membership of UMAS de UCR was composed of Chicano student activists who organized on and off campus in support of students and the community. My initial archival research, which is also part of my dissertation project, shows that one of the first high school outreach conferences was held by UMAS de UCR in 1968 and attended by over 500 Mexican American youth from southern California (UMAS de UCR newsletter, May 11, 1969). In a news release on May 11, 1969, UMAS de UCR leadership reported the conference was attended by students and community leaders of the Coachella Valley and Riverside County. The conference called for a more meaningful education, listing several resolutions passed by the participants including the desegregation of elementary schools, Mexican American courses be taught from Kindergarten through college⁰³, strengthening Mexican American parent participation in education and a call to organize Mexican American students in local school districts (UMAS de UCR newsletter, May 11, 1969).

In the same week UMAS de UCR student president, Henry Perez, wrote a letter to the Dean of Students requesting institutional funding to support UMAS’ efforts. Perez detailed the organization’s labor and highlighted their triumphs, expressing the critical role and investment UMAS de UCR had in “recruiting, motivating, and retaining high school Mexican American students” at UCR (Perez, correspondence, May 13, 1969). Perez also shared the success of the UMAS de UCR high school conference and demonstrated UMAS’s commitment to the community, citing the organization’s contributions to the surrounding neighborhoods. Although Perez’s letter requested institutional funds, it was clear UMAS de UCR intended to continue serving the students at UCR and the local community regardless of

02 The Eugene H. Cota-Robles Fellowship was established in honor of Dr. Cota-Robles following his retirement from the University of California (UC) system where he served in numerous administrative posts in the UC, statewide and nationally. The Cota-Robles fellowship advances diversity in graduate education and is awarded to doctoral students in the UC system.

03 I recognize the long history of activism for a curriculum that is reflective of our diverse communities in K-12 and higher education. This particular conference captures these initial collective efforts by parents, teachers, community leaders and college students organizing for Mexican American Studies in Riverside County. October 9, 2021 marked a critical step in this long effort by the passing of AB 101 (Medina, et al., 2021) making the state of California the first state to require Ethnic Studies in High School. The bill was introduced by Assembly member Jose Medina, a UCR alumnus and representative of the 61st Assembly district which consists of Riverside, Moreno Valley, Perris and Mead Valley.

receiving any institutional support. What existed at UCR within this period was a reflection of the Chicano movement and the pursuit for Chicano liberation locally, statewide, and nationally. The Chicano movement, building on a global movement against oppression originating in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s–60s, demanded Chicano liberation utilizing higher education as a tool for transformational change as published in *El Plan de Santa Barbara: A Chicano Plan for Higher Education* (CCHE, 1969). Chicano student leaders and organizations like UMAS de UCR, established outreach and retention programs, however, most significantly they helped established a *comunidad* on and off campus where they “recruit[ed] themselves” and their communities (Baltazar-Martinez, 2020).

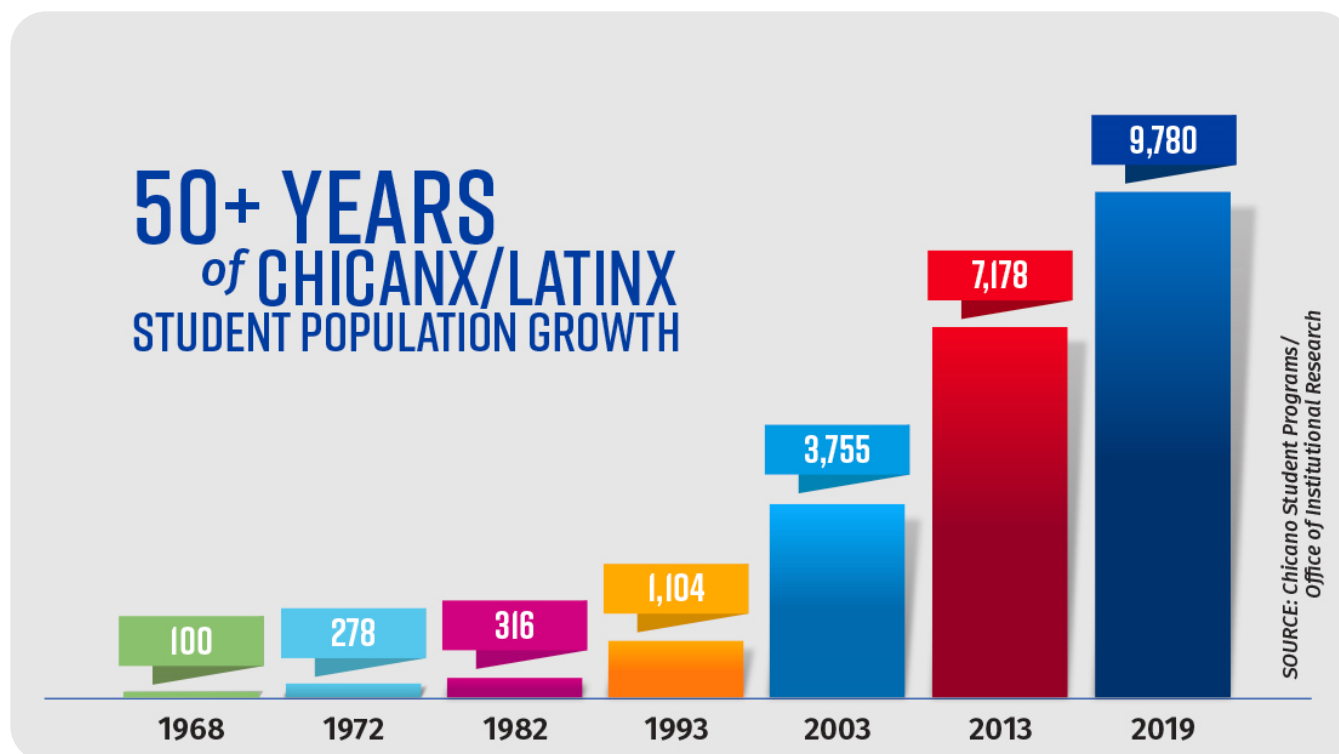


Retrieved with permission from Chicano Student Programs Archive.

A High Achieving HSI: 50 Years of Growth

The Chicano/Latinx student activists and allies were intentional in their advocacy for representation and support. Centering the contributions of the initial architects, like Dr. Cortés, Dr. Cota-Robles and the Chicano student leaders and organizations like UMAS de UCR, acknowledges their initial labor in creating programs and initiatives that established a culture of Chicano/Latinx student success and led to the university's rank as a high-achieving HSI. In 2008, UCR was designated an HSI with an enrollment of over 25% full-time Chicano/Latinx undergraduate students, becoming the first HSI in the UC system. Within the first ten years of this federal designation, UCR grew from 25% to 38% in 2018 enrollment (UCR Institutional Research, 2021), with an overall increase of Chicano/Latinx undergraduate enrollment. As seen in Table 1, UCR went from enrolling 100 Chicano/Latinx students in 1968 (Baltazar Martinez, 2020) to over 10,000 Chicano/Latinx students in the fall of 2021. Notably, UCR ranks amongst the top 25 comprehensive research universities in the nation (Regents of the University of California, 2019). UCR is in a unique position as a top-ranking Hispanic Serving Research Institution (HSRI) to serve those who have been excluded throughout the history of higher education while simultaneously preparing future scholars and leaders.

Leading educational advocacy organization, Education Trust, featured UCR as one of the top graduating institutions for Chicano/Latinx students with a 73% six-year graduation rate for undergraduate students in comparison to the national average of 54% (Nichols, 2017). Significantly, over 80% of UCR's Chicano/Latinx undergraduate population identify as first-generation college students, with hundreds identifying as undocumented, and nearly two-thirds qualifying for Pell Grants (Anderson, 2018; University of California, Riverside Institutional Research, 2021). In June 2020, the Urban Institute named UCR as the top institution enrolling the largest percentage of Chicano/Latinx undergraduate students amongst selective universities (Monarrez & Washington, 2020). Further, according to The Washington Post, (Anderson, 2018), “what sets UC-Riverside apart, students and educators say, is a culture of support. Financial aid and peer mentoring are cornerstones. Professors take time to learn how to pronounce names. Latinx activism, rooted in the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s, runs deep here” (Anderson, 2018, para.31).

Table 1 How UCR became a national leader in enrolling Chicanx/Latinx students. Baltazar Martinez, S. (2020).

Retrieved from University of California, Riverside website: <https://news.ucr.edu/sites/g/files/rcwecm1816/files/2020-09/chicanx-latinx-barchart.jpg>

Conclusion

The foundational programs and initiatives created as early as the 1960s were established by leaders who led from the corazón (heart), with a commitment to each other. As Cortes (personal communication, April 30, 2020) shared, “we [built] this internal community within the Chicano faculty, staff and students at UCR”. Serving Chicanx/Latinx students and creating a culture of Chicanx/Latinx student success has existed at UCR long before the campus was federally designated as an HSI in 2008. In fact, “educating Chicanx/Latinx students has been at the forefront of our community since UCR was established” (Baltazar Martinez, 2020). UCR is proud of its long history as a Chicanx/Latinx

student-thriving campus and community. As an HSRI we continue to uphold our institutional mission of being a global leader in developing and creating a transformative experience for current and future change agents while addressing larger systemic and institutional barriers that may continue to challenge the matriculation of our Chicanx/Latinx scholars. We have worked collectively to build permanent and sustainable success for our Chicanx/Latinx students and community for over 50 years and will continue to do so *en comunidad* (in community).

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