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Sobreviviendo the White Corn Fields: Chicanas and Latinas in Predominantly White Institutions

Abstract

Graduate students are often reminded that acquiring a job in the academic field often demands living far from family and familiar surroundings. For minority doctoral students—specifically Chicanas and Latinas from the West and Southwest—who accept academic positions in Midwest and Eastern predominantly white institutions, the job may test familial cultural beliefs and affect faculty recruitment and retention. I argue that institutions must better understand the needs of new minority faculty hires. This session will explore the personal and professional necessities that both the predominantly white institutions and the Chicana/Latina must consider in order to be successful in recruitment, hiring and retention.

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I write this paper from personal as well as professional experience. I am a Los Angeles native Chicana and never considered living in Nebraska until I was recruited here a year ago. Prior to moving here, I was finishing my doctorate and also teaching at the University of California-Santa Barbara. I taught in the Women's Studies program and in the Chicano Studies Department there. In Chicano Studies, I taught primarily Chicana and Chicano students. In Women's Studies, I primarily taught white upper middle class women. Prior to my UCSB teaching experience, I had been teaching at a predominantly white institution: The University of Denver (where I was a graduate student in the English department). All these experiences helped me prepare for teaching at the University of Nebraska. However, even though I felt prepared and knew what I was going to encounter, I still feel the acclimation process difficult at times. I have also observed what my Chicana and Latina colleagues have experienced as well. The examples in this paper will specifically be about the Chicana and Latina hires.

First, minority graduate students often find themselves the only minority in the department. By chance, there may be another Chicana or Chicano and if so, they may better help each other with the workload. I emphasize "work load" because the Chicana who is hired can often be headed for failure because by being the only minority hire, undergrads, graduates, students from other departments may seek out the new hire to have them direct theses, be a member of the doctoral committee, or speak at a multitude of functions in order to be the "minority" representative. Other department faculty may ask the new hire to be the minority representative for various committees. Soon the new hire is deluged with a variety of commitments and may find it hard to say "no" because she sees the overwhelming need for Chicana representation.

It is this predicament that occurs often in predominantly white institutions. First, more than one hire is necessary in departments. Secondly, predominantly white institutions - if they are committed to recruiting and retaining their hires - must recognize the danger of

their new hire becoming overcommitted. They must protect and carefully prepare their minority hire throughout the tenure-track process. Third, predominantly white institutions can often exoticize their minority hires whether they are conscious of it or not. And the Chicana must face exoticism not only from the institution but from students who may never have had previous contact with Chicanas. The institution must educate itself about exoticism and overtaking their minority hires.

The last part of this paper will consider the personal impact for Chicana/Latina faculty hires. I focus upon Chicanas and Latinas because traditional culture dictates that they create and engender family ties. How can the Chicana/Latina family survive if the female has a job offer three, four or seven states away and in a place where the Spanish language is not heard easily on the street, where she may be living alone, where she may never see a student of color in her classroom? Chicana/Latina mothers and fathers often pressure their daughters to remain in the family and forgo such a career. The pull is strong. Some Chicana faculty have made tremendous sacrifices to remain in academia and more have left. What can be done to strike a balance between family and profession? Communication is most important here - between family, the new hire and the institution. I believe that traditional family and culture can be maintained and can grow in positive ways when the Chicana follows her heart and enters the academic profession. And if the institution protects her, all can be successful.

Presenter

Amelia Maria de la Luz Montes is Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Ethnic Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her area of expertise involves recovery work of Mexican American writings and cultural criticism of these writings within and outside of traditional nineteenth-century American literature discourse. She is also interested in twentieth-century perspectives and reactions to nineteenth-century recovery work. Among her publications are "Es Necesario Mirar Bien': The Letters of Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton" in *Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage*, vol.3 (Art Publico Press) and "Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton Negotiates American Literary Politics and Culture" in *Challenging Boundaries: Gender and Periodization* (University of Georgia Press). In addition to critical publications, her fiction has appeared in *Saguaro*, *UCLA Voices*. Her latest fiction piece, "La Guacamaya", appears in the anthology, *Chicana Literary and Artistic Expressions: Culture and Society in Dialogue*.

Currently she is working on a critical book on Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton and editing an anthology of critical essays on Ruiz de Burton's life.