Latina Pathways to Political Leadership

by Elizabeth Cardona, Research Fellow

ABOUT ELIZABETH CARDONA

Elizabeth Cardona has more than ten years of professional experience working in government and community outreach. Since 2010 she has served as the Director of the Office of the Governor Western Massachusetts Region, a position she also held in 2008-2009. Her educational and professional experience and growth have been shaped by her vision for renewed access to healthcare, housing, education, and economic opportunity. Elizabeth previously served as the regional coordinator for Democrat Suzanne Bump's campaign for State Auditor and she has also held several positions in the Springfield public school system. Through her service as a board member for ¿Oíste?, The Latino Civic Education Initiative, as well as an advisory board member for the Leadership Institute for Political and Public Impact (LIPPI), and as a mentor and Western Massachusetts chair for the CHICA Program, Elizabeth has been a champion of equality and social justice. Elizabeth holds an MPA and a Certificate in Conflict Resolution from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Elizabeth's research aimed to explore pathways to leadership for Latinas who are change agents residing in Western Massachusetts. Recognizing the significance of culture, family and community in her own personal journey, Elizabeth wanted to document and analyze key factors that helped Latina leaders find a voice and play a political role in their communities.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Elizabeth interviewed eight Latinas in diverse political roles including municipal elected officials, directors of community organizations, and state and federal government appointees. The interviewees included 6 Puerto Rican women, one Dominican and one bi-racial woman (Puerto Rican/African-American).

Interview questions focused on identifying the contributing factors which encouraged and sustained their political leadership roles. Specific topics included:

- Leadership philosophies
- Personal background
- Early pathways to leadership
- Personal inspiration
- Policy/public service interests
- Barriers and opportunities
- Guidance for emerging leaders

SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

Women interviewed in this study emphasized the following key factors in their leadership pathway:

- Self-identity (as related to gender, ethnicity, social class, policy interests, and/or values)
- Vision (such as their leadership philosophy)
- Passion (what motivates and inspires them)
- Other critical elements that have shaped their trajectory

The findings from interviews suggest that pathways are not linear for women of color leaders who are social change agents. Rather, the journeys of the women interviewed are constantly evolving and connected to their personal sense of identity, passion, and vision. In addition, the research identified how support systems such as family, friends, mentors and other networks, as well as opportunities for personal and professional growth including formal/informal structures (jobs, education, professional development, etc.) foster leadership transformation. This allows the women to lead with conviction while remaining focused on social justice and loyal to the issues they care about, who they are, and what they believe.

Leading with Conviction

As depicted below, Latina pathways to political leadership may be visualized as an internal compass, embraced by self identity, expressed through passion, and driven by vision. As women grounded in values of equality and justice, this internal compass allows them to persevere despite barriers.
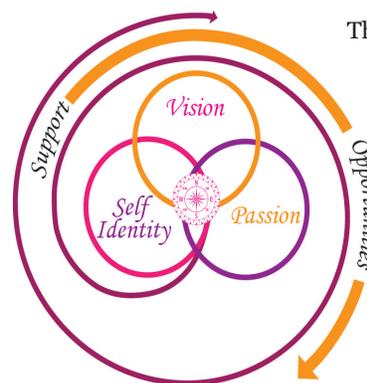
Their pathways are characterized by:
- An internal compass
    Sustained by a core set of values
- Non-linear paths
    Continuously evolve based on life experiences
- Resilience
    Ability to turn barriers into opportunities

However, they would not have been able to embark on their journey if not for the support systems and opportunities available.

Support Networks as the Gateway for Opportunities

Most of the women noted the significance of having received support, mentoring, and guidance for their personal and professional growth from family, friends, teachers, colleagues or others. Developing this mentoring relationship requires mentor and mentee to understand it as a reciprocal process of continuous self-discovery and challenge that demands willingness to be open, genuine, and vulnerable. These women leaders indicated that their mentors facilitated or encouraged them to take advantage of most of the educational, professional, or networking opportunities they had. By asking tough and challenging questions and providing nurturing feedback, mentors helped these women affirm their self-identity, vision, and passion as they persevered and pursued these opportunities.

Leading for the Community

The Latinas spoke about the importance of the collective as they reflected on their perspectives on leadership. One woman noted the importance of her

> *"ability to motivate others to accomplish goals...the way it works is that the vision is also shared by others."*

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The pipeline for Latina leaders is nonlinear, therefore political leadership can be cultivated at any age or stage
- Political leadership development programs need to be innovative and seek strategies which cultivate and sustain Latina leaders in their process of self-reflection, personal growth, and development
- Particular attention needs to be paid to providing adequate time, space and opportunities for Latina leaders to deepen their connections and mentoring relationships with other leaders in their personal and professional network so opportunities for further growth may arise
- Additional research is needed on the relationship between Latina self-identity and leadership

FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION

The analysis may be used:
- as the basis for further research on how self-identity influences leadership style, trends in diversity, leadership identity, and social policy
- in the development of strategic programs to support more women of color on the path to political leadership, especially through training, mentoring, and networking

IMPACT OF RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP

The Research Fellowship had significant impact on Elizabeth's ability to fully acknowledge her own leadership and reflect on her own leadership pathway. It has contributed greatly to her own awareness of the skills and strengths she can maximize to lead with confidence, effectiveness, and with an authentic voice.

As Elizabeth noted:

> *"I would not do justice to you if I do not also challenge you to seek opportunity, to discover yourself, and to pursue a leadership calling because we all believe that we want to have a better world, a better Commonwealth, and it all starts with us. I am now more confident and am able to maximize my strength and talents in order to continue to advocate and to lead with an authentic voice."*

Elizabeth will continue to share the knowledge she acquired through this fellowship with other minority women, especially with the young leaders she mentors.

About the Pathways to Political Leadership for Women of Color Project

This project is the result of an innovative research partnership between UMass Boston's Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy and the Women's Pipeline for Change. Five women of color active in Massachusetts politics became community researchers to identify barriers, opportunities, and resources of interest to women of color who navigate the pipeline toward elective and appointive office or other public leadership positions. In addition to this Project Brief, other resources produced by Research Fellow Elizabeth Cardona may be found on the project website.

Visit **www.umb.edu/pipeline**
for Resources That Inspire, Inform, and Support Public Leadership for Women of Color

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