How My Life and Values Shape My Presidency

William V. Flores

We do not grow up wanting to be college presidents. At least, I certainly never thought in those terms. Yet, here I am today as president of a university. I learned my core values from my parents and from my aunt, Francisca, all of whom helped shape and influence my sense of purpose and leadership. Allow me to explain how my parents and my aunt, among others, shaped my views and my actions. I will start with my mother and father.

FAMILY VALUES AND MENTORS

When I think back on why I went to college, I must say that it was because of the encouragement of my mother and father. The turning point for me was third grade. That was the year when my father chose to go back to school. He left high school during World War II and decided after having children to pursue his high school diploma. He worked in the defense industry,
did most of my family. He sought a better life for all of us and understood that he needed a high school diploma to even consider other jobs. He began taking courses, and I studied with him at the dinner table and at the breakfast table. My mother, who graduated from high school, tutored us both.

My mother always made sacrifices to help others. She would put together food packages for needy families in our church. When someone in our large extended family was sick, she would be there for them with soup or would cook food for their children. She made sacrifices to save money to be sure we had books to read. One of my earliest memories is of her reading the Bible to me and explaining its meaning. She would buy children’s books and read them to me and my brothers and encourage us to read, even at the earliest age. As we grew older, she wanted us to have an encyclopedia, but we could not afford to buy an entire set. Then, our local market, Safeway, had a special. If you bought two bags of groceries, you could buy one volume of an encyclopedia each week for less than a dollar. It took us two years, but we got an encyclopedia. Unfortunately, we were on vacation for two weeks and when we returned they did not have the letter R, so I could never look up anything that began with that letter. When I was in high school, we finally bought a complete set of the *World Book Encyclopedia*.

In sixth grade, I learned algebra because that was what my dad was studying at the time. He would watch educational television at 6:00 a.m., and I watched and learned with him. By the seventh grade, we took standardized tests, and I scored the highest in my school. Several of my teachers could not understand, as they had ignored me as “just one other Mexican kid” who would probably drop out. I was placed into honors courses in high school, and counselors began to view me differently. They encouraged me to apply to college. I went to the University of California, Los Angeles, and subsequently to Stanford University.

My dad was an important role model in other ways. For example, when I was in my early teens, he bought a set of new tires at Sears. After a few months, one of the tires blew out, but Sears refused to replace it. My father was incensed that they had falsely advertised the tires with an “unconditional” replacement warranty. That is why he bought them there in the first place. My dad and I stood outside of the store, showing potential customers the tire. He would tell them, “Don’t buy tires here. Look at my tires. Sears’s tires are no good and they don’t honor their warranty.” Eventually, he got a whole new set of tires! My dad told me afterward, “Remember, ‘No’ is just a beginning point in negotiations. Never give up, especially if what they are doing is wrong. Find a different way of getting to ‘Yes.’”

My mom and dad were always there for me. When I was associate dean at California State University, Fresno, I was diagnosed and underwent treatments for cancer. The chemotherapy caused a mild stroke that left me partially paralyzed on my left side. My parents drove up from San Diego and stayed with me during my recovery. My mom had suffered a series of strokes and was paralyzed on the right side. There was a time after my stroke when I felt depressed and just stayed in bed. My mom came up to me, stroked my hand, and kissed my forehead. She said, “Bill, let’s go for a walk. You may be paralyzed on the left side and I can’t walk too well on the right side, but if we hold hands and support each other, we can walk.” And, we did. Bit by bit, I recovered. With her support and with the help and prayers of many friends, I found the inner strength and confidence to fully recover. I gained strength from her compassion and courage.

Similarly, one of my aunts, Francisca Flores, was a role model to me. She lived in Los Angeles, but growing up, I was always drawn to her and loved hearing her accounts of politics in L.A. She always encouraged me to pursue a college education. My dad related her personal story to me, something she rarely discussed. At the age of 15, she was diagnosed with tuberculosis. About the same time, her older brother, who was also my dad’s brother, Vincent, died when he was 19 years old of the same disease. Francisca had one lung removed and entered a convalescent hospital. At age 26, she was released but placed on permanent disability. Even so, she went on to be a political activist and writer. Francisca founded La Comisión Femenil Mexicana and served as editor of *Carta Editorial and Regeneración*. She later founded and served as director of the Chicana Service Action Center in East Los Angeles. Francisca dedicated her life to creating opportunities for the Mexican American community and fought for social justice, despite her disability.

Francisca once told me, “Having a disability doesn’t define or limit me. It’s not who I am. It’s what I do to make a difference that matters. Remember, we have to be proactive in our activities and always strive to make a difference in the world.”
ber, Bill, when people say you can’t do something, tell them you will, and figure out how you can.” She also told me, “Some see the glass as half full, others as half empty. But, if you’re in the desert, you grab it and drink. Be a realist and grab that glass of water, but share it with others.” She also told me that she did not just want me to go to college, but to “do something that will make me proud.” Before she died, she told me that I had made her proud, and she knew someone in the family would continue working for social justice.

I learned very important values from my family. These values inform my everyday actions as a leader. I believe it is not enough to hold a position of administrative leadership; you must do something to make meaningful change—to make the world a better place. I believe in servant leadership and principle-centered leadership. I lead and develop a vision based on strong values and based on the specific needs and aspirations of the communities I work in and serve.

**Serving the Public Good**

Education is vital to democracy and an educated citizenry is its life blood. In 1905, William Rainey Harper described the university as “prophet of democracy—the agency established by heaven itself to proclaim the principles of democracy” (Benson, 2005, p. 187). Universities perform a vital role for the preservation of liberty and democracy by educating future leaders. Simply stated, universities serve the public good.

As my life evolved and my commitment to public service grew through volunteerism and work with community organizations, my views resonated with Robert Greenleaf’s (2002) conception of “servant leaders.” Servant leadership “begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead” (p. 27). I approach my work from a standpoint of trying to better society and build organizational capacity. I believe we gain by giving of ourselves and learn by engaging others. Serving as a volunteer and community service has made me a better person and strengthened my leadership.

My heroes growing up were Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., César Chávez, and Nelson Mandela. All of them shared the same view of what they wanted for posterity, to create a more just society and a better world. Their values guided their actions. Most did not live to see their dreams realized, but each led with firm conviction and passion. Each provided hope and a dream of a better world, enunciated their vision clearly, built organizations to achieve their dreams, and inspired others to take up their causes. Later, I came to know and respect Dolores Huerta; I include her on that list, as I do my own parents and my aunt, Francisca Flores.

Living through the era of the civil rights movement and my participation in the efforts to expand civil rights and social justice taught me many things, such as organizational skills, leadership, and the ability to communicate in front of a variety of audiences, including Spanish-speaking and working-class communities. My work in several Catholic parishes with immigrant communities and my work in healthcare laid a basis for understanding fundraising, marketing, decision making in constrained environments, and developing and managing efficient operations, as many of these enterprises were run on less than a shoestring budget. For example, while doing volunteer work in immigrant communities. I learned to judge people based on their values and actions, not their title, education, or the way they spoke. I saw individuals grow, taking on considerable responsibility because the person they worked for had confidence in them, encouraged them, mentored them, and inspired their commitment with vision and example.

**Leadership Lessons**

As a Latino, I often felt I had to work harder and be better than others just to be considered as a finalist. Even so, it was not uncommon to get bypassed for positions. Do not be discouraged, if this happens to you. Keep trying. Work twice as hard and achieve results that no one can question or dismiss. Think big and achieve big. Help improve your institution, particularly in how it serves and graduates Latinos. After all, Latinos have become a larger segment of the higher education population and represent the largest group in K–12. In 2009, 37% of students were Latino—the single largest racial and ethnic group (Council of The Great City Schools, 2011, p. 14). One day, I
hope soon, there will be more Latino deans, vice presidents, and presidents. But, we have to work at it every day.

When I first arrived at the University of Houston–Downtown (UHD) in 2009, I found it a very strong institution. It had stable leadership and was growing. Upon my arrival, everyone asked, “What changes will you make?” I believe the best leaders, certainly those who most influenced my life, listened to the needs and desires of those people they served. I felt it was essential to better understand the culture and traditions of UHD, but also to meet and engage stakeholders. I held focus groups on campus with faculty, staff, and students and mailed a survey to alumni, donors, employers, and friends of the university. We appointed a committee to summarize the feedback and present the findings to the campus. This process helped me better understand UHD’s strengths and weaknesses and forge a leadership team to build a stronger institution.

Near the end of my first semester at UHD, we launched a good-to-great process, inspired by the work of Jim Collins (2001). We held several retreats in which more than 70 faculty, staff, and students participated. Since my arrival, we have developed a strategic plan and launched a number of initiatives to strengthen student retention and increase graduation rates. We have developed a new vision: “That UHD will be a premier city university where all students are engaged in high-impact experiences and graduate with 21st century skills.” Our faculty and staff are now involved in developing these high-impact experiences (learning communities, internships, undergraduate research, service-learning, internships, etc.) and integrating them into the curricula (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008). We are also examining our degrees to ensure students receive skill sets for a rapidly changing world.

My approach is value-centered. I believe the same is true for UHD faculty and staff leaders. We realize that the main mission of UHD is to provide an opportunity for student success. Because UHD is both a Hispanic-serving institution and a minority-serving institution, we have an opportunity to build close ties with surrounding Latino and African American communities. UHD has been named one of the top producers of Latino and African American graduates and ranks 33rd and 37th, respectively, in the country in granting bachelor’s degrees to both groups (Diverse Issues in Higher Education, 2012). We are strengthening partnerships with community-based organizations and with the schools in nearby neighborhoods. As our students engage more, they learn more. Moreover, what they learn is made more important by its impact on the communities and schools that surround us. UHD has been recognized as an engaged university by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2008), and in 2012 it was named to the President’s Honor Roll for Community Service with Distinction, an honor shared by only 110 colleges and universities across the country (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2012). But, it is more than community service. The university serves as a laboratory for teaching, learning, and research. Engaging students inspires their learning and gives meaning to it.

My experience underscores this point. As an undergraduate at the University of California, Los Angeles, I was overwhelmed by the size of the campus. There were more than 30,000 students and very few Latinos. In my first quarter, I almost dropped out. There were about 800 students in my introductory chemistry course, and I never had a chance to even meet the professor. Fortunately, I met a few Chicano students in my residence hall and, through them, met others. I got involved in support efforts for the United Farm Workers and by that service found a new reason for my education. Later, I worked in a recruitment center in East Los Angeles where I tutored students. I was mentored by and in turn mentored others. Community service inspired my learning, and I have been a strong advocate of engaged learning ever since.

As UHD engages more with the community, we will see more students graduate and go on to graduate and professional schools. We have much work to do at UHD, but it will not be done in isolation. Building partnerships with community-based organizations helps them to grow, provides greater opportunity to our students for engagement, internships, and employment, and enriches our teaching. I am confident that UHD will grow and be a stronger university. In the process, I am committed to developing others as the next generation of leaders, not only in the university, but in Houston. I regularly write a blog on educational issues (http://uhdpres.blogspot.com) and describe my lessons and observations on what is occurring at UHD and nationally.
Over the years, I have served on boards and commissions, held positions of increasing responsibility and authority, and had opportunities to help create stronger organizations. I worked in many community-based organizations, some where I was employed, others where I volunteered or served as a consultant. Certainly, these experiences prepared me for administrative leadership positions. However, fundamentally, my values guide my actions. I am grateful to my mentors, to my parents, and to those with whom I have worked over the years, as I have observed their different leadership styles and techniques. I remain committed to servant leadership and to mentoring future leaders, and I encourage them to mentor others. Recently, in a trip to New Mexico, I had an opportunity to meet with an old friend, someone who I mentored. She told me, “Bill, you opened the door for me and for so many like me. Now, I am doing the very same thing.” I see it in the campus where she serves as president. She inspires and encourages others to grow, as she builds a strong institution and an even stronger legacy.

Throughout my career, I have been fortunate enough to find good mentors who encouraged my scholarship and prodded me to consider administrative positions. Now, I encourage others to do the same, advising and mentoring them along the way. I have appointed many Latinos, women, African Americans, and Native Americans to positions of administrative leadership. Several of them are now deans, vice presidents, and even presidents. Mentoring the next generation of higher education leaders, particularly those from underrepresented populations, is vital to the future of this country and to ensuring that our universities are inclusive and serve an increasingly diverse population. As the Latino population grows in the United States, it is essential that we mentor and grow a new generation of Latino college and university leaders. America will be stronger for it.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “A good leader inspires people to have confidence in the leader, a great leader inspires people to have confidence in themselves” (Eleanor Roosevelt quotes, n.d., para. 1). Let us inspire others and make a better world.

References


