Dr. William V. Flores is the President of the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD). UHD is one of Texas’ fastest growing universities, a diverse, four-year, public university located in the heart of the nation’s fourth largest city. Small class sizes and excellent faculty have created a nurturing atmosphere that provides students an opportunity to participate in research projects at the undergraduate level. New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson has described Dr. Flores as “one of the great educators not just in New Mexico but around the country.” Dr. Flores previously served as Dean of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Cal State Northridge. He has conducted research projects in voting rights, community empowerment, higher education policy and violence prevention, and co-edited the book, Latino Cultural Citizenship.

I am the president of a university and am committed to service and civic engagement as a key element of learning. I grew up with a civic engagement perspective and it is infused in my every value, experience and thought I have as a president. This article discusses my history and my thinking regarding service, engagement, and learning. I write frankly about how they have influenced my thinking as a professor and as administrator. Like many in higher education, I was the first of many cousins in my family to go to college directly from high school. I grew up in a working class family, most of who worked in the defense industry. My mother, like the famous ‘Rosie the Riveter’ of World War II fame worked as a machinist in the aircraft industry during that war and my father left high school to enlist in the army and to fight in the Philippines during that same time.

Though I share about how my parents and relatives significantly shaped my thinking about service, I never actually thought I would one day be a college professor, let alone a university president. Yet, here I am today, serving as president of the University of Houston Downtown. My path to administration in higher education has been circuitous. I began a doctoral program in the early 1980s at Stanford University right after completing my bachelor’s degree at UCLA. I was the recipient of a Ford Fellowship and also taught courses while pursuing my degree. For a variety of reasons, however, I ultimately left the doctoral program and entered the workforce full-time. I worked in private industry, with nonprofits, and as a consultant.

When I returned to Stanford in 1983 to complete my doctorate, I also taught full-time at Santa Clara University. Although I was intent on teaching and not serving in an administrative capacity, circumstances and opportunity led me on an administrative path. In 1987, immediately after completing my dissertation, I was recruited by Stanford to serve as associate director of the Inter-University Program for Latino Research. While there, I still desired a teaching position and was ecstatic when I was offered an associate professor position at Cal State Fresno. Soon after I arrived in Fresno, I learned that I would serve as chair of the department the following year. After that, I was very fortunate and received both an ACE Fellowship and a Rockefeller Fellowship for the Humanities, which led me to New York and Hunter College in the CUNY system. I returned to California after the Provost of CSU Fresno, Alex Gonzalez (now president of Cal State Sacramento), encouraged me to apply for a position as associate dean of the School of Social Sciences, and I was appointed to the position.
As it turned out, one appointment after another led me down the administrative path. Along the way, I was diagnosed with cancer and suffered a mild stroke from the chemotherapy. The recovery made me stronger and heightened my resolve to continue to improve conditions for Latino and first generation students in higher education. The very next year I assumed the position of dean at Cal State Northridge in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. From there I was appointed as provost and executive vice president at New Mexico State University, where I also served for a year as interim president. While in New Mexico, I served on several state committees and was subsequently appointed by then Governor Bill Richardson as Deputy Secretary for Higher Education. There, I had an opportunity to work on educational policy at both the state and national levels.

I am now president at the University of Houston-Downtown, one of only two institutions in Texas, recently selected to the President’s Honor Roll with Distinction. I attribute this honor to the commitment and diligent efforts of our faculty, staff, and students alike, and am very proud to be president of such an institution. Civic engagement is part the UHD vision and mission and, as such, an important part of our identity as a university.

Servant Leadership and Social Justice

I believe that education is vital to democracy and an educated citizenry is its life-blood. Thomas Jefferson, among others, felt that an educated citizenry was essential to maintaining a free society. In 1816, he wrote, in a letter to Charles Yancey, “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and will never be. (1) In 1905, William Rainey Harper described the university as “prophet of democracy—the agency established by heaven itself to proclaim the principles of democracy. (2) Public universities perform a vital role for the preservation of democracy as they educate its future leaders and its citizenry. It is in serving the larger public, despite the fact that state and federal funding is declining, that public universities play a critical role in educating the future teachers, social workers, nurses, scientists, and business leaders of our country. And perhaps even more importantly, we educate its citizen leaders, we provide them with a strong understanding of the philosophical traditions of democratic ideals, engage their minds, and through service learning provide students with opportunities to apply classroom learning to real world settings.

Simply put, higher education invigorates and strengthens democracy. Similarly, increasing the diversity of our student population and of our faculty, staff, and administration better reflects the changing face of our country and nurtures and supports the fabric of our democracy. In 1947, the President’s Commission on Higher Education urged colleges and universities to serve as “the carrier[s] of democratic values, ideals, and process.” In fact, they called their report, Higher Education for American Democracy. (3) A recent report of the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012), makes the point very clearly, arguing that civic engagement can strengthen democracy: “Putting civic learning at the core rather than the periphery of primary, secondary, and postsecondary education can have far-reaching positive consequences for the country and the economy. It can be a powerful counterforce to the civic deficit and a means of replenishing civic capital.” (4) (2012: 25)

I believe that universities should be actively engaged with the communities they serve. This is particularly true of public institutions. Fundamentally, we are public, not only because we receive public funding (which sadly is becoming a smaller portion of our budget), but also because we serve the public good and educate its citizens. When designed to do so, faculty research, community service, and partnerships strengthen learning and create opportunities for students to apply what they learn in real-world settings. At every one of my universities, I have purposely built partnerships with community organizations, agencies, and corporations and provided students with opportunities for service learning, internships, and voluntarism. My values and principles have consistently guided my actions.

It is not by chance that I came to have these views regarding our own civic responsibilities to our students. The old proverb, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime,” embodies the spirit of service learning. In higher education and in community service organizations, my perspective has always been to strengthen organizations and recruit and develop leadership from within the campus or community, as well as to recruit those from the outside who share similar values and beliefs. I do my best to hire and develop leadership of strong individuals who share a servant leadership perspective, individuals who see their work less as a job and more as a mission in life. Like my own commitment, they devote their life to student access, opportunity, and success. I do not view myself as an administrator, per se, but rather as a leader, who helps colleagues see a broader vision of what is possible and then leads the organization to chart out a path to achieve that vision.

I had an opportunity to meet and be inspired by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta and their work with United Farmworkers movement. Still, I did not grow up seeing myself as a leader. I was not student body president nor even involved in student government in high school or in college. Instead, I was rather shy and introverted and didn’t feel at all like a ‘boss’ leader. I did, however, learn to confront this challenge by seeking the guidance of others and consciously moved outside of my comfort zone, slowly becoming more confident, more vocal, and more involved. Until I undertook public speaking and became active in the debate club in high school, the thought of speaking in front of more than a handful of friends terrified me. I never would have imagined speaking in front of hundreds or even thousands, as I often must do now. With the help of others, I confronted my fears and rose above them.

Living during the civil rights movement and through my own civil rights and social justice advocacy, I learned the importance of leadership. My work with community based organizations honed my organizational and communication skills and dramatically improved my Spanish language skill set.
More than learning to speak in front of Spanish speaking audiences, I also obtained critical skills, such as fund-raising, marketing, decision-making in constrained environments, and developing and managing efficient operations especially for enterprises with minimal resources. I volunteered with immigrant communities; I learned to judge people based on their values and their actions, not their title, education, or the way they speak. As a mentor, I witnessed individuals grow, take on considerable responsibility and, in turn, I learned from them and was inspired by their dedication.

Family Influences and Core Values
I learned my core values from my parents and from my aunt, all of whom shaped and influenced my sense of purpose and leadership. Each prodded me in their own way to move beyond my comfort zone to explore new things. Each provided personal examples of moral leadership that ultimately shaped my development. Like many of my generation, I was the first in my family to attend college. When I returned to high school, I attribute it specifically to my parents. The turning point for me was in third grade. That year my father decided to go back to school after having left high school during World War II. Long after his children were born, he decided to earn a high school diploma by taking night courses. I studied with him at breakfast and dinner and my mother, who had graduated from high school, tutored us both.

By sixth grade, I was learning algebra alongside my father. He watched educational television at 6:00 a.m. and I watched and learned with him. By the seventh grade, when we took standardized tests, I scored the highest in my school. Several of my teachers were perplexed because they had seemingly considered me destined to drop out. In high school, however, counselors viewed me differently and I was placed in honors courses and encouraged to apply to college. I attended UCLA and then Stanford for graduate school. My two brothers attended community college. Our father was our role model and one of our first examples of how teaching and meaningful sacrifices enrich and strengthen lives and communities for the better. My father sacrificed and educated himself to make a better life for his family.

My mother always made sacrifices to improve the lives of others too. Her desire to give back was evidenced in her actions from making food packages for needy families at church, to offering soup to sick family members, to caring for the children of the sick family members, to saving money to buy us books to encourage us because they had seemed so short. She pointed out to me how important it was to read. My father encouraged us to read. One of my earliest memories is of her reading the Bible to me and explaining its meaning. As we grew older, she wanted us to have an encyclopedia, but we could not afford to buy an entire set. Then our local supermarket offered a special that allowed her to buy one volume of an encyclopedia for less than a dollar when she bought two bags of groceries. It took her two years, but she succeeded in providing us access to information with an entire encyclopedia set.

My aunt, Francisca Flores, was also a role model to me. She lived in Los Angeles and growing up I clamped to hear her stories of the LA political scene. As a political activist and writer she was active in several civil rights groups and founded an organization of young Mexican American women, La Comisión Femenil Mexicana. She published a political newsletter, Carta Editorial, and later, a journal of art and politics, Regeneración. She founded and served as director of the Chicana Service Action Center in East Los Angeles. I remember going to dinners at her house where I met founders of the Mexican American Political Association and various educational rights leaders, such as Burt Corona, Delfino Valera. My aunt once told me, “When people tell you that 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 always encouraged me to pursue a college education and advised me to “do something that will make me proud.” Before she died, she let me know she was proud of me and happy that someone in the family was continuing to work for social justice.

Long before hearing of the concept of “servant leadership,” I experienced it every day in the life and works of my mother and aunt. I learned values that today inform my every thought and action as a leader. It is not enough to hold a position of administrative leadership, but one must work harder to engender meaningful change—to make the world a better place. Today, I lead and develop a vision based on strong values, specific needs and the aspirations of every organization I work with and serve.

Over many years, I have been involved in a wide-range of issues affecting the Latino community; health care, affordable housing, criminal justice, and education. I have raised many funds for community organizations, scholarships, and K-16 partnerships. I actively do this because I believe this is an obligation we must all share. Volunteering helps us improve our society. I have spoken with many Latino administrators of my generation and though each of us is different, we have some shared experiences. Many of us have fought hard to open the doors of elite universities to all students, challenged discriminatory practices in the workplace, or worked to shatter the glass ceiling limiting opportunities for women, especially minority women. I have worked hard to ensure access and opportunity for all students and also take pride in supporting the efforts of working class, first generation, Latino students who will be a big part of the future of this great country.

My Values Applied
As a higher education administrator, I strive to be a servant leader. I work hard to strengthen the university’s ability to help students succeed by putting a community lens on the student’s educational experience through service learning and civic engagement. Our most important legacy is to shape a bright future for coming generations. My dream is to see universities which reflect the changing face of America, not only in their student population, but in their faculty, staff, and administration. I am diligent about engaging UHD with its surrounding communities and encourage faculty to apply their research, whenever possible, to solve challenging societal issues.

For America’s future, we must all work consciously to ensure that our universities and colleges better serve the growing Hispanic population. I believe that a genuinely Hispanic-serving university should actively promote access and opportunities to Hispanic communities and populations. Make no
mistake, as president; I serve the entire university community and all the populations of our service area. We engage with the community to improve achievement and graduation rates in K-12 and academic preparation for college. Within the university, administrators should work with faculty to improve learning, retention, and graduation rates for all students. I strongly encourage those whom I mentor to grow in their position and to use every opportunity to expand access, success, and opportunity for all students.

My Leadership Approach
My approach as president of a university is straightforward. My counterparts at other universities and I are not Latino presidents, but rather, we are presidents who happen to be Latinos. Our responsibility is the same to the entire campus and to all of our students. As president, I am committed to making the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD) a better place for all of its students. Houston is the fourth largest city in the country and has one of the most diverse populations in the country. UHD, demographically, looks like Houston, the city it serves. The university's student body is 39% Hispanic and 29% African American with students from over 90 countries, making it one of the most diverse universities in the country.

When I first arrived at the UHD, I initiated a Good-to-Great process (Collins, 2001). (5) We distributed a hundred copies of the book to faculty, staff, and student leaders, along with copies of Good-to-Great for the Social Sector. We held several retreats and discussion groups examining areas where the university might excel (using the data from the surveys and focus groups). My approach has always been one of engaged listening and I solicited feedback and then formed groups of faculty and staff to develop initiatives. Those teams selected a BHAG (Big Hairy Audacious Goal), which is central to the Good-to-Great process. From that we developed a vision--UHD will be a premier university where students receive a high impact experience and graduate with 21st century skills. Our faculty and staff are now developing these high-impact experiences. (6) (learning communities, internships, undergraduate research, service learning, internships, etc.) and are integrating them into the curricula. We are also examining our degrees to ensure students receive skill sets appropriate for a rapidly changing world. Over the last two years, we developed a strategic plan and have launched a number of initiatives to strengthen student retention and to increase graduation rates.

My approach is value-centered. At UHD, we realize that our main mission is to provide an opportunity for student success. As both a Hispanic-Serving Institution and a Minority-Serving Institution, UHD has an opportunity to build close ties with surrounding Hispanic and African-American communities. We strengthen partnerships with community-based organizations and 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 in the communities. UHD has been recognized with the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement as an engaged university and has been named to the President's Honor Roll for Community Service. In 2012, UHD received "With Distinction" honors—the highest-level of recognition. Our faculty view application of learning as an integral part of the UHD experience. Education is closely tied to community service; such service can provide a laboratory for teaching, learning, and research. Engaging students inspires their learning and gives meaning to it.

We have much work to do at UHD, but it will not be done in isolation. As UHD engages more with the community, we will see more students graduate and go on to graduate and professional schools. Along the way, hopefully, we will contribute to building capacity among our partner organizations and within the partnering communities. I am confident that UHD will grow and be a stronger university. In the process I am committed to also developing others as the next generation of leaders, not only in the university, but in Houston.

Concluding Thoughts and Recommendations
Over the years I have served on boards and commissions, held positions of increasing responsibility and authority, and have had the opportunity to help create stronger organizations. Certainly, these experiences prepared me for administrative leadership positions but, fundamentally, my values have guided my actions. I am grateful to my parents, my family, and my mentors and my employers for the opportunity I have worked with over the years, observing their various leadership styles and techniques. I remain committed to servant leadership and to mentoring future leader, and encourage them to mentor others.

Recently, during a trip to New Mexico, I had an opportunity to meet with an old friend who I once mentored. She said to me, "Bill, you opened the door for so many like me and now, I am doing the very same thing." Her words ring true as I see it in the campus where she serves as president. She inspires and encourages others to grow, as she builds a strong institution.

Throughout my career, I have been fortunate enough to find good mentors who encouraged my scholarship and who prodded me to consider administrative positions. I have followed their example and have had numerous mentees, many of whom now serve in administrative roles or who run successful businesses. Mentoring the next generation of higher education leaders, particularly those from under-represented populations, is vital to the future of this country and to ensuring that our universities our inclusive and serve the increasingly diverse population of America.

Service learning is but one way that we mentor others. Students learn from faculty and, in many cases, have an opportunity to mentor other students (perhaps middle school or elementary students). They work on projects together and learn from each other. They are inspired by the examples and sacrifice of community members, parents, and public servants. Service learning can be a powerful tool for changing behavior and a small step towards making a better world.

I am reminded of Eleanor Roosevelt, who once said, "A good leader inspires people to have confidence in the leader, a great leader inspires people to have confidence in themselves." (7) Let us inspire others and, in so doing, create a better world.


Bibliography

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