

## Los Angeles Times | California | Local

---

You are here: LAT Home > Articles > 1998 > July > 19 > California | Local

Archive for Sunday, July 19, 1998

# Building Better Bridges for All Students

By Nancy Cleeland

July 19, 1998 *in print edition B-1*

He's a poet. A philosopher. A veteran Chicano activist and son of the barrio.

Manuel Gomez is also one of the University of California system's top Latino administrators, a highly visible role model for the minority students who have become so sought-after in the post-affirmative action era.

As vice chancellor for student services at UC Irvine, Gomez, 51, has created innovative links between the campus and local schools and community colleges, with the aim of putting more students from poor, predominantly minority neighborhoods on the university track.

Such outreach programs—which include providing tutors for elementary students, coaching high schoolers in SAT test-taking skills, hosting on-campus science and math academies, and planning class curricula that prepare kids for college—have become popular alternatives to the affirmative action admission policies that were dismantled by UC regents two years ago.

But Gomez, who joined UCI's Office of Student Affairs 26 years ago, was developing partnerships long before they came into vogue.

"He was one of the pioneers of the partnership movement," said Russell Edgerton, director of education programs for the PEW Charitable Trust and former president of the American Assn. for Higher Education. "We date the active role of partnerships from about 1985 forward, and Manuel was one of the people that you always wanted to talk to very early on. I remember being impressed years ago with how his programs were more comprehensive and systemic and enduring rather than just a glancing blow."

The UCI programs, which in three years helped move Santa Ana College from 44th to seventh in the state in transferring Latino students to the UC system, were cited as a model for what the state should be doing in a recent report by the nonprofit think tank Policy Analysis for California Education.

The university—which was one of only three in the nine-campus UC system that saw an increase in minority enrollment this year—recognized the programs' importance two years ago by creating the Center for Educational Partnerships, which coordinates all UCI partnerships.

\*

At a time of often acrimonious debate over the value and necessity of affirmative action, partnerships focus on positive ways to help even the playing field, Gomez said.

"These programs create bridges," he said. "And in addition, they move us away from the divisiveness of the moment to recognize our common concerns, and ultimately, our interdependence."

Gomez, who remains a staunch supporter of affirmative action programs, cited those partnerships as the most significant achievement of his career.

But in a recent interview, he emphasized that he wants to be known as more than UCI's highest-ranking minority. "I'm not a Chicano vice chancellor," he said. "I'm a vice chancellor who happens to be a Chicano."

One of eight children born to migrant farm workers, Gomez spent his early years shuttled from the sugar beet fields of Colorado to his grandfather's ramshackle house in the Santa Ana barrio of Santa Anita.

He remembers a childhood marked by cold nights in brick, tin-roofed migrant housing, but also the comfort of being surrounded by supportive friends and relatives.

At a young age, he began working at his mother's side, hefting sugar beets onto a truck or dragging onions alongside him in a sack. He recalled being charmed by the women's talk as they analyzed their dreams in lilting Spanish or tried to describe the nature of the wind and the way the sun warmed the fields.

"My mother gave me the love of poetry," Gomez said. "And I developed a love of nature in Colorado. There were so many birds and trees. In some ways, despite the hard work, it was beautiful."

\*

Through his work in the fields, Gomez also developed a compassion for farm workers that deeply influenced his college years and continues to affect his thinking on matters of race and ethnicity.

His parents—a maverick musician father and a dreamily romantic mother born in the United States to immigrants from Mexico—were products of a segregated educational system where expectations for Latino students were low. Neither one made it past grade school.

Yet, despite his family's frequent moves and poverty, Gomez was determined to succeed. He studied with passion, was named to the Santiago High School football team in Garden Grove, and became student body president in his senior year.

"He was a good scholar, very ambitious and interesting to talk to, which you can't say about all high school students," recalled JoAnn Lawton, the former counselor who encouraged Gomez to continue his education beyond high school.

"He was definitely college material," she said. "He could have been admitted anywhere, but he didn't want to go that far from home and his parents were leery about letting him leave. They didn't want to take the chance of losing him."

\*

In the end, Gomez passed up a Harvard scholarship and chose Cal State Hayward in the Bay Area, where Lawton's brother-in-law taught. Backed by a small stipend from Santa Ana banker Manuel Esqueda, Gomez became the first in his family to attend college.

"I remember him very well because he indicated that he was going to go into education and that was music to my ears, he being from the barrio and all," recalled Esqueda, who has helped more than 1,000 local students attend college. "And he kept his word. One of my greatest rewards has been watching Manuel Gomez climb. He has never forgotten where he comes from."

However, Gomez didn't take a straight shot to academia. Caught up in the activism of the 1960s, he left college to work for Chicano and farm worker rights. "For three years, I traveled all over the Southwest to speak at rallies," he

said. "But I grew weary of it. I wasn't reaching people the way I wanted to. That was when I started writing poetry, and it seemed to reach people in different ways."

Since then, Gomez has had two anthologies of poetry published, and he continues to teach a freshmen seminar in poetry writing at UCI. He still writes poetry, most recently an affectionate ode to outgoing UCI Chancellor Laura Wilkening, a planetary scientist whose specialty is comets.

In "Comets" he wrote: "In communion, shining beyond their nature, They run, chasing themselves around the sun. Not for transcendence or salvation; they are not so vain. Not in worship or desire, but simply because they do. Unlike us, they do not contemplate their nature... ."

Gomez did eventually graduate from Cal State Hayward with a history degree and went on to coordinate community relations for Oakland public schools—a job that would plant the seeds for university-public school partnerships.

In 1972, he "came home" to Orange County, taking a job in UCI's student affairs department. Aside from a two-year stint at the U.S. Department of Education, he's been at the university since. In 1995, Wilkening promoted him to vice chancellor.

Through those years, Gomez, who lives in Irvine with his wife and two teenage children, gained a national reputation for forming educational alliances. He plans to travel to South Africa next month on a Ford Foundation grant to help establish similar programs there.

\*

Unlike affirmative action, partnerships intervene long before the college admissions process.

In neighborhoods characterized by poverty, language barriers and parents with little education, the most important step may be simply persuading young students to aspire to a university education, Gomez said. That's one reason promising middle school and high school students are brought on campus for summer and weekend academies.

Schools in low-income neighborhoods also benefit from the expertise of university education specialists, who can recommend curricula changes that better prepare students for college. "One thing we're trying to do now is get more middle schools to provide algebra courses," Gomez said.

Community college students are offered information on the college admissions process, scholarships and loans.

Whether such efforts will eventually restore minority admissions in the UC system to affirmative action days remains to be seen.

\*

Statewide, minority enrollment at UC campuses dropped significantly this year, the first since affirmative action was abolished. The number of blacks planning to attend UC schools dropped by 24% and the number of Latinos by 5%.

The declines were pronounced at the most competitive campuses—UC Berkeley and UCLA. However, UCI, along with UC Riverside and UC Santa Cruz, actually showed increases in minority enrollment.

UC Irvine registered 29% more African Americans and 21% more Latinos planning to enroll this year.

But Gomez was careful not to take credit for the jump. "It went up [at UCI] due to a lot of hard work, but it didn't go up across the system," he said. He pointed out that UCI could have benefited from a "cascade effect," in which minority students rejected at those more prestigious campuses took UCI as a second-choice.

"There's a broader concern of access to public institutions that needs to be addressed," Gomez said. "One of my great frustrations has been seeing education, and particularly the universities, being drawn into these polarized racial

politics when we should be talking about educational opportunity.”

At the same time, Gomez said, he’s found his university career to be immensely rewarding.

“If there was one lesson I have to offer from inside my own life, it would be the immense power of our human mind to create the kind of life we dream about,” he said. “That’s why I’m happy working in education. In some respects that’s what the fundamental task of education is all about, allowing that potential to unfold.”

#### **Related Articles**

- Greater Than Their Sum: 2 Cultures Give Jan 18, 1999
- Professor may be O.C. law school’s first dean Aug 29, 2007
- Chancellor’s admirers baffled by his decision on dean Sep 14, 2007
- UC Irvine Names Parker Vice Chancellor, Dean Apr 19, 2000
- ‘Lovely Little School District’ Is in Chaos Jun 18, 2006

#### **More articles by Nancy Cleeland**

#### **More articles from the California | Local section**

---

California and the world. Get the Times from \$1.35 a week

---

Copyright 2008 Los Angeles Times