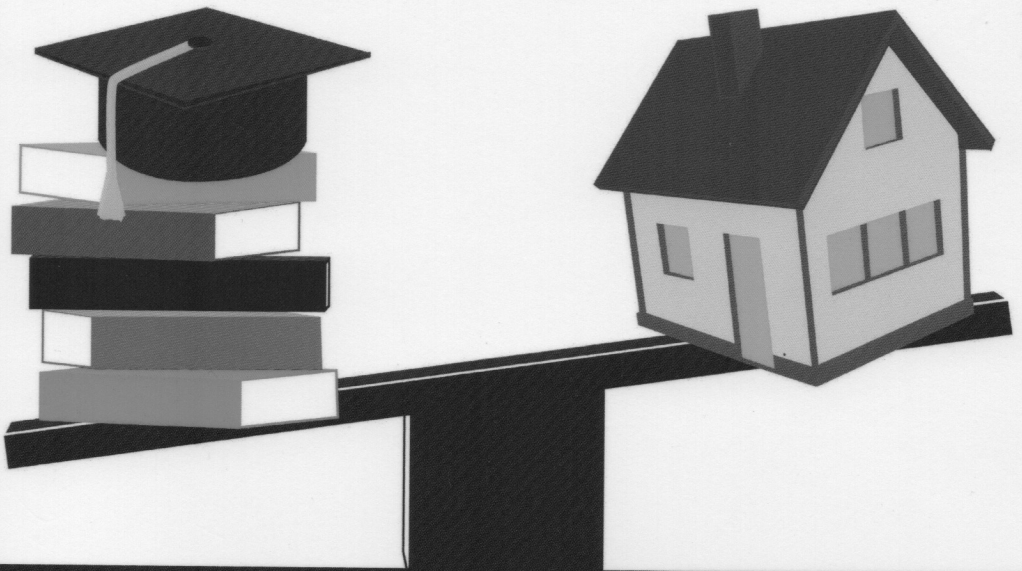


BEYOND THE PRIDE AND THE PRIVILEGE: THE STORIES OF DOCTORAL STUDENTS AND WORK-LIFE BALANCE



Edited by
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B. Genise Henry
Chinasa A. Elue
Edna Martinez

With a Foreword by Marybeth Gasman

A VOLUME IN:
WORK-LIFE BALANCE

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CHAPTER 20

MENUDO FOR THE SPIRIT

Marissa Vásquez Urias

I was 16 when I experienced my first heartbreak. As I lay locked up in my room, feeling that my world was coming to an end, a gentle knock on my door brought me back to my senses. It was my mom. She had been by my side all day, wiping my tears and telling me that I would be okay. However, as a young, naïve teenager, I thought to myself, *how could she possibly know how I feel?* Walking in, I saw her place a book on my nightstand. She took my hands in hers and said, “*Mija*, I know that you’re going through a difficult time right now. And I know that you may not want to talk to me about it. So I bought you this book. Maybe it’ll cheer you up.” When she left the room I sat up in my bed and reached over for the book. The title of it was *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul*. I skimmed through the table of contents and stopped at the section entitled, “On Relationships.” As I began reading, I found myself relating to similar stories of first loves, breakups, and sorrow. The lessons prescribed by each of these narratives involved perseverance, believing in oneself, caring for others, and inner-strength. My mom was right. While I valued her love and support, there was something different about relating to my peers. The more that I read their stories, the stronger I felt about sharing mine.

The complexity of life’s challenges have certainly evolved since I was 16, but the value of sharing my failures and successes are what continue to keep me grounded. The continued support from my family and the mentorship that I have

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received from fellow scholars and advisors has been instrumental to my persistence. As a Latina doctoral student, I know that my experiences are not unique to those sharing my struggle. However, my hope is that those reading this narrative will find comfort in knowing that this journey is not impossible. ¡Si se Puede!¹ And just as *Chicken Soup* re-energized my soul, I hope that the stories in this book serve as the menudo² that fuels your spirit.

New Beginnings

“Damn Deedee! Aren’t you tired of studying?” This was the response from my sister after telling her of my intent to apply to a doctorate program. While most of my family thought I was crazy for considering another three years of school, the truth was, I missed the intellectual stimulation of being in a classroom. It had been nearly two years since completing my master’s program and I had yet to secure a full-time job. As the budget crisis in California continued to escalate, particularly in education, I lost hope of ever achieving my goal of becoming a community college counselor. The economic downturn coupled with the competitiveness for employment within the community college system was disheartening. After months of various consulting gigs with my mentor, Dr. Ken Gonzalez, I was hired as a full-time employee at a non-profit organization. However, while my work at the organization was fulfilling, I longed to return to the community college setting. My passion for higher education, particularly community colleges, stemmed from personal experiences as a transfer student who had been nurtured, both academically and socially, by my *Puente*³ counselors and instructors. As a *Puentista*, I was challenged to think critically about education, including my own role as a socially conscious Latina. Such empowerment led me to continue my education and inspired me to help others do the same. Thus, I was determined to find a way back to the community college system. Thankfully, with the support of loved ones, I applied to the Educational Leadership Program (EdD) at San Diego State University.

My initial response to my acceptance was that of excitement and anxiousness. I was eager to begin this new chapter in my life, especially as my husband had just completed his first year of law school. Yet, it wasn’t long before these emotions subsided and were replaced with thoughts of doubt and uncertainty. As the youngest, least experienced, and only individual not working in a higher education setting in my cohort, I questioned whether I made the right decision to enter into a practitioner-based program. As more of a research/theory kind-of-girl, I became frustrated and bored with my coursework. I came home after every class venting about the lack of intellectual stimulation and the drawn out discussions about APA formatting and how to write in academic prose. My disillusionment with the program prompted disdain and ungratefulness of the opportunity I had been given.

One evening, my husband finally sat me down for an intervention. He told me that since beginning the program, I had become irritable, negative, and unhappy. I was completely taken aback by his comments, though not because I disagreed.

Rather, I was concerned over how such negativity was affecting others in my life. Had I been disrespectful to my parents, co-workers, or other family members? Was I projecting my dissatisfaction with the program in an unprofessional way towards faculty and my classmates? My husband reminded me of the excitement that I once had about joining the program, and of my passion for becoming a change agent within higher education. He was right. As a Latina, I knew that the opportunity to pursue a doctoral degree was one that is not afforded to many women of color. At that moment, I told myself that I would become more proactive in balancing my family, work, school, professional development, and maintaining my sanity!

The Balancing Act

As with most doctoral students, balancing my family life has been a challenge. Although I am a third generation Latina, the traditional cultural value of *familismo* still exists within my family. Many scholars have operationalized and dissected the impact that this cultural notion has on Latino students in education (Marin & Marin, 1991; Ojeda, Navarro, & Morales, 2011; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999). In short, it means putting family first, even if it requires sacrificing personal responsibilities or commitments. While I know that my *familia* always has my back, subtle jokes and comments such as, “¡Ya no me quieres, hija!” or “I guess I’ll see you when I see you,” has made it difficult to find a balance between focusing on my studies and spending enough time with family. This is even more challenging coming from a large family, where I often miss out on numerous get-togethers, birthday celebrations, holidays, and other special occasions due to school. Over the years I have endured my share of guilt trips for not calling or visiting enough. This constant battle between upholding my family values and accomplishing my goals is emotionally and psychologically draining. I ask myself, “Am I doing the right thing? Have I misplaced my priorities? Am I being selfish?” Each time I force myself to remember that my sacrifices will pay off in the end. While I don’t spend as much time as I would like with my husband and my family, I do what I can to let them know that they are in my thoughts.

Aside from spending most of our evenings and weekends at the library together, my husband and I make time late at night to catch up on our favorite television shows or grab dinner with friends. Throughout the day, we send each other cheesy text messages or Facebook posts as reminders that we are thinking of each other. As for my family, I make it a point to see or speak with my parents at least two or three times a week. This includes visiting their home during my lunch breaks (and raiding their fridge) or calling them as I’m driving from work to school. The long-distance relationship with my sister (who lives in North Carolina) is maintained through weekly Skype calls or silly Snapchat messages. As cliché as it sounds, it’s the little things that count. These daily acts are the ingredients to my menudo. They’re the flavor and spices that make my life exquisite. Although I struggle to maintain this balance, I am reminded of the sacrifice they too have made on my

behalf, both directly and indirectly. My husband, my family, and friends keep me grounded as to why I continue the work that I do.

"Keep Calm and Finish your Dissertation"

That's the meme displayed as my cellphone wallpaper. It's a constant reminder of the task that lies ahead and a reflection of my journey thus far. As I previously mentioned, my first semester was a challenge. Not only did I lack a sense of belonging, but I also yearned for an opportunity to engage in more research. Such opportunity came through an announcement for a graduate assistant position with a faculty member in our department. After meeting with Dr. Luke Wood, I knew that I had found my outlet for research! I agreed to a flexible 20-hour per week workload on top of my full-time job and full-time enrollment. After a few weeks of working with Dr. Wood, he asked, "So, what do you wanna do after you graduate?" I hated being asked that question, mainly because I wasn't sure. After giving him a roundabout answer about wanting to work at a community college, he said, "I think you should be a faculty member." Although I had loosely considered this career path a few years prior, I told Dr. Wood that I was keeping my options open, to which he responded, "Well, you still have some time to think about it, but my goal is to prepare you to become a faculty member." His bold statement made me laugh, as I thought, "Okay, sure," not giving it much thought. Soon enough, Dr. Wood took me under his wing and slowly began molding my confidence as a scholar. By the end of my first year, I had presented at a national conference, published my first article, and became managing editor for his journal, the *Journal of African American Males in Education (JAAME)*. By my second year, I became more convinced that the role of a faculty member was one that I was capable of achieving. As I reflect on my journey and growth throughout these three years, I am again reminded of another significant ingredient to my symbolic menudo: mentorship. Such mentorship has come not only from my advisors, Drs. Wood, Gonzalez, and Frank Harris III, but also from my brother and sister scholars. Again, it's the little things that count, whether it be words of encouragement, a brief text to say hello, lunch invitations, introductions to celebrity scholars, or folded notes after each presentation that say "Fantastic work!" or "You killed it!" Their academic, professional, and personal support continues to inspire me to become an advocate for social change, a confident researcher, and a humble servant to our communities.

'Me' time

Aside from balancing my family, work, and school, I've also come to recognize the importance of maintaining my physical and emotional wellbeing during this process. As a thirty-year old woman, my metabolism isn't quite what it used to be. Thus, finding time to exercise has become an important part of my weekly routine. Although I don't mind going alone, having a gym buddy makes the effort

a bit more doable. Thankfully, I found a classmate who shares a similar interest and joins me in our quest to stay fit. Aside from its physical health benefits, working out has become a great way to mentally unwind from work, school, and personal stress. However, just as everything else, finding time for the gym has been a challenge. Thus, we typically go at night (around 10 pm) or on the weekends. As an added push to maintain our gym routine, we've made bets on who could lose the most weight by the end of each semester! Although we usually end up calling a truce around finals time, the camaraderie that we've developed as a result of our gym sessions is something for which I am greatly appreciative.

While going to the gym has been a productive outlet for managing my stress, I find it necessary to also indulge in a little "me time." Living in sunny San Diego, I'm fortunate to have many options, including going to the beach, going on a hike, hanging out at a café, watching the sunset, or just chillin' at a park. However, my favorite "me time" consists of taking my family's dog, Princess, to the beach. Rather than bringing my books or laptop, I simply pack a small blanket, some snacks, and a pillow. After letting Princess enjoy her initial sprint to the ocean and her usual seagull chase up and down the sand, we trot our way back to our blanket and soak up the warm sun. The cool ocean breeze and the calming sound of the waves produce a personalized relaxation soundtrack. These moments allow me to re-center my spirit and reflect on why I chose to follow this path in academia. As a Latina, I feel obligated to accomplish my goals, not only for myself, but also for my *familia*, my community, and my profession.

Maintaining a Well-Balanced Diet

As with many Latinos, food always has a way of bringing my *familia* together. Chef *Papi* (aka, my Pops) is well known by both family and friends for his culinary skills. While his recipes for *chile con carne*, *caldo de pollo*, and *ceviche* are to die for, it's his passion and technique that never cease to amaze me. "It's all about presentation." He utters these words each time he prepares a family meal. I watch him take each food item and carefully place them on a platter. He then garnishes the food with colorful spices and finalizes his creation with an enthusiastic *voilà!* While most folks only see (and eat) the finished product, I've been fortunate to witness and partake in the process of his dishes, including *menudo*. Such process isn't simple; it's time consuming, arduous, exhausting, and depending on the dish, can be emotionally and physically draining. As a Latina doctoral student, I've experienced my share of similar sentiments throughout my academic journey. Yet, despite these challenges, the ingredients in my life (*familia*, mentorship, friendship, intellectual and social outlets, encouragement, a sense of belonging, humility, and confidence) have allowed me to maintain a well-balanced path to becoming a critical and socially conscious scholar. And while I can't guarantee that the ingredients to my *menudo* are to your liking, I encourage you, dear reader, to prepare your own recipe for success.

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Adding to the Work-Life Balance Series with Information Age Publishing, *Beyond the Pride and Privilege: The Stories of Doctoral Students and Work-Life Balance* offers valuable insight into the complex lives of today's doctoral scholars. Modern doctoral students represent a wide variety of demographics and experiences not akin to those of the past. Where there was once a privileged few who pursued advanced degrees for the purposes of career advancement and financial opportunities, doctoral students today pursue this degree for a variety of reasons and are changing the landscape of who can obtain this type of advanced degree. Women, students of color, married and single-parents, and first-generation doctoral scholars are increasingly amassing doctoral study programs with purposes that are deeper than advancement and opportunity. However, the challenges for these students and for the universities where these students pursue their advanced degree, continues to be retention and on-time completion rates. Work-life balance must be a part of the dialogue for doctoral students, their families, and professors.

The authors included in this book represent a wide variety of identities, in addition to being representative of the demographic shift in doctoral study programs, and movingly express their experiences of work-life balance through their autoethnographies. Each autoethnography offers the reader a look into the emotionally, physically, and mentally charged life of the doctoral scholar, where family, language, culture, and community intercept to expose the pride and privilege that cannot be taken for granted. The authors have not withheld from sharing the full scope of their experiences, adding stories that are often left to the margins in the broader scope of the doctoral study experience, they express their most intimate selves that have included wanting to withdraw from the pursuit of a doctorate, issues of strained friendships, physical disabilities, and feelings of guilt. Despite the challenges, this book brings to life the hope.

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