

# *Pathways to the Presidency: Biographical Sketches of Women of Color Firsts*

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*According to recent data, only 3 percent of all college and university presidents are women of color. While the numbers remain disturbingly low, some of these women of color are making history as the “first” of their gender, race, and ethnicity to become president of a public, baccalaureate degree-granting college or university. In this article, Caroline Sotello Viernes Turner presents biographical sketches of three of these women. They are acknowledged to be the first Mexican American, Native American, and Asian Pacific/Asian American women who are presidents of such colleges in the United States. Women from these respective racial and ethnic groups have become university presidents only recently. Using in-depth interviews and cross-case comparisons, the author examines the paths these women presidents have taken and how their narratives contribute important information about women of color in higher education administration. She asserts that from their stories we can learn about the “pathway to the presidency” these women have helped to forge, about the ways universities can help support the leadership development of women of color, and about how to foster leadership in other women of color who aspire to be college presidents. Turner concludes that these women of color “firsts” continue to make important contributions to the field of higher education, and to pave the way for other women.*

Juliet V. Garcia, Karen G. Swisher, and Rose Y. Tseng<sup>1</sup> are making history as the first Mexican American, American Indian, and Asian American<sup>2</sup> women presidents of their respective institutions.<sup>3</sup> As I collected information for a study on women college presidents, I found that few women of color<sup>4</sup> serve in these roles. Women from these three racial and ethnic groups have become college presidents only recently, far later than White or African American women.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, little has been written about them and their presidencies.

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This study contributes to the scant literature on the general topic of women of color in higher education administration because the women featured here are “firsts.” From the stories of Garcia, Swisher, and Tseng we can learn about the pathway to the college presidency for women of color that these women have helped forge, about the ways universities can support the leadership development of women of color, and about how to foster leadership in other women of color who aspire to be college presidents.

I am a woman of color with more than thirty years’ experience as a student affairs administrator and full-time faculty member. My research interests include access and equity issues for racial and ethnic minorities in higher education. For me, identifying these women of color as “firsts” prompted several questions: What led these women to become college presidents? What were and are their visions and goals? What have they accomplished in their presidencies? What can be learned from them about creating pathways for less-represented populations in higher education? I set out to locate these women and, due to my longstanding relationships with scholars from various racial and ethnic groups, I was able to interview them on their respective campuses. In this article, I introduce the presidents and their campuses, briefly describe the demographic contexts within which they work, and discuss themes derived from their biographical sketches in connection with related literature.

In order to understand the unique space that each of these women occupies in academe, it is important to present data on the representation of women of color among college presidents and to review the literature documenting the experiences of women, including women of color, in leadership positions.

### Demographic Context: Invisibility of Women of Color College Presidents

The results of a survey reported in *The American College President* (American Council on Education, 2000) reveal that among all campus president respondents (2,366), 511 (21.6%) are women. Of the women, 430 (84.1%) are White, 36 (7%) are African American, 31 (6.1%) are Hispanic, 7 (1.4%) are American Indian, and 5 (1%) are Asian American (p. 13). The report concludes that in 2001, the “demographic profile of the typical college or university president is slowly changing but continues to be White (87%) and male (79%)” (p. 9). Taking institution type into consideration, Harvey and Anderson (2005) report that of the 200 who were women presidents of public, four-year institutions in 2004, 171 (85.5%) are White, 18 (9%) are African American, 8 (4%) are Hispanic, 2 (1%) are American Indian, and 1 (0.5%) is Asian American. According to these data, Garcia is one of eight Hispanics, Swisher is one of two American Indians, and Tseng is the only Asian American woman college president of this institutional type. The report concludes that “the imperative of rapid change, including an increasing racially and socioeconomi-

cally diverse student body, suggests a need for adaptability and diversity in higher education institutions and their leaders” (p. 47).

Other studies also document the continuing rise of the number of underrepresented students and women in the college student body (Almanac, 2005; Haro & Lara, 2003). Furthermore, these reports indicate that most college presidents hold doctoral degrees and have served among the faculty ranks. When asked about the future of women of color in senior administration, a study participant stated, “I think it is promising. . . . First, however, women of color must have opportunities to come up successfully through the ranks across all disciplines of the professoriate” (Turner & Kappes, in press). To determine the representation of women of color within the pool of potential presidents, it is useful to examine the number of women of color enrolled in college, their degree attainment, and their faculty status (see Tables 1 and 2).<sup>6</sup>

Based on these data, it appears that the pathway to a college presidency is narrow for women of color. As one tracks their representation upward in the academic hierarchy, their numbers all but disappear at the highest levels, particularly within the ranks of full professor and senior administration. There is a body of literature citing the barriers women of color must overcome to succeed not only as faculty (Rains, 1999; Turner, 2002; Turner & Myers, 2000), but also in senior-level administrative positions (Canul, 2003; Farris, 1999; Hansen, 1997; Ideta & Cooper, 1999; King, 1999; McDemmond, 1999). These barriers include not being considered for administrative positions; having their scholarship devalued and ignored; and being torn between family, community, and career responsibilities.

## Women and Leadership in Academe

The rise of women of color as higher education leaders must be viewed within the historical context and legacy of exclusion, substandard educational facilities, and limited opportunities for students of color (Weinberg, 1995). Wilson (1989) refers to the limited presence of women of color in higher education administration as “rooted in the history of America” (p. 85). He describes the “lack of educational opportunities that existed for racial minorities in the 19th and early 20th century, including the fact that women were expected to raise families, not to become educated and have careers” (p. 87). Wilson concludes that “affirmative action and court decisions were the primary levers that forced open the doors of mostly White male institutions to people of color” (p. 93). Allen, Epps, Guillory, Suh, Bonus-Hammarth, and Stassen (1991) note that “women from underrepresented populations face barriers due to historical, cultural, and social factors that have shaped their experience and development in American society. . . . Pervasive racist and sexist attitudes continue to limit educational opportunities for women of color” (p. 190).

According to Walton and McDade (2001), “Women are underrepresented in senior positions within higher education. . . . Furthermore, there are too

TABLE 1 Women's Educational Enrollment and Attainment by Race and Ethnicity

	College Enrollment, Fall 2002 <sup>1</sup>	Degrees Conferred, 2002-2003 <sup>2</sup>		
		Bachelor's	Master's	Doctorate
White, non-Hispanic	6,242,300	564,210	208,515	14,228
American Indian	100,200	5,963	1,815	120
Asian	570,200	47,733	14,745	1,183
Black, non-Hispanic	1,270,200	82,769	31,467	1,604
Hispanic	962,700	53,950	15,723	819
<i>Total Women</i>	9,145,600	754,625	272,265	17,954

1. Source: *Chronicle of Higher Education Annual Almanac*, August 2005, p.15.

2. Source: *Chronicle of Higher Education Annual Almanac*, August 2005, p. 20.

TABLE 2 Full-Time Faculty Women by Race and Ethnicity, Fall 2003<sup>1</sup>

	Rank		
	Assistant	Associate	Full
White	52,754	41,816	34,363
American Indian	340	242	154
Asian	5,049	2,540	1,611
Black	5,188	3,341	1,916
Hispanic	2,509	1,523	957
<i>Total Women</i>	69,500	50,203	39,366
<i>Total Faculty</i>	153,064	132,961	166,415

1. Source: *Chronicle of Higher Education Annual Almanac*, August 2005, p. 26.

few scholarly studies of their contributions to higher education” (p. 86). Nidiffer (2001) provides a historic context in which to study the pathways of women presidents. She explores many of the controversies surrounding the education of women, including the fear of “race suicide” — the idea that better-educated women tend to have fewer children. She concludes that as more women obtain positions of leadership, their voices will no longer be isolated and a new norm of academic leadership will be created.

Studies document challenges related to racial discrimination, as well as gender stereotypes that must be overcome by African American women holding executive-level campus positions (Davis, 1994; Farris, 1999; Harvey, 1999; Jackson, 2004; King, 1999; McDemmond, 1999; Moses, 1989). To address such challenges, the importance of mentorship and networking for women of color aspiring to high-level positions in academic administration has been noted (Turner & Kappes, in press). Research on women of color in faculty positions also documents the challenge of balancing home, family, and work (Turner, 2002; Turner & Myers, 2000). Given the demographic context and the literature reviewed above, it appears that gender and cultural difference affect the lives of women of color in academe. Because the focus of this article is on a Mexican American, an American Indian, and an Asian American woman, I review literature related to these reference groups.

### *Mexican Americans/Latinas/Hispanas/Chicanas in Higher Education Leadership*<sup>7</sup>

Scholars writing about the experience of Latinas in higher education leadership note the challenge of racial, ethnic, and gender stereotyping, but concentrate most of their discussion on cultural differences leading to feelings of dissonance and contradiction in the workplace. Canul (2003) describes her experience as a Latina administrator by noting that barriers to her advancement included fighting gender and racial stereotypes because people “stereotypically characterize Latina women as baby machines, uneducated, and poor” (p. 172). Niemann (2002) describes the importance of dispelling stereotypes of Chicanas as submissive, docile, and passive. She also encourages the validation of the important contributions Chicanas make in academe and elsewhere in society.

Canul (2003) also asserts that although it may be acceptable in the dominant culture to ask for additional resources, some women of color, particularly Latinas with strong cultural values, may experience a sense of discomfort both in risking the shame of a negative response and in placing someone in the awkward position of having to refuse them. Nieves-Squires (1991) describes cultural differences that can lead to tension for Hispanas in academe, stating that “challenging someone’s statements, trying to change another person’s opinion, or debating issues can be viewed as a sign of disrespect” (p. 2). Hansen (1997) describes responses from Latina administrators who speak about learning how to function in two distinct sociocultural environments, either by drawing on their identity and upholding institutional values (dualism) or by drawing on their identity and working toward the social transformation of their institution (negotiation). Finally, Aleman (1995) describes the phenomenon of dissonance and contradiction in the workplace: “I am struck by my lived contradiction: To be a professor is to be an *anglo*; to be a *latina* is not to be an *anglo*. So how can I be both a Latina and a professor? To

be a Latina professor, I conclude, means to be unlike *and* like me. Que locura! What madness!” (p. 74). She further explains, “As Latina/o professors, we are newcomers to a world defined and controlled by discourses that do not address our realities, that do not affirm our intellectual contributions, that do not seriously examine our worlds. Can I be both Latina and professor without compromise?” (pp. 74–75).

*American Indian Women in Higher Education Leadership*

American Indians who aspire to the professoriate often face barriers due to the conflicts between their own values and those of the mainstream culture (Cross & Shortman, 1995).<sup>8</sup> Cross and Shortman state, for example, that “the social value and preeminent goal in life for many American Indians is [not individual success but] the survival of the Indian people” (p. 22). Warner’s (1995) study of American Indian females in higher education similarly concludes with an exploration of circumstances in which they perceive dissonance in their work environment because “cultural expectations within tribal communities are significantly different from cultural expectations of a formal organization” (p. 1). For example, according to Swisher and Benally (1998), “in many Indigenous cultures, humility is a value . . . so it is inappropriate for individuals . . . to bring attention to her/his deeds or accomplishments” (p. xiii).

In her study of four American Indian women tribal college presidents, Krumm (1997) tells the stories of their presidencies from their perspectives. Her study reports that tribal college leadership is inseparable from culture, underscoring the connection between culture and leadership. For example, participants described their preferred leadership styles as very supportive, which is reflective of their cultural values, although situations often compelled them to use a more directive leadership style. However, in these women’s experiences, tribal colleges did not appear to create barriers that prevented women from assuming leadership positions. In fact, Krumm states that at the time of her study the percentage of women presidents in tribal colleges (10 of 28, or 39%) was higher than the percentage of women presidents of U.S. colleges nationwide.

Johnson, Benham, and Van Alstine (2003) note that American Indians, both male and female, are relatively new to educational administration, which explains the “paucity of literature focused on Native American leadership” (p. 150). They conclude that there is a dire need for greater numbers “of highly trained leaders in all fields who are knowledgeable about their culture and secure in their identity” (p. 150).

*Asian Pacific/Asian American Women in Higher Education Leadership*<sup>9</sup>

Asian Americans, representing some twenty nations and sixty ethnic groups, are grossly underrepresented among administrators of higher education (Escueta & O’Brien, 1991; Hune, 1998; Hune & Chan, 1997). Cho (1996) de-

scribes the particular absence of Asian Pacific/Asian American women at the executive and managerial levels in higher education in terms of “academic caste” and points to sexual and racial harassment, as well as accent discrimination, as barriers to the upward mobility of Asian Pacific/Asian American women. Hune (1998) refers to cultural issues that may hinder upward mobility for Asian Pacific/Asian American females. For example, her study reports that “an APA [Asian Pacific American] female faculty member seeking consensus in a meeting, or being polite and deferring to a senior colleague, or waiting to have something to contribute before speaking may feel that she is acting properly in her culture and as a woman. She is likely to be viewed by the dominant male culture, however, as lacking leadership qualities, confidence in her abilities, and original ideas. This perception can hinder her professional advancement and reinforce this notion of lack of leadership” (p. 16). She concludes that “the small number of APA women at the highest levels of academic administration is not commensurate with their representation as students and faculty, and it suggests the effect of a glass ceiling” (p. 18).

Ideta and Cooper (1999), in a study of Asian women presidents, report that their study participants, ten women of Chinese, Filipina, and Japanese backgrounds, described themselves as not fitting the typical stereotypes of Asian women as docile, passive, and silent. When confronted by these stereotypes, they responded with greater determination to achieve their goals. They also confirm that Asian American women constitute the smallest ethnic minority group among female presidents of color.

Racial and ethnic stereotyping, gender bias, and cultural differences leading to feelings of dissonance and contradiction in the workplace are the primary themes that cut across the literature focusing on Hispanic, American Indian, and Asian American women in positions of academic leadership. Later in this article, when results from the narrative data are presented, reference will be made to the literature on women academics of their respective race and ethnicity so that themes from the biographical sketches can be connected with the themes noted in the literature.

### Biographical Sketches

I use the term “biographical sketches” as a way of indicating that this article, although capturing the range of interview and other data collected, does not attempt to portray the entire lives of these women. Instead, critical life factors leading to their present positions are the focus of this analysis. I use biography as a form of inquiry, which Creswell (1998) describes as the “study of an individual and her or his experiences as told to the researcher or found in documents and archival material” (p. 47). Armitage (2002) refers to the interview as a process “for the purpose of recording . . . personal and historical memories” (p. ix). Gluck (2002) states that “through the tape-recorded interview of women the researcher creates new material about women, validates

women's experiences, and affirms that our everyday lives are history" (p. 5). It is my hope that this article will contribute new knowledge about the lives of the pioneering women college presidents interviewed for this study, and that those who aspire to senior-level administration, as well as decisionmakers attempting to diversify the academy, will learn from the experiences of the women presented here.

These biographical sketches are derived from 90-minute, semistructured interviews with each president; transcripts of their 20-minute plenary presentations and handouts prepared by them for a summit of women of color;<sup>10</sup> observations made while shadowing each president over a two-day period at their respective campus sites; information gathered from demographic background sheets filled out by each participant before her interview; their respective campus websites; and historical accounts of their campuses (Ames, n.d.; Chilton, 2002; Inouye & Kormondy, 2001).

All three study respondents agreed to be interviewed, shadowed, videotaped, and audiotaped. They agreed to have their names and the names of their institutions used in final reports and publications. Each interview was transcribed and coded. Each participant was sent a copy of the transcript and was allowed to make changes to the transcript so that it accurately reflected their contributions to the study. They also had access to all other data collected during campus visits.

In order to address study questions, the three women were asked to describe their career paths, as well as significant life events and influences that lead them to become college presidents. In their narratives, Garcia, Swisher, and Tseng provide details about their journeys toward their present positions. As the literature review indicates, there is diversity within each racial and ethnic group. Each president interviewed for this study was quick to point out that she was speaking for herself and not necessarily for others of her gender, race, or ethnic background. Niemann's (2002) advice should be noted while reading the material presented in this article: "It is critically important for readers to keep in mind that a label does not define a woman or her ideology and that labels are fluid and, for many women, interchangeable" (p. xii).

Patterns of meaning were identified, and quotes explicating significant life events and emerging themes are included in this article (Creswell, 1998). Themes emerging from the narratives are based on an analysis that is grounded in the data (Merriam, 1998). Portraying these women in their own voices was important to me. Many of the factors described above in the literature on women of color and leadership in academe are reiterated in the presidents' reflections.

The next section of this article introduces each president, her campus, and her pathway to the presidency. Cross-cutting themes emerging from an analysis of each president's narrative follow. Their personal journeys provide many examples of their pioneering spirit and their commitment to making a difference.



## Women of Color Firsts, Their Campuses, Their Pathways to the Presidency

### *President Juliet Villarreal Garcia*

Juliet Villarreal Garcia has served for twenty years as president of the University of Texas at Brownsville/Texas Southmost College (UTB/TSC), a Hispanic-serving institution established in 1926 as Texas Southmost College. She is a native of Brownsville, Texas, where the campus is located. Garcia earned a doctorate in communication and linguistics in 1976 from the University of Texas at Austin.

In 1998, the University of Texas Brownsville, a four-year university, and Texas Southmost College, a two-year institution, formed a partnership. UTB/TSC offers a full range of occupational-technical education, continuing education, and community education programs, with the certificate and associate degrees traditional to community colleges. UTB/TSC also offers baccalaureate and master's degrees traditional to a university. Students move between the schools without the need to transfer. Student enrollment exceeds 11,000. Brownsville, Texas, is a binational region (United States and Mexico); the university is one block from the Mexican border. This area is home to one of the fastest growing, poorest, and most undereducated Latina/o populations in the country (J. V. Garcia, personal communication, November 2004).

#### – Pathway to the Presidency: Garcia

When she was nine years old, Garcia lost her mother, and she grew up with her father and brothers. At this time, she learned to blur the lines between what men and women can do. She also learned that she had already faced the most critical challenge of her life:

My mother died when we were very young, so . . . my brothers and I were raised by my father. . . . What I remember the most about all the things he said . . . is “the worst thing that could ever happen to you has already happened, you’ve lost your mother, and you have survived this journey. So the rest of your life is downhill in terms of challenges. You are strong and you will survive.” I’m thinking now, as an adult, how smart he was. Instead of cuddling and kind of holding us close to him, his job . . . was quite the opposite; it was helping us not to need that dependence. . . . [I also learned] that a father can take on the role of a mother successfully; men and women can both do important work in and out of the home.

Garcia’s childhood experiences, as well as her later success in earning her doctorate, are factors that drove her to apply for the presidency. After completing her doctorate, Garcia says, she was disillusioned as she found herself teaching the same freshman-level courses that she had been teaching before earning her doctorate. Yet, she did not want to leave her family in Brownsville — stability was important to her. Contrary to the stereotypes about Chicanas noted in the research literature (Niemann, 2002), Garcia was not passive or

docile. She had to do something, to take action, to be proactive. So when she was in her late twenties, Garcia decided to apply for the presidency of Texas Southmost College, even though she knew she would not be selected. In being proactive, she was willing to risk the shame of public failure. To minimize the impact of this on her family, especially her husband, she says she prepared him by explaining, “Now, sweetheart, I am going to apply for this job. I am not going to get it, but I just have to do this.”

Referring to her husband and the important role he played (and continues to play) in her pathway to the presidency, she says, “I married the right person . . . the person who sees you five or ten years ahead of where you are and is able to help you make it through those times of self-doubt. . . . All my degrees and experiences in higher education are as a married lady. I got married at nineteen.”

Garcia’s decision to apply for the presidency gave her visibility. After her failed attempt, she was considered for other administrative opportunities, culminating in her current presidency:

So I didn’t get [the presidency] at that time. . . . But, it caused people to think that maybe I could do something else aside from what I was doing. [I was appointed to lead] the reaffirmation of accreditation with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. It was the . . . most fertile learning that I had ever done about how colleges work. . . . The end result was that we did get reaffirmed for accreditation, and it was our study that allowed that to happen.

As the director of the self-study for reaffirmation of accreditation, Garcia learned about the operation of TSC. She also had a chance to leave her departmental setting and work with faculty and staff campuswide. This experience led to her appointment as academic dean. With the knowledge, experience, and cross-campus connections garnered over this time period, Garcia was ready to accept an invitation to apply for the presidency upon the resignation of the former president. However, this did not happen without some controversy. She notes that her gender, ethnic background, age, and education level were considered liabilities by some who questioned her candidacy:

I became president then in 1986. I served as president of Texas Southmost College for five years. . . . People were taking bets on how many months I would last because I was a woman, I was too young, I was too Mexicana. And, I was too educated, because we could count the number of PhDs on this campus at the time.

She would have to overcome these biases. As president, her success in meeting the challenges confronting the college, including budgetary and college image issues, appeared to quiet these concerns about her presidency. These initial challenges echo those encountered by Swisher and Tseng and are discussed in detail later.

After twelve years as president of TSC, Garcia had addressed the initial concerns about the survival of the college and was ready to embark on a future vision for the college:

[In 1998], we decided to create a university [partnership] because while many minorities get started in community college . . . they don't transfer to universities very well. We realized very quickly that as good as we were as a community college, we were almost dead-ending many students because of the structure of not having a university for them to attend. . . . We formed a new kind of university, one that provided for the same kind of open access for students that a community college does, but eliminates the . . . transfer issues for students between a community college and university . . . and then I was invited to become president of the [newly created partnership], and I've served in that position since then.

*President Karen Gayton Swisher*

Karen Gayton Swisher has served for seven years as president of Haskell Indian Nations University (Haskell), a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)–funded campus.<sup>11</sup> Swisher is a member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. She was born, raised, and educated through high school on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota. She earned a doctorate in educational administration from the University of North Dakota in 1981.

Haskell Indian Nations University, located in Lawrence, Kansas, was established in 1884 as the U.S. Indian Industrial Training School. What was once an institution that promoted assimilation is now an institution that takes pride in promoting the philosophy of self-determination for American Indian and Alaska Native people and nations. Supported by the BIA, Haskell is characterized by a tuition-free education, a culturally based curriculum, and a culturally rich multitribal student body of 900 students representing approximately 140 tribes and nations. In its sixth year as a baccalaureate degree–granting institution, Haskell offers bachelor's degree programs in elementary education, American Indian studies, business administration, and environmental science (K. G. Swisher, personal communication, November 2004).

– Pathway to the Presidency: Swisher

Swisher's first administrative appointments, which she enjoyed a great deal, were as a supervisory teacher and elementary school principal:

I taught [for] two years, and I had a student teacher. . . . I liked the supervisory role. . . . I was appointed the acting principal. The next summer I finished my degree and . . . I was appointed the permanent principal. I really loved administration.

After her time in the K–12 system, Swisher went on to complete her doctorate. While she obtained her doctorate later in life than the other presidents

featured here, she describes encountering opportunities for administrative experience early in her faculty career. She made use of sabbaticals and other leaves of absence to explore different types of administrative positions. By taking advantage of academe's professional development opportunities, Swisher took a proactive role in the advancement of her career. She describes a combination of timing and circumstances — coupled with qualifications, experiences, and interests — that led to opportunities for her:

As I reflect back on what helped me get to this point, I realize that it was the incremental steps. I entered higher education much later than many people, I was nearly forty. . . . I had been an elementary school teacher and principal. . . . My higher education experience started at the University of Utah with my first faculty position, and then I spent eleven years at Arizona State University before I came to Haskell.

When she was an assistant professor at the University of Utah, Swisher was the only faculty member who had experience and a degree in educational administration, so she was named to a department chair position. At Arizona State University (ASU), while on a one-year leave of absence from Utah, she was able to do administrative work and have a faculty appointment. At ASU, Swisher was the first woman to be director of the Center for Indian Education and the first woman to be an editor of the *Journal of American Indian Education*. In the spring of 1995, Haskell invited Swisher to spend six months there while she was on a leave of absence from ASU. A series of interim and probationary appointments eventually led to her being hired as president of Haskell.

Upon her arrival, Swisher assisted in the development of a teacher-education program, the first baccalaureate program for Haskell. This work led to her appointment as department chair and then to an interim dean of instruction position, which later became a permanent position. After serving in that capacity for over a year, the president left; Swisher was then appointed by the board of regents as the interim president.

During her time as interim president, Swisher relates, "I found myself being encouraged [to apply] and thinking, 'Well, maybe I can do this job.' I didn't know what it was like to be a president, and the only models I had to follow were those I knew and, of course, the person I had been directly reporting to." She was encouraged by the former president to apply for the permanent position. Those who served with her during her appointments as Haskell's chief academic officer and interim president also stepped forward and encouraged her application.

Unlike Garcia or Tseng, she was offered the position on a probationary basis. Swisher states that some regents wanted "to make sure they had made the right choice and that I could do the job." She describes the learning curve as steep, but adds that it has become easier over time. At each step, Swisher says, she gained confidence, and others became convinced of her abilities and capabilities. She remarks on how she worked her way up the traditional rungs

to achieve her present position: “Although I did not aspire to be president, I did come up through the ranks of academe as a faculty member, center director, chair, and chief academic officer. I am the fourth American Indian and the first woman to lead Haskell Indian Nations University.”

*Chancellor Rose Y. Tseng*

Rose Y. Tseng has served for eight years as chancellor of the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo (UH–Hilo), established in 1952. Tseng earned a doctorate in nutritional sciences, with minors in biochemistry and physiology, in 1968 from the University of California, Berkeley. She grew up in Taiwan, accompanied her parents to Ethiopia when they joined the World Health Organization, went to Kansas for her undergraduate degree, and then to Berkeley. She describes her decision to locate in Hawai‘i as “going west, west, west, circling around the globe.”

UH–Hilo is described as “a vibrant, multicultural campus, with a unique blend of local, mainland, and international students.” It was ranked ninth nationwide for campus diversity and fourteenth nationwide for the number of international students among four-year liberal arts colleges (R. Y. Tseng, personal communication, November 2004). Approximately 3,300 students are enrolled at UH–Hilo.

– Pathway to the Presidency: Tseng

Like Garcia and Swisher, Tseng considered family responsibilities when deciding whether or not to pursue administrative career opportunities. To support her husband’s career, Tseng decided not to pursue certain positions, and, like Garcia, she did not pursue positions outside a certain geographic region:

When I finished my PhD, I was going to go to a research institution, but my husband moved to San Jose . . . and I had a one-year-old child. . . . My professor wanted me to go to UC Davis to be assistant professor. I thought [of the] four-hour drive; that is not possible. So I went to San Jose State and San Jose City College teaching chemistry and nutrition.

Tseng experienced a series of opportunities in academic administration at San Jose State. Her first administrative appointment was as a department chair. She was encouraged by both students and senior faculty members to consider this position. She was initially reluctant to apply because of her commitment to teaching and her concern for the needs of her family. But after her selection and subsequent experience as a department chair, she came to realize that she liked working in the community and appreciated the opportunity to have an impact on an organization and promote change from an administrative position. Tseng, like Garcia and Swisher, notes that experiences with accreditation processes helped her to understand further how her campus and department functioned. Tseng describes her tasks as department chair:

I had to gain accreditation, get community involvement, I got . . . other universities working with us in chemistry and nutrition, changed the department name, and reformed the entire curriculum. This started my interest in . . . institutional change and working with the community.

Following her success as a department chair, Tseng was seen as a potential candidate for an associate dean position:

A senior dean . . . recognized me and asked, "Do you want to be an associate dean?" I said, "No. My children are too young. I can't do that." Then he says, "Well, I thought you were the kind of woman that would do things for professional reasons." So he kind of made me feel . . . embarrassed and not willing to do things.

After Tseng served as an associate dean for a few years, the dean's position came open and Tseng was tapped again. Again she was reluctant to apply because she felt that this position was more appropriate for a man who did not have childrearing responsibilities. However, her father encouraged her to apply, assuring Tseng that her family would be fine. He also pointed out that she maintained a heavy work schedule even in her current position and that her peers would not recommend her if they did not think she could be successful. Tseng felt her nomination for a deanship was a turning point in her career: "I turned in the application because I talked to my dad the night before. I [thought] if I don't try I'll never know . . . if I could do it. So, it was almost like [the] turning point [of] my life."

Tseng served for ten years as a dean of the largest college on her campus, describing herself as the first woman dean and the first minority dean. At this time, Tseng began to question whether she should continue going up the administrative ranks. She continued to consider her responsibilities to her family, but she was also concerned about her image of how a woman's role should differ from that of a man. During Tseng's rise to the presidency, family and gender remained concerns, as she reveals in the following comment:

West Valley Mission Community College was searching for a chancellor. Somebody nominated me for that job. . . . As an Asian woman, my family is very important. My mother and mother-in-law all live in San Jose, so I could not move to anywhere. My son and daughter both are growing up.

For ten years, Tseng simultaneously raised her family and successfully fulfilled the role of chancellor at West Valley Mission Community College. With her children grown, her husband nearing retirement, and her success in a presidential position, she responded affirmatively to her nomination for the chancellorship at UH-Hilo. When considering UH-Hilo, Tseng states, "I never thought about anywhere else [to work] except California and Hawai'i." During her interview at UH-Hilo, Tseng felt that the search committee valued her experience and appreciated her philosophy of life, convincing her to accept the presidency:

I went to Hilo. It is not a big university. It is a very underserved area. They wanted me, . . . the community actually convinced me. . . . I love what I do now. . . . They had a lot of challenges in the system and the university but I was able to . . . work with the community in making some changes.

Unlike Garcia and Swisher, Tseng came to UH–Hilo as an outsider to the community. She describes one of the strategies she used to mitigate her outsider status:

When I came to the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo, I hired an executive assistant who had been there for twenty-five years. . . . She became my eyes and ears, and she really supports a lot of things for me because I’m an outsider, even though I look Asian. I fit in Hawai‘i pretty well, but I am still an outsider. When you come as an outsider, you have to have an insider to give you all the true information.

Each biographical sketch presented above shows that these women took advantage of opportunities to develop their administrative skills and leadership capabilities early in their careers. Their achievements led to further opportunities. They mention mentors and champions that they met along the way: those who noted their previous accomplishments, saw a spark in them, recognized their talents, encouraged them, appointed them, nominated them, and pushed them to the next step.

In addition, these women college presidents took actions that gave them visibility. They learned to step out of their comfort zone into new jobs that carried expanded responsibilities. Garcia applied for a presidency and was not selected, but her potential and desire for upward mobility were made visible, and she set in motion events that would eventually lead to her current presidency. Swisher took advantage of interim appointments in which she demonstrated her abilities to address critical tasks; this eventually resulted in her being appointed to the presidency. Tseng applied for increasingly higher positions, and her success in these positions led her to be chosen for two chancellorships.

### Emerging Themes: Forging the Pathway

From the narrative data collected for these biographical sketches, several other themes emerge that cut across the experience of these women presidents. Their narratives provide insights on the importance of early educational and career success; the important role of interpersonal connections; their style of leadership, which built community out of difference; their responses to initial challenges in their role as president; their courage as they anticipate the future and do the unprecedented; what it means to be a first; and the role a positive individual and institutional match plays in their work lives.

#### *The Power of Storytelling: Importance of Early Success and Inspiration*

Embedded in each president’s narrative are family stories similar to those described by Gándara (1995) as being important to the educational mobility of

Chicanas/os. Such stories are said to engender a sense of hopefulness, self-worth, and competence from one generation to another. Each woman told stories about her early educational successes and accomplishments, whether speaking about a childhood experience or early experiences in her career. Each president also spoke about the strong female educators who served as important early role models by providing confidence and inspiration.

Garcia was a successful student whose parents fought to have her transferred to the English-speaking second-grade class. She recalls the mentorship of a second-grade teacher who believed in her capabilities and took her to concerts and theatre performances: “She gave [me a] tremendous amount of confidence to succeed. . . . She taught me about what one teacher can do . . . to impact the life of a child.”

As a youth, Swisher expressed admiration for the first American Indian woman to hold the position of agency superintendent within the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Regarding this superintendent and other inspirational mentors, Swisher says:

I always admired her because that was certainly a man’s world. And it was even more a White man’s world. . . . There were several women in my community who were educational leaders who I looked up to and respected. And there were some very effective men, many who were mentors.

Like Garcia, Tseng recalls the role an educator played in her life and the implications for her self-confidence:

I went to a girl’s high school in Taiwan. . . . My principal was a woman who devoted her whole life to education. . . . I never really feel I cannot do math, science, anything. . . . Don’t ever let anybody say you cannot do anything. Sometimes things take a little time. . . . English is my second language, so for the big speech . . . I’ll have to take a little bit more time. That could be my disadvantage. But in other things . . . I’m a wiz in numbers.

Tseng also expresses faith in the ability of individuals to do anything. She underscores the need to have patience with our limitations and to give ourselves time when needed, while also acknowledging our skills. Our particular skills may come easily to us. This is where we make up for the time spent on strengthening weaknesses.

#### *Important Role of Interpersonal Connections: Support along the Pathway*

Garcia, Swisher, and Tseng describe several relationships that were critical to their perseverance along the path to the presidency. These include relationships with their family, with women of color peers, and with other professionals on their campuses.

Family ties are important to these professionals and help them maintain energy and balanced lives as they address the challenges of their leadership roles. They are all married, have children, and made career decisions while



considering the needs of their families. For example, Garcia and Swisher spoke about the importance of their children and grandchildren in their lives. Garcia says, “I have grandchildren. . . . My children have chosen to live here. . . . Having my family and babies around is so — it’s reenergizing, it’s respiriting. That makes life.” When asked about people in her life that she wanted to emulate, Swisher talks about her mother: “She was a strong person, and she was not only a teacher for many . . . years, but she was also a county superintendent of schools.”

In the biographical sketches presented above, Tseng’s father’s influence is similar to the influence Garcia’s father and husband and Swisher’s colleagues and friends had during turning points in their careers. It appears that at these turning points, each woman was fortunate to have cultivated deep, personal, reciprocal relationships with family members and friends who provided needed advice and support. In the higher education literature (Niemann, 2002), validation is described as an important factor for success. In each instance, these women’s supportive family members validated their potential to succeed and helped them overcome self-doubt. Each of these stories also provides examples of how institutional structural opportunities furthered each president’s career advancement. According to Cuadraz (2006), “We know that without structural opportunities moments of validation are stripped of their transformative force and left to dwell in the realm of memory” (p. 104). In the lives of these women, the coupling of individual validation with institutional opportunity has been critical to their growth and development, professionally and personally.

In addition to speaking about the importance of family, each president underscored the importance of maintaining close relationships with other women of color. With their peers they feel free to seek advice and to discuss issues concerning their lives as presidents. Swisher says, “One of the experiences that I’ve really enjoyed is being with other women presidents of color. [Sharing experiences has] been very valuable.” As noted in the literature, such networks are critical to the retention and development of women of color in senior-level positions (Turner & Kappes, in press). Garcia talks about *confianza* — a familiarity, a rapport — particularly among women of color. She says, “We can drop a comment about our children or grandchildren into the proceedings at a business meeting of women and no one will think less of us.” In fact, she maintains that such comments can build instant rapport, breaking down cumbersome layers that often keep women from learning from one another:

[It is a special experience] to be with women, because many of us grew up in this world, as old as I am, where there were no other women in the field. I remember . . . someone saying, “I’ll meet you there.” I said, “Well, how will you know who I am?” He looked at me, like, “How many women presidents are there?” Well, that’s right, and so you stuck out all the time. It is so wonderful to be in a room with women and understanding how significant that evolution has become.

Each president also underscored the importance of developing and sustaining respectful relationships with their campus staff, faculty, students, and members of their trustee boards. Team-building and having smart, encouraging, honest people around you are critical to success. Garcia remarks, “The first lesson [I learned] was that you can do absolutely nothing of significance by yourself. . . . What I learned right away was that I needed a whole lot of people moving in the same direction if we were going to accomplish anything important.” Tseng talks about the importance of support from her trustee board: “I’m pretty happy with what I’m doing, and the board just gave me a pretty good recognition of that, and they want me to stay.” Tseng’s work to benefit the university and the surrounding community are reenergizing for her.

*Use of Nontraditional Leadership Style to Bring Diverse Communities Together*

The important role of interpersonal relationships in each of these leader’s personal lives and along the pathway to the presidency has manifested in two ways. The first way is in their leadership styles as presidents, and the second is in their efforts to build community through partnerships. The leadership styles described by these presidents are not considered the dominant or traditional practice. Findings of a recent study by Allan, Gordon, and Iverson (2006) indicate that the image of the autonomous, solo leader continues to persist in U.S. higher education. The same authors discuss

an alternative to the dominant discourse of autonomy. The leader in this discourse is constructed as the *facilitator* helping others move toward collective action. . . . This requires a great amount of interpersonal skill and a temperament that is willing to work with others. (p. 55, emphasis added)

This alternative image connects with the way Garcia, Swisher, and Tseng describe their leadership styles. Words and phrases such as “participatory,” “team-builder,” “being sensitive,” “facilitator,” and “matchmaker” are mentioned when these leaders describe their leadership styles. They acknowledge that what they have accomplished was due, in large part, to people who play supporting roles. They said that different styles work in different circumstances and with different people. Being flexible, approachable, and looking for common ground is just as important as being a visible presence on campus and in the community. They also spoke about needing people around them who can provide an insider’s perspective and can shore up their weaknesses — people who are encouraging, truthful, and smart.

These women value working with people. Each describes a way of tapping into the potential of people around them and seeking solutions on a collective basis. Getting people to move in the same direction is critical to accomplishing goals. Their leadership styles have proven to be both effective and workable, and act as testimonies to their abilities to move diverse communities toward common objectives.

Garcia describes her leadership style as “eclectic,” saying she “use[s] whatever it takes to get something done. Surround yourself with smart people who give you courage. [It is] one thing to give you [the benefit of their] brains, but it’s quite another for people to give you courage.” In her narrative, Swisher echoes Garcia’s point and credits her own positive work relationships with playing a part in her eventual decision to apply for the presidency. Swisher also notes how important professional relationships were during her first six months on the job, especially in light of early challenges. She explains:

I didn’t address them by myself. . . . I have wonderful people to work with, both the administrators and faculty. . . . There was a lot of support of one another, a lot of strategy sessions, . . . but I felt that if I could weather all of them — that gave me courage to go on.

Swisher describes her preferred leadership style as “participatory,” stating, “I wanted more involvement from key components of the university, and so I expanded . . . the administrative council.” She also acknowledges the importance of “seeking out people that are going to give you the truth, that are going to let you know what they really do think.” Having described her leadership style as participatory, Swisher also notes that

involving others in decisionmaking could be perceived as weak. . . . It’s a double-edge sword, but I want to have the involvement of others. It’s important. . . . Women tend to be more participatory, but still recognizing where the buck stops. . . . There are times when a decision needs to be made and made very firmly in directive ways.

Krumm’s (1997) research on American Indian women tribal college presidents echoes the sentiment that while a supportive leadership style is preferred, a directive style is required in some situations.

Tseng describes herself as a facilitator:

I don’t think of myself as some kind of style of leader. . . . If anything, I’m probably a facilitator type . . . a matchmaker type. I also like partnerships. I really think that people have different strengths, organizations have different strengths, but if they can identify a common big goal . . . then you can get people to work together.

Tseng’s description of herself as a facilitator and her ability to provide guidance to others as they move collectively toward a common goal reflect the findings of Allan et al. (2006). The following paragraphs describe Tseng’s efforts to resolve a particularly interesting clash of cultures at UH–Hilo.

Although the existence of diverse populations on campus is an asset, according to Tseng, conflicts and challenges also arise from these differences. One conflict arose concerning the use of Mauna Kea, the tallest mountain in Hawai‘i. The mountain is sacred to Native Hawaiians, but astronomers see it as an ideal place to build observatories. Before Tseng arrived on campus, sev-

eral observatories were already in operation on the mountain. Tseng supported the development of a Mauna Kea Astronomy Education Center as long as discoveries from the observatories could be showcased with a respect for Polynesian traditions.

Tseng detailed her need to bring diverse communities together to resolve this challenge:

I have to deal with how to resolve [this conflict] and at least work together, because we don't want to destroy [Mauna Kea]. . . . We want the future generations of all Hawaiians to be able to learn the best science they can, and also to contribute to the world in discovering the universe.

In working to resolve this conflict, Tseng appointed a management board to address the day-to-day operational issues concerning visits to the mountain, maintenance of the grounds, and other details. She also appointed an advisory board, several of whom had expertise on Hawaiian culture, to think about the conceptual concerns involved in the development of Mauna Kea. Tseng worked with her advisors, Hawaiian faculty, and other community members to understand the inherent cultural and scientific underpinnings that could guide the creation of a Mauna Kea Astronomy Education Center. They did so in a way that would address the concerns of both communities. For example, Tseng notes that there “are 200 stars with Hawaiian names . . . but nobody even remembers that anymore because [Hawaiians] have not been allowed to use their language for years. . . . And now they are rediscovering that.” It is important to Tseng that the center be a place where the leading scientific discoveries from the observatories can be situated within the framework of the Polynesian traditions of navigation and exploration.

The NASA-funded astronomy education center was completed in 2005. It has been renamed *ʻImiloa*. This center showcases the connections between the rich traditions of Native Hawaiian culture and the groundbreaking astronomical research conducted at the summit of Mauna Kea. It was developed by a team of educators, scientists, and community leaders who understood the need for a comprehensive educational facility. In this case, Tseng's facilitative leadership style is a potent example of the use of nontraditional methods to bring diverse communities together. This resolution was not a quick fix promoted by an individual working alone, but a collective action that required a lot of time and patience in order to learn about the multiple perspectives surrounding this issue before arriving at a solution.

### *The Presidency: Responding to Initial Challenges*

Garcia, Swisher, and Tseng spoke of their first tasks after accepting the presidency as being operational, because all three faced concerns about their selection as president, as well as campus crises. The three women's responses to their initial challenges as president are important to document because they are grounded in the day-to-day details of progressing along the pathway.

Each woman described experiencing gender bias, racial and ethnic stereotyping, and accent discrimination during the presidential selection process. Their experiences mirror what the literature identifies as barriers to the advancement of women of color (Canul, 2003; Farris, 1999; Hansen, 1997; Ideta & Cooper, 1999; King, 1999; McDemmond, 1999). Garcia and Tseng reported that they were asked inappropriate and sexist questions during their interviews. Swisher noted that her soft voice was criticized as not being presidential and wondered if the same criticism would be directed at a man. Garcia also mentioned that some criticized her laugh as being unpresidential. Tseng indicated that her accent was also viewed as a detriment for a university president.

As noted above, they worked in an environment where their capabilities were questioned. Kanter (1977) states that “the numerical distribution of men and women in the upper reaches of the corporation provide different interaction contexts for those in the majority versus those in the minority” (p. 206). For example, women who are a minority in the upper reaches of an institution inhabit a context characterized by being more visible and on display, feeling the pressure to make fewer mistakes, finding it harder to gain credibility, and being stereotyped. Although primarily addressing gender, Kanter’s description can also be applied to racial and ethnic distinctions. Initial successes were particularly crucial to the perseverance shown by Garcia, Swisher, and Tseng because of their status as “firsts.”

Garcia pointed out that some of her initial duties included ensuring that paychecks got out on time and that all campus reports required by the state were accurate and met deadlines. She wanted to boost the school’s stature and image in order to better serve the students, particularly those who might want to transfer to other higher education institutions. Garcia comments on the budget crises she had to address as soon as she was hired:

My first job was to cut the budget, and that’s not what you want to do as a new president. . . . All the congratulatory flowers had come in and I’m sitting there worried about a deficit budget. Now, there was no . . . honeymoon. By the third day, the flowers were getting a little smelly. And I’m thinking, this is a funeral, this is not a celebration. Get the flowers out of here and bring in people that can help me figure this out, because I don’t care how many hours I stayed by myself, it wasn’t a problem that I could figure out by myself.

After stabilizing the general operation of the campus, Garcia turned her attention to the creation of the partnership university.

Swisher’s ability to address the issues that came up during her interim presidency convinced her that she could lead Haskell:

There were several things that occurred during that fall semester that were challenging. . . . First, three of our students were killed in a car accident. . . . That was so traumatic, and I had to move us through that healing process. The second thing . . . was that we had a foundation that served as the fundraising arm of the university. It also managed all of the grants and projects that we had . . .

[and] there were problems with mismanagement and misappropriations. . . . Then a local issue emerged. . . . The state want[ed] to build a roadway through the wetlands . . . at the southern boundary of our campus. . . . There was a successful attempt to stop it.

Like Garcia and Swisher, Tseng describes her need to stabilize her campus before she could begin to address other goals. She explains:

When I came to UH–Hilo they had no vice chancellor [and] they had only one permanent dean, who was retiring. . . . I had to [fill] every position. It’s a challenge in Hawai’i because we’re civil service oriented, so to reestablish a job, you have to go through classification. And because we’re a small university they classify us very low in terms of salary. . . . Now I have a permanent vice chancellor, permanent deans, pretty much all the positions [filled].

Initial failure could have affected the future of these institutions, as well as validated the opinions of those who originally doubted Garcia’s, Swisher’s, and Tseng’s ability to lead. However, the women were able to address each challenge, stabilize their campuses, and lay the foundation for the future growth of their institutions. They gained recognition both on and off campus for their long-term vision, which each developed over the course of their presidency.

*Anticipating the Future and Doing the Unprecedented: Uniqueness of Vision*

These three women presidents are known for doing the unprecedented; the accomplishments documented in this article are only some of their achievements. Each has developed a unique vision for her work, which has apparently led to their national and international recognition. In creating these visions, each has underscored the importance of adhering to a set of institutional core values, which include the importance of treating people with respect, seeking consensus, being polite, and being humble. These are values also noted in the literature about women of color in higher education leadership positions (Hune, 1998; Nieves-Squires, 1991; Swisher & Benally, 1998).

Garcia says that she asks her staff at each annual retreat, “What are the core values . . . important to create a good place [to work]?” Creating a welcoming and safe environment that bridges two cultures is important to Garcia. She adds that access to programs leading to educational and career advancement is of vital importance to her. She is committed to meeting the needs of those who never thought about going to college and who might be turned away by other educational institutions. She says that “our community is in great need of industrial technology training” and supports the creation of such programs, and of others that lead to further educational opportunities. She then remarked on other factors important to creating a good working environment:

Another core value . . . [is] openness with information . . . [and] a place where you treat people with dignity . . . respect and grace. . . . It means when some-

one is not good in their job anymore, not simply sending them off to Siberia. It means maybe there's another place at the college, or now it's a university, where that person's skills can be used.

Speaking about Haskell's core values, Swisher describes the importance of holistic education and the recognition of a greater being:

One of the things that we say at Haskell is . . . that we pay attention to the intellectual, the physical, the emotional, the spiritual, and the cultural aspects of our students. . . . We're always mindful of giving thanks and remembering that we're here because of a greater being. . . . There is truly an understanding that there is a spiritual being that guides us all, and to whom we can look for guidance. . . . You see that manifested in different ways, and through different customs and behaviors because we have students from many different tribes. . . . The customs and ways of behaving spiritually are different across cultures.

After addressing the initial pressing campus needs, Tseng began to develop a long-term vision. Valuing inclusion and consensus-building, she asked various campus and off-campus communities to help her reassess and redefine the university's goals. After conversations with faculty, staff, and community representatives, she created a survey that asked stakeholders to respond to such questions as, What do you want University of Hawai'i Hilo to be for you? She used their responses to identify goals to guide the first five years of her presidency, which included the campus image, enrollment issues, and addressing resources through industry and fundraising. Tseng states, "That's a to-do list for me. . . . I didn't have a specific vision except to make the university a better place — for the people, for the community, and for the state."

A critical component driving the visions of these presidents is the high priority placed on community service and development. Committed to serving their communities, Garcia, Swisher, and Tseng work tirelessly to understand the needs of their students and of the larger community. Their efforts to address these needs are exemplified in their accomplishments. Tseng attributes her commitment to community service to the values taught by her parents' example:

My parents both grew up in mainland China. . . . They both are trained doctors, but they didn't have anything when they went to Taiwan: I saw them struggle. I saw them taking on volunteer jobs. . . . My mother did a clinic in our own home. When we were growing up, we had to help her as [nurses' aides] . . . so I saw the way she treats people. . . . Then they went to Ethiopia and joined the World Health Organization. . . . Somebody once asked me, "Why are you majoring in nutrition?" And I said, "I want to solve world hunger!" So, since I was twenty that was my idea.

Tseng is credited with securing unprecedented state and external resources for UH–Hilo. She generated funding to capitalize on and leverage existing natural resources. She describes progress as a never-ending process:

In the last five years I see a lot of momentum. . . . I think we could be a very major university that can be the link of the Pacific. . . . We have a China-U.S. center building coming up. . . . It will never end, the improvement can never end.

In order to obtain financial resources for the campus, Tseng met with representatives of foundations. Her prior success in fundraising as a community college chancellor proved invaluable in her pursuit of grants to support UH-Hilo. For example, during a visit to the National Science Foundation (NSF), she asked:

“Don’t you have any grants for a growing university . . . in an underserved area?” . . . [The NSF representative said], “Well, it sounds like you should be thinking about grants like EPSCoR (Experimental Programs to Stimulate Competitive Research).” . . . Hawai‘i had never applied. . . . After a couple of years with a planning grant, we received an EPSCoR State grant. . . . So far [the entire state has] received more than \$10 million.

Swisher says that she entered higher education as a professor trying to make a difference. She wanted to make changes, especially in the way Native students were being taught and Native teachers were being prepared. She says, “So I thought I could make a difference. . . . One of my goals was to be a contributor to Indian education in a significant way.” She spoke of the importance of looking for ways to “lessen the problems for the sake of the future.” Swisher began moving Haskell from a community college model, creating baccalaureate degree programs where none had existed. Swisher is recognized for providing essential guidance in moving Haskell to university status as she continues to nurture several of the baccalaureate programs she helped to establish. Swisher says:

Just the establishment of the elementary education baccalaureate program was quite an accomplishment. . . . But it also paved the way for the other baccalaureates. . . . It was accredited . . . and . . . we were authorized to offer . . . programs . . . in American Indian studies, business administration, and environmental science.

The region served by Garcia’s institution does not have many higher education options. Because of the varied needs of the surrounding community, Garcia recognized the students’ need for a seamless postsecondary option. Prompted by the low transfer rates of community college students to four-year colleges, particularly minority students, Garcia guided the creation of a university-community college partnership. This partnership provided an educational path for Texas Southmost College graduates. In her view, having both options available in one institution was best. Garcia describes her efforts to create a university-community college partnership:

We created a new university; that wasn’t easy to do. . . . We had to find a partner. . . . We were a community college, and why would anyone . . . adopt [us] to



be a partner with, especially when you're a UT system? . . . We had to convince [UT] that they should create this new creature and support it.

To achieve this partnership, Garcia had to convince the Texas higher education coordinating board and the Association of Colleges and Universities accrediting board of its viability.

In order to continue to meet the growing needs of students, UTB/TSC purchased a shopping mall to house an industrial technology training center and a small-business incubator. Garcia hired a "star" physicist who obtained external funding and attracted other physicists to the campus, en route to creating a nationally renowned physics department. "We now have twelve physicists. . . . Our students are involved in research, along with students from Cal State, MIT, and Harvard, in gravitational weight analysis. I had to learn what that was so that I could market it for them."

Striving to achieve their visions, each president spoke about surviving through trials and never thinking about giving up. They all spoke about the need to trust themselves. Because they had unique ideas, they often had to go with their instincts, trusting themselves to be the capable leaders they knew they could be, but also taking risks because they were forging the very pathway they were on.

*On Being Firsts: "It Sort of Happened"*

On being a "first," Swisher says:

I would like you to know that I did not aspire to be president. It sort of happened. My aspirations had been to be a good teacher and a good faculty person. I did not aspire to be in any higher administrative position than a dean. . . . [Being a first] was not as important to me as was seeing to what needed to be done, and trying to move.

When asked about their unique positions in higher education as "firsts," Garcia and Tseng state sentiments similar to Swisher's. They did not plan to be presidents, let alone firsts. They all began their academic careers committed to their roles as faculty members. Tseng "wanted to be a teacher," never thinking she would be an administrator.

Garcia adds:

Well, it's all so coincidental, because no one planned . . . you never know that you're going to be what you end up being. . . . We simply were trying to decide what next steps to take to get ourselves a good little college. . . . My reaction [to being a first] is that it's interesting. I happened to be chosen at a time when it [was my] place in time. You know, who chooses it? There is a sense of responsibility that comes with it, and [you] just hope you do it right.

Garcia's understanding of the responsibility that comes with her unique role of being a first is demonstrated by her mentorship of others. In fact, all

of these presidents have a commitment to mentoring others just as they were mentored. In their positions, although they had no specific plan to do so, they have appointed other firsts.

As a dean, Tseng appointed the first minority associate dean. Under Garcia, UTB/TSC appointed the first Hispanic in the nation to head a medical school. She says, “We did not know it when we were doing it. . . . I think that just happens to people. . . . I think it’s the same case with me; none of us know it [in advance].” In her administration, Garcia also talks about having the only female vice president for business affairs in the University of Texas system and enlarging the pool of individuals with administrative skills:

My job is to make sure that I’m [building her strengths but also] building strength underneath her . . . making sure she’s mentoring someone, or she’s sending someone off for leadership training . . . or to shadow somebody else. . . . You absolutely have to be more active in putting women into positions, and often, myself included, you’re caught up in getting the job done, not in mentoring someone along the way. . . . We all need to slow down a little bit and say, “Part of getting the job done is building depth in administration.” I would recommend that every one of us take as part of our job helping someone else along the way.

Garcia describes her satisfaction when she sees the impact of her efforts on students:

The best experience [as president] is the kind of quiet moments when you see what happens to people. . . . One young lady came from Matamoros, [Mexico], couldn’t speak any English, and went through our program for intensive English. . . . She [ended] up with a bachelor’s degree in physics, went off and got a master’s degree — this is all in between having children with her family — and is now working on her doctorate.

Swisher reports a similar satisfaction: “One of the things I enjoy most is seeing students . . . achieve even when they don’t think they can, especially . . . Native students who have had a very difficult time in the K–12 systems from which they came.” Swisher developed the first baccalaureate program in education at Haskell, and she describes getting to know the first seven students admitted. She fondly refers to them as “the Magnificent 7, the first baccalaureate graduates at Haskell.” She remains in touch with several of them.

Tseng describes her source of satisfaction in terms of the values and passion that drive her presidency:

I don’t think you prepare for [a presidency]. . . . It is a passion, and you love the place. You love the people. You love the students. You feel you can accomplish something, you feel you can be the role model for others coming your way, and you can influence the right value . . . which is helping [the] community, helping poorer people, helping diverse populations make the world a better place and more equal for the disadvantaged.

These narratives show that while it may have “just sort of happened” for them, Tseng, Swisher, and Garcia are working to provide structural opportunities that support others in an intentional way. Studies documenting the hiring of faculty of color in higher education underscore the importance of mentoring and championing in order to increase their numbers in the professoriate (Smith, Turner, Osei-Kofi, & Richards, 2004; Turner & Myers, 2000). These studies find that little progress will be made unless efforts to employ active and intentional intervention strategies are made.

Intention is similarly important in the development of the pool of potential administrators who are women of color. Effective mentorship was noted by women of color participants in a study of factors contributing to their progress toward careers in academic administration (Turner & Kappes, in press). McDemmond (1999) notes that in order to overcome the multiple challenges women of color experience as they attempt to move up in academe, “We [senior administrators who are of color] . . . must take it upon ourselves to help each other achieve and to increase our numbers” (p. 80). Garcia, Swisher, and Tseng benefited from structural opportunities to develop their capabilities, including placement in interim appointments, placement in leadership roles on highly visible and influential committees, and in being nominated for increasingly high-level positions. Yet they realized that in order to make an impact, they must be proactive in developing talented individuals — and specifically women of color — at all levels of the organization.

#### *Leading from Unique Places: Individual and Institutional Match*

It is interesting to note that the campuses hiring these presidents include a Hispanic-serving institution located in a binational region, a BIA-funded college primarily serving American Indian and Alaska Native people, and a university described as a multicultural campus. This is not to say that these women of color could not lead in other contexts. In fact, both Swisher and Tseng have held leadership positions on other campuses and Garcia describes being courted for presidential positions elsewhere.

However, opportunities for these women of color to be firsts may occur more often in institutions that reflect their own cultural backgrounds. In other words, these women may be drawn to settings where they can minimize the cultural duality or dissonance as described in much of the literature on women of color in leadership positions (Aleman, 1995; Cross & Shortman, 1995; Hansen, 1997; Hune, 1998; Warner, 1995). However, it may be necessary for firsts in any context to minimize dissonance and maximize congruence. Garcia touches on this dilemma:

I have to tell you that I thought at first that I had to become like someone else. I had to look like, or act like, or talk like the models that were here before us. And if I could just dress like, look like, talk like them, whoever they were, then I had a chance for that type of position.

As noted earlier, Hansen (1997) describes two strategies used by Latina administrators to function in two cultural environments. The first strategy is dualism, where the individual lives in a divided world in which one's cultural background is viewed as distinct from (and even in conflict with) institutional values. Garcia's description of how she initially began her pathway to the presidency reflects this concept of dualism because she thought she had to emulate others who had preceded her in order to become president. She felt as though she had to become like someone else.

Aleman (1995) asks the question, "So how can I be both a Latina and a professor?" (p. 74). This question, relative to being both a woman of color and a college president, was addressed by Garcia, Tseng, and Swisher. Reflected in their actions as president, they all choose to be who they are as women of color and work toward the social transformation of their institutions and higher education in general. This response would be described by Hansen as negotiation, which differs from dualism in that negotiation is a strategic approach to functioning in varied environments. All three presidents appear to feel that there is something to be gained in being true to oneself. As Garcia asserts, "We need to take great strength from what we naturally are."

Ladson-Billings (1997) describes the academy as being shaped by many social forces, including women of color, who can define and redefine their roles within it. In her view, the academy need not be in conflict with the community and cultural work embraced by Garcia, Swisher, and Tseng. In fact, the work they do to lead the implementation of institutional change may result in a more congruent work environment for other women of color presidents now and in the future (Turner, 2002), by challenging old assumptions and creating new traditions of academic leadership.

Thus, context is important for these presidents. Garcia, for example, states that "the context of where we do our work influences how we do our work. . . . Leadership doesn't depend on where you are leading from, but what leadership you are doing from where you are." For example, these women participate in professional activities, through which they can influence educational issues locally, nationally, and internationally. Garcia describes working in South Africa to assist in integrating their universities and, in addition to many other commitments, she serves on the board of the Ford Foundation. Swisher is also involved with many organizations, especially those dealing with Native issues, and she continues to write scholarly publications related to Indian education (Swisher, 1995, 1996, 2001; Swisher & Benally, 1998; Swisher & Deyhle, 1989; Swisher & Schoorman, 2000; Swisher & Tippeconnic, 1999). Tseng is active on several community boards, including the United Way and Asian Americans for Community Involvement. She serves on the President's Council for Division II of the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

Each woman describes her history with her institution, creating a picture of a comfortable individual and institutional match. Their campuses needed a lot of attention upon their arrival; all three schools work to meet the needs

of underserved populations. Nonetheless, each president speaks about these factors not as limitations but as opportunities to make a difference within these communities. Each president also describes the personal and cultural ties they have to their respective campus communities. Garcia, Swisher, and Tseng all underscore the importance of maintaining close communication with their surrounding communities so that they can understand the needs of students in context, and take actions to meet those needs.

Swisher was familiar with Haskell before accepting the presidency. She had support and knew what she could do to assist in its continuing development as a university designed to meet the needs in “Indian Country.” One of her primary goals is to contribute to Indian education. She comments, “I’ve almost come full circle.” Her professional career began at a BIA-funded K–12 school, and now she is teaching at a BIA-funded university. As a Standing Rock Sioux, Swisher is also a member of one of the many tribes served by her institution.

Tseng also sees opportunities and a match when she looks at UH–Hilo. She describes UH–Hilo as a “jade not polished.” UH–Hilo represents a unique institution that serves the Native Hawaiian population and acts as a bridge between the East and the West. She also notes her personal attraction to this place as an Asian American. She calls herself bicultural, combining Eastern and Western values. As a scientist, she notes the many natural resources on the island (e.g., Mauna Kea) that can contribute to scientific research endeavors. Tseng also identifies with Hawai‘i as an islander herself, since she lived in Taiwan.

Garcia comments that cultural connection is influential in her presidency:

People look at us and they think, *pobrecitos* [literally “poor little ones,” used as a term of endearment and sympathy] . . . on the border, and it’s a poor area. . . . We think, how wonderful to be in a place where two hemispheres connect. . . . We say we are surrounded by insurmountable opportunities. . . . We are very proud to know Spanish, speak Spanish, and salute both flags because we had dual citizenship until we were eighteen.

Garcia underscores the importance of the individual and institutional match between her and UTB/TSC. Part of her comfort comes from growing up and living most of her life in Brownsville, Texas, where the campus is located. She says:

I think there’s just a good match every once in a while, and some of the energy that you need for a job comes from being at the right place, and doing what your soul tells you you’re supposed to be doing. So, I don’t know that I would be good at some of these other places [trying to hire her]. They might want me because I’m Hispanic and female. . . . I might be good for them in that regard, but I don’t know if I would be good for the school that they’re inviting me to go to, or for myself. . . . It’s a very personal decision.

Providing educational programs that serve the needs of a largely Hispanic community is what Garcia’s soul tells her she is supposed to be doing.

## Conclusion

Women of color must forge their pathways to the college presidency. Based on the extant literature and the demographic data, the pathway to the presidency is occupied by few women of color, and those who make this journey are confronted with roadblocks that must be overcome in order to achieve success. In addition to gender, racial, and ethnic stereotyping, for Mexican American, American Indian, and Asian Pacific/Asian American women, cultural differences present great challenges, particularly in the workplace. Most of this literature explicates a situation of cultural value conflicts between each of these groups and the mainstream. Language discrimination is mentioned in the literature for Mexican American and Asian Pacific/Asian American women. The literature also presents factors that help these women address and overcome these challenges. In addition to the strength of character and creative problem-solving skills, the literature cites the importance of mentorship, social networks, and validation of their contributions, coupled with structural opportunities to demonstrate their skills and talents, as critical ingredients for their success.

The women featured in this article speak to all of these points as part of their journeys toward the college presidency and about the critical factors related to their perseverance. Their unique experiences contribute to the literature on women of color in higher education leadership. However, their narratives also help us understand many aspects of the pathway to the presidency, including what it means to be a first; their courage as they anticipate the future and do the unprecedented; their style of leadership in building community out of difference; the importance of early educational and career success; the important role of interpersonal connections; and the role a positive individual and institutional match plays in their work lives.

Findings presented here revolve around some basic factors that result in successful presidencies. The importance of goal-setting is portrayed by the three presidents. They report, however, that although they are pushing toward institutional goals, they are also guided by their vision and values, including supporting communities and maintaining their cultural and gendered identities. As they describe their appreciation for their unique campus sites, they are also sharing information on how their own identities meld or match with that of their campus and the populations it serves. They spoke about the importance of interacting with as well as reading about the lives of other women of color. Garcia, in particular, speaks about her commitment to mentor women of color in academe.

These presidents also pay attention to the development of and adherence to their campus mission statements, particularly with regard to providing educational opportunities for those served by their campuses. The importance of helping others and meeting the educational needs of the campus and surrounding communities drives much of their work. In addition, Tseng and Swisher spoke about the importance of the work they are doing to revitalize

indigenous cultures. These presidents arrived at their visions for their campuses in different ways. This provides an understanding that many styles of problem-solving and decisionmaking can lead to success for individuals in campus administrative positions. For example, Swisher and Garcia saw the importance of creating structural opportunities for their students to attain baccalaureate degrees. Attainment of four-year university degrees opens up opportunities to pursue graduate and professional education. To accomplish this goal, Garcia created a new partnership institution, whereas Swisher developed baccalaureate programs within Haskell's existing structure. Academe can learn from their initiatives to address the educational needs of underserved populations. Study findings also point to skills (or lack thereof) possessed by the three presidents, implying that there is room for individuals with varying skill sets in campus administration.

In the process of examining pathways to the presidency for individuals in this study, other questions emerged that may need to be examined. For example, this article focuses on successes rather than failures. Further studies might explore strategies that the women tried that did not work, and what was learned from those experiences. It also focuses primarily on professional experiences. Further research could include gathering more information on the women's personal lives and providing greater insight into the connection between the personal and professional realms of their lives. Other questions emerging from this study are, What is the pathway for the organizations in this study as they select a woman of color "first"? How does an institution arrive at a readiness to do the unprecedented? As women of color are selected to lead predominantly White institutions (PWI), what influenced these institutions to select them? How would women of color speak about their individual and institutional "match" with a PWI, and how would their description compare with those in this article? For that matter, interviews with women of color presidents more recently appointed as presidents of PWIs may provide insight into elements facilitating the pursuit of their careers, and also may provide insight into the progress the field of higher education has made to arrive at these selections.

Results of this study document a myriad of factors leading to the three women presidents' achievements. A confluence of factors culminated in their success. Certainly, individual mentoring and the validation of their potential allowed them to persevere along their pathways. However, their stories also reveal that institutional opportunities need to exist throughout our education system to ensure the development of talents not only of these women of color, but of all women of color. Academe, in particular, must be more focused on providing leadership opportunities for these women. If women of color who have the requisite academic rank and prior leadership experiences do not exist, then they are unavailable to the pool of potential presidents and chancellors. The contributing factors for success identified here point to the critical importance of academe in preparing the next generation of

women of color for leadership in higher education. Respondent statements and literature cited in this article point to the important role higher education institutions play in the education, hiring, and development of women of color. For example, women of color need the support of their home institutions as they progress toward full professorships and senior-level academic administration.

Walton and McDade (2001) describe women who are the first of their gender in particular roles in their institutions as “boundary breakers within the internal organization of colleges and universities” (p. 86). In the introduction to their book about Native North American firsts, Swisher and Benally (1998) state the following reason for doing work that recognizes “firsts” and their accomplishments, even though humility is a strict value in many indigenous cultures: “Living in two worlds is a metaphor accepted by Indians and non-Indians alike, so to be recognized as a first is part of living in one of two worlds in which accomplishments are measured by such efforts” (p. xiii).

“Firsts” pave the way for others to follow. They have no like models to emulate or like peers to mentor them. They explore new vistas and create new horizons. The stories of these firsts portray their pathways to the presidency, as well as their important contributions to higher education. Women who are the first of their gender and their race and ethnicity in presidential roles are torchbearers imparting knowledge and inspiration to others.

Besides gaining more administrative experience, what advice do Tseng, Swisher, and Garcia provide for those, particularly women of color, who are reading their stories and who will likely experience being a first in some aspect of their career development? Tseng says, “Probably my only word of advice is trust your instincts . . . and go for it, and don’t let anybody think you are not as good [as others].” Garcia says, “The greatest strength comes from being centered and knowing exactly who you are . . . being comfortable with who you are, and then expressing that along the way.” Garcia and Swisher note, however, that being oneself gets easier the longer you are in a top-level position. Swisher says:

You have to have the courage to fail . . . you have to believe in yourself. . . . It really is the golden rule, you know, to treat others as you want to be treated, and always be mindful of how what you do is perceived.

They would also agree, I believe, that whatever one decides to do, one should find great satisfaction with one’s work. Recall Garcia’s words:

I think there’s just a good match every once in a while, and some of the energy that you need for a job comes from being at the right place, and doing what your soul tells you you’re supposed to be doing.

Tseng and Swisher reiterate this sentiment, saying that wherever one is, one must “feel you can accomplish something . . . feel you can make a difference.”



Women of color continue to move into positions that no one of their race, ethnicity, and/or gender have held before. Nevertheless, these women continue to make history as firsts because they still live in a context where they are in the minority (Lively, 2000). The women featured here are also part of a larger generation of women of color moving into higher education leadership. For example, although Ruth Simmons is not the first African American woman college president, in July 2001 she became the first African American woman to lead an Ivy League institution (Brown University). Although France Cordova is not the first Hispanic woman college president, upon her appointment in July 2002 as chancellor of the University of California, Riverside, she became the first Hispanic woman to lead a University of California campus.

Presidents can use their influence to create learning environments that welcome and stimulate the development of all students, including women, people of color, and underserved communities. Certainly the women of color described here use their local, national, and international influence to nurture and develop their educational institutions. Their work is a testimony to their longstanding commitment to increase access and equity for all communities served by higher education. All three women entered their presidencies in order to make a difference. Each has done that and much more. These women continue to make important contributions to the field of higher education and to pave the way for others who see in them possibilities for themselves.

## Notes

1. Tseng's title is chancellor, but for purposes of this article, when study participants are referred to as a group, the title president will be used.
2. Participant responses when asked to designate their racial/ethnic background.
3. These women of color are making history as the "first" of their gender and race and ethnicity to become presidents of public, baccalaureate degree-granting colleges (Carruolo, Rodgers, & Stout, 2002; *International Daily News*, 2000; Pierpoint, 2001; Tseng, personal communication, July 19, 2002).
4. "The term women of color refers to persons of African American, American Indian, Asian Pacific American, and Latino origin. In doing so, we understand that 'people of color' do not constitute a monolithic group and recognize that whites are also members of a distinct racial category, and certainly by using the individual racial and ethnic categories we do not intend to imply that all persons so 'designated' experience anything in a uniform way. Rather these categories are used in order to present existing data distinguishing between these groups, identify some common themes, and make overall statements about the varying experiences of the identified groups" (Turner & Myers, 2000, p. 9). Even though common themes are noted in this article, it is also important to acknowledge that all women of color are not the same and that institutions should not expect them to behave as such. Furthermore, women of color have a range of interests and ways in which they choose to contribute to the academy.
5. In 1871, Frances Elizabeth Caroline Willard became president of Evanston College for Ladies in Illinois, where she was the first woman to preside over the first baccalaureate graduation of women, awarding five laureates of science and one laureate

of arts (available in Northwestern University Archives, [http://www.library.northwestern.edu/archives/findingaids/college\\_for\\_ladies.pdf](http://www.library.northwestern.edu/archives/findingaids/college_for_ladies.pdf)). The first woman president of a four-year, degree-granting campus (Read & Witlieb, 1992, p. 483), Willard served until 1873. In 1904, Mary McLeod Bethune founded Daytona Educational and Industrial Institute, renamed Bethune-Cookman College in 1931. She served as president for two terms, 1929–1942 and 1946–1947. Bethune is acknowledged as one of the first African American woman to head a college, although the college was not a degree-granting institution during her first tenure as president. She is credited as being the first African American woman to establish a secondary school that became a four-year accredited college. Mary Elizabeth Branch is acknowledged as the first African American woman president of a bachelor's degree-granting institution. She was president of Tillotson College—renamed Huston-Tillotson College in 1952—in Austin, Texas, from 1930 to 1944 (Brown & Heintze, 1981).

6. Data reported for fall 2002 and for U.S. citizens and resident aliens.
7. According to Nieves-Squires (1991), Hispanics can be of Cuban, Mexican, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish ancestry or descent. Cuadraz (2005) notes that women of Mexican origin will number an estimated 32 million, representing 8 percent of the total U.S. population, in 2050. Niemann (2003) describes the label “Chicana/o” as referring to U.S. citizens or residents of Mexican descent. She describes this term as being popular among activists and states that feminists added the label “Chicana” “in an effort toward gender inclusivity and recognition of women’s experiences” (p. xii). Also, “like the term Hispanic, the label Latina/o is inclusive of all persons of Spanish-speaking descent” (p. xii).
8. When referring to studies about American Indians, tribal affiliations and their respective cultures and traditions must be taken into consideration.
9. Hune (1998) notes that “American citizens and residents who trace their ancestry to the Asian continent, subcontinent, and islands within the Pacific Rim, and who include indigenous Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders,” are collectively “classified under a single umbrella category, most commonly as Asian American . . . or Asian Pacific American (APA)” (p. 3). She goes on to state that “educational institutions need to recognize the limitations of a single APA category and give attention to the population’s complexity and diversity and how Asian Pacific American women’s issues may differ within each APA group and among ethnic groups on their campuses” (p. 15).
10. The invited plenary session, Pathways to the Presidency: A Dialogue with “First” Presidents, was presented at the American Council on Education and Brown University Women of Color Summit II, “Valuing Our Strengths: Exercising Leadership through Participation and Achievement,” held in Providence, Rhode Island, on November 5, 2004.
11. Haskell is federally chartered and governed by national boards. It was originally founded as a federal off-reservation boarding school. In 1970, it became the first Bureau of Indian Affairs degree-granting institution (Oppelt, 1990, p. 94). Haskell differs from tribally controlled institutions, which are chartered by one or more tribes and locally managed.

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