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Promoting Latiné excellence: A Q&A with inaugural HSI director Veronica Fematt

A first-generation college student and community college transfer, Veronica Fematt's journey from Rio Hondo College to UCLA and later UC Santa Barbara's Gevirtz Graduate School of Education deeply shaped her work in higher education. With research focused on the post-transfer experiences of community college students and the challenges faced by underrepresented groups, Fematt brings both personal and academic insights to her new role: Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) Director.

As the university's inaugural HSI director, Fematt is tasked with uniting efforts across campus to enhance "servingness" — an HSI model that goes beyond enrollment numbers to truly support the success of Latiné students. (Latiné — pronounced "la-'ti-ne" — is a gender-neutral term for people of Latin American heritage, offering an inclusive alternative to Latino and Latina.)

As UCSB deepens its commitment to being an HSI, the campus community is invited to attend the first-ever HSI forum, "Promoting Latiné Excellence and Servingness," hosted by the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Office. [The event, scheduled for Thursday, Oct. 17,](#) from 12 to 4 p.m. at Corwin Pavilion, will focus on advancing opportunities for Latiné students and fostering an inclusive campus environment.

In advance of the forum, Fematt shared her perspective on UCSB's HSI designation, her goals in this new position, and how her personal experiences continue to fuel her passion for educational equity.

From your perspective, can you situate UCSB's HSI designation within the university's history and what it means for the campus and student population moving forward? You're the first HSI director at UCSB, in a brand new position. Why do you think UCSB is leveling up its HSI leadership? What does it mean that we now have an HSI director?

I believe the entire UC system is deepening its commitment to HSI identity and leadership, with several factors driving this strengthened focus. The Latiné population is the fastest-growing demographic, not only in California but across the nation. As of last year, the Latiné population reached nearly 64 million, accounting for 19% of the U.S. population. Projections show that Latiné student enrollment in higher education will surpass four million by 2026, outpacing the growth rate of all other racial and ethnic groups. This demographic trend is reflected in the UC system, where five of the nine undergraduate campuses are already designated as Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), or Hispanic-Serving Research Institutions (HSRIs). The remaining campuses are nearing the 25% Latiné undergraduate enrollment threshold to become HSRIs.

This growth presents an opportunity for the UC system to position itself as a leader in “serving” Latiné students from recruitment through to graduation and beyond. The UC system recognizes that Latiné students are the future leaders, researchers, innovators and advocates who will shape our society, drive progress and inspire change across industries and communities.

Achieving HSI status was the result of a collective, cross-campus effort, and UCSB has been successful in securing several HSI grants since becoming an HSI in 2015. However, these efforts are often unrecognized, with many individuals working in silos.

Therefore, the establishment of an HSI Director at UCSB is a significant step forward. And as HSI Director, my role is to bring people together and unify our efforts to ensure that we move closer to achieving true “servingness” for Latiné and other underrepresented students — because when we uplift one underserved group, we create a ripple effect that benefits the entire campus community.

What do you look forward to accomplishing in this position?

I look forward to uniting our campus community — undergraduate and graduate students, administrators, faculty and staff. I'm excited to work collaboratively with people across campus to develop a shared vision of what "servingness" can look like at UCSB. A key aspect of this work will involve securing grants to develop programs and interventions that create equitable opportunities for Latiné students and advocating for institutionalization of these programs and/or interventions. I also plan to collaborate with leaders at other UC and CSU campuses to exchange and learn from their best practices. I have a lot of ideas!

Tell us about your research background and how it intersects with your work as an HSI director.

My research is deeply informed by my own nontraditional educational journey as a first-generation community college transfer student. I began my postsecondary education at Rio Hondo College in Whittier and transferred to UCLA after two and a half years. As an incoming transfer student, I didn't feel welcomed at UCLA, and I quickly realized that many university policies weren't designed with transfer students in mind. Years later, as a graduate student in the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education at UCSB, I focused my research on the post-transfer experience, examining the ways community college students are stigmatized at selective research institutions.

Throughout my career, my research has always been student-centered, with the goal of improving the college-going experience for underrepresented student populations — especially at selective research institutions where they often face differential treatment, stigmatization and marginalization.

Recently, my co-authors and I published two new articles that intersect with my work as the HSI director. The [first](#) article examines Latiné transfer student intersectional microaggressions, while the [second](#) focuses on Latiné student pushout in STEM fields at Hispanic-Serving Research Institutions (HSRIs). In my research, I lean towards qualitative methods to amplify student voices, which is a powerful way to advocate for institutional change and move closer to fostering a more equitable campus environment.

What do you want today's Latiné students to know?

I want today's Latiné students to know that we are making meaningful strides toward making UCSB a more welcoming and inclusive campus. As their advocate, I am committed to fostering equitable opportunities and driving institutional transformation. Universities exist because of students; they are (and should be) the heart of everything we do. That's why it's essential that we empower them and ensure they are fully supported.

If you could ask a question to students from the future — let's say, the Class of 2035 — what would you ask?

I would like to ask students from the future how it feels to attend a university that fully embraces and supports them. By 2035, I hope we've achieved that goal, creating an environment where every student feels seen, valued and empowered.

If you could speak to students from the past — say, the Class of 2001 — what would you tell them?

If I could speak to the Class of 2001, I would tell them that the challenges they faced were not in vain. Their perseverance, organizing efforts [and protests](#) laid the foundation for lasting, tangible changes that continue to benefit underrepresented students today.

I would assure them that their advocacy for spaces that affirm their cultural and intersectional identities led to significant milestones, such as [the opening of the Student Resource Building](#) (SRB) in 2007. Their legacy of activism inspired younger generations to keep making their voices heard, and future students will follow their example by seeking allies among faculty, graduate students and administrators. These collaborations would be instrumental in creating the critical mass needed to drive further change, including the development of the Transfer Student Center (TSC).

I would also tell them that in 2015, we were designated a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), and that my position as the inaugural HSI director was created in response to the demands they championed — specifically El Congreso's demands. Their legacy made my role possible, and now, I proudly carry forward this tradition of advocacy, resistance and change.

Tell us about you. What motivates you?

My parents immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico with little more than the clothes on their backs. My father had a high school education, and my mother only completed the third grade before being pulled out of school to work. I am the second of four daughters, all born in Long Beach. My father was a self-taught man who started as a machine shop floor sweeper but eventually became a real estate agent and later a real estate broker-entrepreneur. Life was stable until my parents divorced when I was starting high school. My mother, who had spent most of her marriage as a homemaker, suddenly had to support us on her own. She applied for welfare and entered the workforce.

During this time, I began to act out and ended up at a continuation high school, where I encountered some of the most egregious and inequitable schooling experiences. Though I didn't have the language to describe what I was going through — systemic inequality, subtractive schooling — I knew it wasn't right. Seeing my mother struggle with limited education to support us, combined with my own experiences in an unjust educational system, ignited a passion in me to pursue higher education and challenge educational inequity. These formative experiences continue to motivate me in everything I do.

My mother, Maria Rosaura Lavenant Zapata, is my “shero.” She has faced and overcome countless challenges in her life. After the divorce and struggling to make ends meet, she self-educated herself and attained her real estate license. She was able to fully support us and eventually bought a house for us. Witnessing her resilience and strength motivates me every day and reminds me that giving up is never an option.

Tell us a fun fact, hobbies?

As for a fun fact, I have skydived twice! Off the clock, I enjoy going for walks on the bluffs, meeting up with friends and cuddling with my dilute calico cat Bella Luna, when she's willing of course. My personal mantra is, “The universe will put you where you need to be.”

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About UC Santa Barbara

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