

2019 Speaker and Moderator Biographies



Viviana Abreu-Hernandez is associate vice president for external affairs at Quinsigamond Community College in Worcester, Massachusetts. In this position, she is responsible for expanding the college's relationships with national, state and community stakeholders, including policy makers, community leaders and employers developing strategic partnerships that benefit the community and QCC students. Prior to accepting this position, she was director of research and program development for the 1199SEIU League Training and Upgrading Fund, the largest workforce development, labor management-led organization in the United States.



Joedis Avila is a manager at Ford Motor Company Fund, where he directs and oversees Ford's strategic partnerships with key organizations and corporate initiatives on a national and local level. He also manages Hispanic investments nationally as well as the global expansion of signature programs throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Prior to joining Ford, he worked at MillerCoors, Molson Coors and Coors Brewing Company, where he managed multicultural relations, corporate social responsibility and marketing programs. He was instrumental in building the global procurement strategy during the Molson Coors merger.



Irma Becerra is president of Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia. President Becerra is a nationally recognized educator known for innovation, entrepreneurship and transformational education. Her passion, commitment for exceptional service, and plan to provide all students with high-quality professional internship experiences guide her vision for a new era at Marymount University. After completing just one year of service as president, she has already introduced several initiatives with long-lasting effects in support of the university's mission with an eye toward creating a sustainable future.



Elizabeth Bejar is vice president for academic affairs at Florida International University in Miami, Florida. She previously held the positions of vice provost for academic affairs and vice provost for academic planning and accountability at FIU. As FIU's first vice provost for academic planning and accountability, she established institutional assessment and evaluation plans as well as policies that currently serve the university's practice of striving for continuous improvement and developing a culture of evidence-based decision-making.



Margarita Benitez is executive director of the Puerto Rico Humanities Foundation in San Juan, Puerto Rico. She brings to her current role a lifelong commitment to higher education that began at the University of Puerto Rico. During her time in Washington, D.C., she held various senior positions at the Office of Postsecondary Education in the U.S. Department of Education and worked in pivotal areas impacting Latino student success. Achievements include directing the launch of GEAR UP and the Title V Institutional Development for Hispanic-Serving Institutions programs, and heading the Upward Bound, Talent Search and Educational Opportunity programs in TRIO.



Estela Bensimon is a professor of higher education at the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California and founder and director of the Center for Urban Education. Since its founding in 1999, CUE has helped thousands of college professionals—from presidents to faculty to academic counselors—take steps in their daily work to reverse the impact of the historical and structural disadvantages that prevent many students of color from excelling in higher education. And with a singular focus on increasing racial equity in higher education outcomes for students of color, she developed the Equity Scorecard, a process for using inquiry to drive changes in institutional practice and culture.



Jesse M. Bernal is the second vice president for inclusion and equity at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan. He joined Grand Valley in 2015 and oversees the university's coordinated efforts to advance diversity and campus climate. Prior to arriving at Grand Valley, he served as a senior diversity officer at Santa Clara University and the University of California Office of the President as well as in other academic and student affairs roles in the UC system.



Sarita E. Brown is co-founder and president of *Excelencia* in Education, a not-for-profit organization based in the nation's capital with the mission to accelerate Latino success in higher education. Starting her career by building a nationally recognized program to increase Black and Latino talent earning graduate degrees at the University of Texas at Austin, she came to Washington, DC in 1993. Since then, she has held positions at prominent national educational institutions, not-for-profit organizations and at the highest levels of government working to implement effective strategies to raise academic achievement and opportunity for low-income and underserved students.



Beatriz Ceja is director of the Hispanic-Serving Institutions Division in the Office of Post-Secondary Education in the U.S. Department of Education. She previously served as a program manager for the Teacher Quality Programs in the Office of Innovation and Improvement. As a program manager, she oversaw the administration of several discretionary programs, including Race to the Top District, Teacher Quality Partnership, School Leadership, Supporting Effective Educators and the Transition to Teaching.



Nichole Davari is the program director of Latino Achievers of the YMCA of Middle Tennessee in Nashville, Tennessee.



Erika de la Riva is a community-engaged researcher who serves as the assistant director of research and planning at Richard J. Daley College in Chicago, Illinois. Her chief responsibilities focus on providing research and analytical support to assess institutional effectiveness; providing leadership to the development of college-wide strategies; and spearheading grant-writing efforts to secure funding for new college initiatives. She previously served as a research project manager at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine. She has worked for several community organizations and managed projects in parental involvement and community health education and served as co-investigator on community-engaged research projects.



Virginia M. Fraire is the associate provost at the University of Texas at El Paso. Prior to this role, she served in multiple leadership capacities at Austin Community College District in Austin, Texas, including vice president of student affairs. Here, she led 30-plus student and academic support units across 11 campuses to improve student access and graduation. She is the architect of ACC's nationally recognized advising program where she worked with student and academic affairs to establish a more holistic and integrated advising approach. Through her leadership, the college established robust transfer services and pathways working with multiple colleges and universities.



Ronald Gray is vice president for student affairs and dean of students at Felician University in Rutherford, New Jersey. He also serves as the chief student affairs officer. He applies his unique experiences to heighten the attraction and retention of students at Felician University. Prior to coming to Felician, he worked at various colleges and universities, serving students from diverse backgrounds and communities. Through collaboration, a shared understanding, common purpose and collective action, he has worked with university and community members with a commitment to diversity as a critical asset in the quality of teaching and learning, inquiry and innovation.



Alfred Herrera is assistant vice provost and director of the Center for Community College Partnerships (CCCP) at the University of California, Los Angeles.



Estela López serves as a senior associate of *Excelencia* in Education. She is also vice chairperson of the Connecticut State Board of Education. She brings to *Excelencia's* mission significant campus and organizational experience, including senior administrative roles at the Inter American University of Puerto Rico, Northeastern Illinois State University and the Connecticut State University System. She has held positions with leading national higher educational associations that have shaped her leadership skills and made her an effective change agent for student success.



Janette Martinez is a senior policy and research analyst at *Excelencia* in Education. In this role, she focuses on federal and state policy and effective institutional practices to accelerate Latino student success. She works with the *Excelencia* policy and research team on key issues, including affordability, institutional capacity and workforce development. She started her career in education as a sixth-grade teacher and continued as an intern with the Lumina Foundation and National Association of Financial Aid Administrators, and as a policy analyst with Education Reform Now.



David Medina is the COO and co-founder of Results for America based in Washington, D.C. He previously served in the Obama administration as deputy chief of staff for First Lady Michelle Obama and as the Peace Corps' public engagement director. Other career positions include serving as government relations director for the U.S. Global Leadership Campaign; national political director for U.S. Sen. John Edwards; deputy CEO for the 2004 Democratic National Convention Committee; and as a legislative representative for the AFL-CIO.



Jose Miranda is a legislative assistant to U.S. Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard (CA-40). In this role, he advises the congresswoman, who is vice chair of the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Subcommittee on Appropriations, on education policy. Prior to working for Congresswoman Roybal-Allard, he worked for U.S. Rep. Raúl Grijalva (AZ-03) as a Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute Public Policy Fellow.



Eyra Perez is the technical assistance coordinator for *Excelencia* in Education. In this role, she advances the non-profit's strategy and provides support for institutions committed to intentionally serving Latino students. She brings more than 25 years of experience in Latino student access and success, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, equity-centered practices, program development and management, student development, student leadership, financial aid, transfer, STEM, and parent involvement. Her professional experience includes higher education, K-12 education, and non-profit community-based organizations.



Monte Perez is president of Los Angeles Mission College, which serves Los Angeles San Fernando Valley and is one of nine colleges of the Los Angeles Community College District. Prior to this position, he was president of the Moreno Valley College. He also served as vice president of student services at Golden West Community College in Huntington Beach, California, and as provost and vice president of academic affairs at the National Hispanic University in San Jose, California. Here, he engineered the successful WASC accreditation for NHU as the first Latino non-profit independent senior college on the West Coast.



S. K. Ramesh is director and professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering, Attract, Inspire, Mentor, and Support Students (AIMS²), at California State University, Northridge.



Cristobal Rodríguez is an assistant professor in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies in the School of Education at Howard University in Washington, D.C., where the goal is the “elimination of inequities related to race, color, social, economic and political circumstances.” Given this institutional legacy, his research agenda is guided by this conviction as well as a focus to connect policy and leadership research to improve access for diverse communities throughout the education pipeline.



Alexander Rudolph is professor of physics and astronomy at the Cal-Bridge Program at California State University in Pomona, California.



Elizabeth Santamaria is a college recruiter with GEICO in Dallas, Texas. She has a broad career history with frontline and management responsibility. Throughout all aspects of her career, she has used her bilingual skills and has served as a simultaneous interpreter during her lengthy work experience. She loves being a resource to others and having a positive impact on careers and lives.



Deborah Santiago is the co-founder and CEO at *Excelencia* in Education. For more than 20 years, she has led research and policy efforts from the community to national and federal levels to improve educational opportunities and success for all students. Her current efforts include expanding *Excelencia's* organizational capacities and fiscal management while leading research and policy strategies using a Latino lens to address federal and state policy, financial aid, Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), and effective institutional practices for student success in higher education.



William Serrata is president of El Paso Community College (EPCC) District. He came to EPCC after serving as vice president for student affairs and enrollment management for South Texas College in McAllen, Texas, a position he held for more than seven years. During his tenure at South Texas College, he established a college-going culture and provided leadership in fostering enrollment growth, increases in student retention, dual credit enrollment, and graduation rates with an emphasis on first-generation and Hispanic populations. He currently serves as Chair of the Board of Directors for *Excelencia* in Education.



Belle Wheelan is president of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. She is the first African American and the first woman to serve in this capacity. During her 30-year career, she has served in many roles including as a faculty member, chief student services officer, campus provost, college president, the state of Virginia's secretary of education and president of an accrediting association. She has received numerous awards and recognition including four honorary degrees and Washingtonian Magazine's 100 Most Powerful Women in Washington, D.C. She currently serves as Vice Chair of the Board of Directors for *Excelencia* in Education.