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Dr. Rumaldo Z. Juárez, President Texas A&M University-Kingsville

By Robert H. Leos



Dr. Rumaldo Z. Juárez

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E-mail messages from Dr. Rinaldo Zapata Juárez include the question of the day: “Did it help our students?” Helping students succeed at Texas A&M University-Kingsville has been a top priority for Dr. Juárez since he took office in August 2002 as the university’s 17th president. A native of nearby Robstown, Texas, Dr. Juárez assumed his position after serving for eight years as Dean of The College of Health Professions at Southwest Texas State University, now Texas State University. Retention rates among Hispanic students at Texas A&M University-Kingsville are at their highest levels in 10 years. Dr. Juárez attributes this to strong mentoring and tutoring programs as well as consistent support of students requiring additional developmental coursework. Dr. Juárez has a message for young men and women just starting out their careers: “Don’t underestimate your abilities and don’t be afraid to try something new.” Dr. Juárez has practiced his own advice throughout a stellar career in higher education that began with a position as assistant professor of sociology at The University of Arizona in Tucson, Arizona. Dr. Rinaldo Juárez made time in his schedule to discuss the professional experiences that led him to his current position and some of the programs that have been developed to help students succeed at Texas A&M University-Kingsville. *rhl.*

ROBERT LEOS: *Was it your career goal to become president of a university when you first began your academic career?*

DR. JUAREZ: No, it wasn’t a career goal. Once I became a dean, I felt comfortable and was happy at a good university. A friend called me and asked if I knew about the vacancy at Texas A&M University-Kingsville. I thought about it. I thought about the fact that it was near Robstown, Texas, the town where I grew up. By that time I had quite a bit of administrative experience as a department chair, as Executive Director of The University of Texas System’s Texas-Mexico Border Health Coordination Office, and as Dean of the College of Health Professions at Southwest Texas State University. I thought, “Maybe I should give it a try,” and here I am, president of this very good university in Kingsville, Texas.

ROBERT LEOS: *Tell us about your journey from assistant professor of sociology to your current position as university president.*

DR. JUAREZ: In 1981 I took a faculty position as assistant professor of sociology at The University of Texas-Pan American in Edinburg, Texas. The following year, in 1982, there was a

vacancy for department chair. I knew the faculty, the department, and the issues, and felt that I knew what needed to be done. I decided to get in and do it. This experience introduced me to administration in an academic setting. After several years as department chair, I applied for, and was fortunate to receive, a Kellogg Fellowship. The Kellogg Foundation gave me numerous opportunities to develop leadership skills and to travel internationally. I credit the Kellogg Foundation for much of the training and experiences that I believe opened doors for me in my career.

ROBERT LEOS: *You served as Executive Director of The University of Texas System’s Texas-Mexico Border Health Coordination Office. What was the purpose of this office and position?*

DR. JUAREZ: The position was based at The University of Texas-Pan American. It was established to coordinate the numerous health-related programs that were being conducted along the Texas/Mexico border by several University of Texas System universities and health science centers. The purpose of the office was to reduce redundancy in the various UT System projects and to determine the types of services that were needed and could be

brought to the border by these institutions. It was a very good appointment because it introduced me to administration at the UT System level—working with the Office of Vice-Chancellor for Health Affairs. It gave me experience in obtaining funds for the office and applying those funds to where they were needed. The position provided excellent networking opportunities from Brownsville to El Paso, addressing health issues on both sides of the border. I continued in that position until I was named Dean of the College of Health Professions at Southwest Texas State University in 1994. I was Dean and Professor at Southwest Texas State University for eight years prior to being named President of Texas A&M University-Kingsville in 2002.

ROBERT LEOS: *A major challenge today is attracting and retaining Hispanic students in colleges and universities. What programs do you have in place to maximize your students' success?*

DR. JUAREZ: This is a very complex problem with some variables that we can control and others that we can't control but that perhaps we can mitigate. Here, we're struggling with students who lack the background in mathematics and the sciences that they need to succeed in a university. When they are not doing well in their freshman year we have to address the issue. We graduate teachers, so as a university, we have to assume some responsibility when students come and have difficulties. This is an area where we can work with the kindergarten-Grade 12 system to fill gaps and better prepare students. As part of our effort to help students succeed we have added new mentoring programs, a new advisor program, and new tutoring services. In addition, we have established a cooperative program with

the community college to enable students to pass their developmental courses and transition into the university curriculum.

ROBERT LEOS: *What are you most proud of accomplishing since becoming President of Texas A&M University-Kingsville?*

DR. JUAREZ: I'm particularly pleased about the increase in retention rates among our Hispanic students. In addition, after a long wait, the university system finally received funding that was sufficient to open the doors to the new Irma Rangel College of Pharmacy, housed on our campus. Those are only two accomplishments for which I am most proud.

ROBERT LEOS: *Would you advise students who are interested in a career in higher education administration to take the academic route and climb the administrative ladder?*

DR. JUAREZ: It's possible to become an administrator in higher education, even president, without taking an academic route as I did. Much of it depends on



The Texas A&M University Health Science Center named the College of Pharmacy after the late state representative from Kingsville, Texas. The state-of-the-art facility is located on the campus of Texas A&M University-Kingsville.

the position. Personally, I wouldn't have it any other way except through academia. By going through an academic career you get to know the nuts and bolts of university operations. When there's an academic issue that arises, you've been there, done that. When there are administrative issues in a department that arise, you've been there, done that. There is certainly precedent for excellent leaders from non-academic occupations that have assumed positions of university president but their adjustment has been quite challenging.

ROBERT LEOS: *Are there other skills and experiences that you believe can help a person become a more effective leader?*

DR. JUAREZ: I'm a huge advocate of international travel and would encourage others to take every opportunity to travel. The experiences put me in touch with many other very bright people and important leaders from other countries. My experiences gave me an opportunity to visit with people from the very poor to the very rich. My exposure to different parts of the world, Germany, South Vietnam, countries in South America, Russia, contributed to my development and gave me an appreciation for multiculturalism. I also had the opportunity to learn skills in conflict resolution and public speaking—personal development skills that helped me become a better-rounded person.

I often tell students not to be hesitant about trying something different. Certainly we have to be realistic about ourselves but if you feel you have the qualifications, put your credentials on the table and let others decide if you're qualified for the position. Don't cut yourself off at the pass without giving it a try. Don't be afraid. Give it a try.

Rumaldo Z. Juárez, President Texas A&M University-Kingsville

Education

Ph.D. in Rural Sociology, Pennsylvania State University. **M.S.** in Sociology, minor in Psychology, 1968, Texas A&M University. **B.S.** in Sociology, minor in Psychology, 1966, Texas A&M University.

Commissioned Officer, U.S. Army Medical Service Corps. 1966. Texas A&M University. Vietnam Veteran.

W. K. Kellogg Foundation National Fellowship Program, October 1988 to June 1992.

Career Highlights

Dean and Professor, College of Health Professions, Southwest Texas State University, September 1994 to August 2002.

Executive Director, University of Texas System, Texas-Mexico Border Health Coordination Office, September 1990 to August 1994.

Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Texas-Pan American, Edinburg, Texas; September 1992 to August 1994.

Co-Project Director, Texas Consortium of Geriatric Education Centers, Pan American University, Edinburg, Texas; October 1985-August 1994.

Adjunct Associate Professor, Department of Family Practice, University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio; February 1991 to August 1994.

Adjunct Assistant Professor, Department of Preventive Medicine and Community Health, The University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, Galveston, Texas; January 1, 1987 to August 1994.

Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Texas-Pan American, September 1987 to August 1992.

Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Sociology and Social Work, Pan American University, Edinburg, Texas; September 1984 to August 1987.

Visiting Associate Professor, Center for Studies in Aging, North Texas State University, June 1987.

Assistant Professor and Chair, Department of Behavioral Sciences, Pan American University, Edinburg, Texas; September 1982 to August 1984.

Assistant Professor of Sociology, Department of Sociology and Department of Agricultural Economics, The University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona; June 1976 to August 1980.

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A&M University-Kingsville visit:
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