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Astrophysicist and university president France Cordova on diversity in action

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URING A VISIT TO CALTECH IN 2005, FRANCE A. CORDOVA WAS AMAZED TO LEARN THAT MANY OF THE FEMALE students at the science-and-engineering campus she had attended several decades earlier faced the same problems she had experienced.

"I couldn't believe that in 40 years nothing had changed," says Ms. Cordova, 59. "They still didn't have supportive teachers that really recognized their talents and fostered and mentored them: they still had people who were discouraging them from going into these kinds of careers."

For Ms. Cordova, an astrophysicist, that discovery underscored the importance of continuing her efforts to increase the number of women and minorities graduating from college and in teaching positions where they can serve as role models.

"I wasn't sure when I was going through school that role models mattered because I didn't have any, but now I've seen what a difference it can make in a classroom or learning environment to have women and minorities as teachers," Ms. Cordova says.

She is now in a position to make a difference for all students, both as the president of a major U.S. university with an internationally renowned aeronautical engineering program, and as a pioneering Hispanic woman. She has become a role model herself in the sciences, in education, and even in corporate governance [she's on the boards of both the Belo Corp. and Edison International].

In May, Ms. Cordova was named the 11th president of Purdue University, becoming the first Hispanic woman to lead the West Lafayette, Indiana, campus. As she settles into her new position, she says she intends to "embrace diversity," which was among her primary focuses at the University of California at Riverside, where she became the first Hispanic woman to ever lead a UC campus in 2002. "As it is now, diversity is very much a part of Purdue's plan," she says. "There's been a lot of significant gains and I'll want to study those in more detail."

Proven Track Record

Ms. Cordova was instrumental in establishing numerous diversity programs at UC Riverside.

The campus east of Los Angeles is one of the fastest growing and most diverse in the 191,000-student UC system, and Ms. Cordova has learned that having a student body and faculty with a wide range of backgrounds, cultures, and experiences is critical in providing a top-quality education. Achieving diversity not only benefits the underrepresented, but their teachers as well, she says.

In 2005, Ms. Cordova created the position of associate vice-provost for faculty equity and diversity at UC Riverside. The primary focus of the vice-provost is to bring more women and minorities onto the faculty. During her tenure, at least 34 percent of new hires were female and 11 percent underrepresented minorities.

"Faculty [members] tell me in a diverse classroom that they too are affected, it's not just transmitting information but they learn from the questions and the background and experiences that the students bring into the classroom," Ms. Cordova says. "So I believe it benefits everyone around."

Undergraduate Hispanic enrollment at UC Riverside exceeded 25 percent last fall, compared with less than 15 percent systemwide. School officials credit the high numbers to programs such as community outreach, summer seminars for high schoolers, and remedial math and English courses for freshmen. »
Her efforts were both noticed and appreciated at Riverside, where Academic Senate Chair Thomas Cogswell complimented her for making Riverside the UC campus that reflects the “face of California,” and for encouraging diversity without sacrificing student success.

“Our trustees interviewed several outstanding candidates who would have been excellent presidents, but Frances Cordova is the right person at the right time for Purdue,” said J. Timothy McKinley, chairman of Purdue’s board of trustees. The seven-month search for a new president ended with a unanimous vote to hire Ms. Cordova.

When news spread at Riverside that Ms. Cordova was being courted by Purdue, students at the university picketed, asking her to stay. Faculty members also started a campaign of e-mails and telephone calls.

As a college professor, Ms. Cordova said she learned first hand what kind of effect the faculty can have on its students.

“I had students who would tell me that I changed their career path,” Ms. Cordova adds. “These young women who became physicists came in not knowing what they should do. But after hearing me talk with passion about my research area, they became interested in that.”

Those experiences have convinced Ms. Cordova that “when students see somebody who looks like them and can share the same kind of experiences and can encourage them, it really does make a difference.”

Writer, Scientist, Leader

The oldest of 12 children, Ms. Cordova was born in Paris, France, to a Mexican father and an Irish-American mother. The West Covina, California, native graduated cum laude with a degree in English from Stanford.

Although she dreamed at an early age of being a physicist, her parents and teachers encouraged her to pursue writing. “I was very influenced when I was in grade school and high school by what kind of career my parents thought I should go into, and also my teachers,” she says.

After graduating college, Ms. Cordova moved to New York, where she landed a job writing for a magazine. She briefly worked as a news writer and editor for the Los Angeles Times News Service and authored a work of fiction, “The Women of Santo Domingo,” based on her anthropological fieldwork in Oaxaca, Mexico.

Her love of science drew her back after watching a public television special about neutron stars. The next morning she went to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and asked for a job at the Center for Space Research. She got the position and was later admitted to graduate school. In 1979, Ms. Cordova earned a doctorate in physics from the California Institute for Technology, or Caltech, and spent the next 10 years at Los Alamos National Laboratory as a member of the Space Astronomy and Astrophysics Group.

She served as chief scientist at NASA, where she was the youngest and first woman to hold that position. In 1999, Ms. Cordova led one of the American teams that helped build the European Space Agency’s X-Ray Multi-Mirror satellite. The satellite was designed to provide high-quality X-ray spectra from black holes to very hot objects created when the universe was young. She has also written more than 100 scientific papers.

Among her other accomplishments, Ms. Cordova is the winner of NASA’s highest honor, the Distinguished Service Medal, and was recognized as a 2000 Kilby Laureate for “contributions to society through science, technology, innovation, invention, and education.”

During her tenure at NASA, Ms. Cordova was on leave as a professor and head of the Department of Astronomy and Astrophysics at Pennsylvania State University. She would later serve as vice-chancellor at UC Santa Barbara for six years, the job she held before starting at UC Riverside in 2002.

As Ms. Cordova has demonstrated, the whole idea of going to college is not just about “doggedly pursuing one career path,” but more about being exposed to many opportunities and perspectives.

“Sometimes that dialogue that’s in the classroom or outside of the classroom that you have – because you have a more diverse environment – can really enrich your perspective and lead you on a wholly different track.”

Student Board of Trustees member Rachel Cumberbatch applies to be Ms. Cordova try on a Purdue varsity jacket.