

## 2022-23 Alumni Award Recipients



Laura I. Rendón

**G**rowing up in Laredo, Texas, a town on the U.S.-Mexico border, Laura I. Rendón looked up to teachers. Along with priests and law enforcement officers, teachers, she says, were some of the few respected professionals visible in the low-income, isolated area where she was raised. But in high school, as a member of Future Teachers of America, she was told by the sponsor of the program to forget her dream of becoming an educator because Rendón had failed chemistry. The sponsor didn't ask why she had failed. (Rendón had gotten caught in a rainstorm and badly sprained her knee. She couldn't walk to school for two weeks. When she returned, she was unprepared to take a test.)

"She just assumed that I had failed, and that was it," says Rendón. "I remember feeling rather sad about that, but something told me just to keep going. And so I did."

Rendón recently recounted the beginning of her educational career in her autobiography, "A First-Generation Scholar's Camino de Conocimiento," published in 2020 in *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*. Immediately after graduating from high school, she enrolled at Laredo Junior College (LJC), the only institution of higher education in her hometown. When she ran out of courses to take at LJC, she transferred to San Antonio College—where she was recently

named an outstanding alumna—where she earned an Associate of Arts degree. She transferred once again—this time to the University of Houston, where a friend was attending college. Her mother took the long Greyhound bus ride with Rendón to campus, terrified that something would happen to her. This was the first time any of her daughters had traveled that far away from home.

"In the Latino community, they hold their children very, very close. Sometimes, when you're the first to go to college, they want to keep you as close as possible. So going to Houston was a struggle," says Rendón.

It was the height of the Vietnam War. Protests raged throughout the country, she recalls. But when she set foot on the university campus, she was elated.

The friend who encouraged her to join him at school was Raúl Garza. Like Rendón, Garza was a low-income student from Laredo. He loved to collect catalogs from universities across the country.

**Inspired by her personal experience, and the students she met along the way, Rendón devoted her scholarship to advocating for students like herself—those who came from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students who she felt had hopes and dreams but often did not know how to realize them.**

"Raúl was an inspiration because he totally believed in higher education. He is the reason I went to the University of Houston—because I had a friend there," says Rendón. "We would talk about our times in Laredo, and what we wanted to be. We also talked about getting doctoral degrees."

In 1970, Rendón earned her bachelor's degree, becoming the first in her family to graduate from a four-year college.

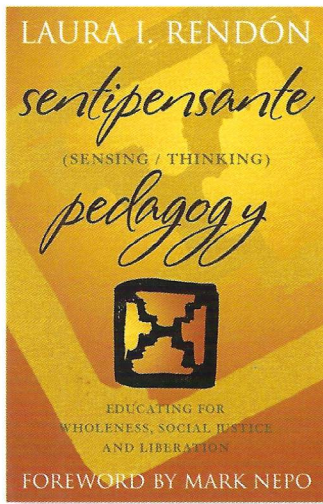
"I had successfully crossed the academic border which before had seemed so inaccessible," writes Rendón in her autobiography.

Rendón was popular with the eighth graders she taught back in her hometown. (As soon as she graduated, her family insisted she return home.) She used music by the Beatles to turn her students on to poetry. She connected literature to contemporary issues. She had her students write and perform their own plays. During those early years in the classroom, she began to gain more confidence, and noticed that people regarded her in the same way she had admired teachers herself when she was a child. In her autobiography, Rendón writes that she could have easily spent her entire working life at that school, but her intuition told her there was something else in store for her professionally.

**I**nterested in psychology, Rendón began taking night classes at Texas A&I University (known today as Texas A&M University-Kingsville), with the aim of becoming a school counselor. But when she graduated with her master's degree, there were no counseling positions available in the Laredo Independent School District. Instead, Rendón took her first job in higher education at her alma mater, LJC, working as a counselor and teaching psychology. She taught in a Title III program, a learning community of low-income Mexican American students, with an interdisciplinary approach to writing, reading, history, Spanish, psychology, and counseling—all designed to prepare students to transfer. Within a year, she had been promoted to director of the program. At 26 years old, she held the status of department chair.

Each year, faculty from the University of Texas who oversaw a community college leadership program came to LJC to evaluate Rendón's program. She was proud of her program's success, which boasted a high retention rate, and always received high marks. It was through visits with these faculty that Rendón learned about higher education doctoral programs. As soon as she did, she knew that would be her next step. She applied to two programs in Texas, but once again, a test nearly stood in her way. One program accepted her conditionally on account of her low GRE score. However, the University of Michigan offered her a generous financial package and accepted her without condition.





“When I opened the acceptance letter [from the University of Michigan], I jumped for joy. I knew my life was about to change,” writes Rendón.

Back at the University of Houston, when she had felt overwhelmed by the challenges of school, and of being a first-generation student, Rendón went to the student union to take solace in listening to music. Stan Getz and Astrud Gilberto’s Brazilian bossa nova album featuring “The Girl from Ipanema” and Armando Manzanero’s album of romantic Mexican songs, including “Esta Tarde Vi Lover,” calmed her. Friends like Garza, and later the small but tight-knit community of Latinx students she met at U-M, were instrumental in her student experience.

“Without that support I would not have had a sense of family, and it would have been much more challenging to complete a doctorate,” writes Rendón. Concerned about the lack of Hispanic representation on campus, the community formed an organization, Coalition of Hispanics for Higher Education. Rendón served as president. The coalition lobbied U-M’s president, deans, and director of affirmative action to recruit more Latinx students and faculty.

Inspired by her personal experience, and the students she met along the way, Rendón devoted her scholarship to advocating for students like herself—those who came from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students who she felt had hopes and dreams but often did not know how to realize them.

In 1994, Rendón wrote the article, “Validating Culturally Diverse Students: Toward a New Model of Learning and Student Development,” in which she established the groundbreaking validation theory. This theory, consisting of six elements, is defined as “an enabling, confirming, and supportive process initiated by in- and

out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development.” Validation theory has been used extensively to theoretically frame college and university programs such as the Puente Project (California) and Catch the Next (Texas). The theory has also been employed in student affairs programming, student success programs, research capturing the experience of low-income and first-generation students, and dissertation studies.

Today, Rendón holds professor emerita status at the University of Texas-San Antonio. Her development of validation theory, as well as her book, *Sentipensante (Sensing/Thinking) Pedagogy: Educating for Wholeness, Social Justice and Liberation*, represent two scholarly contributions that transformed higher education scholarship on student development as well as contemplative teaching and learning rooted in social justice. Currently, Rendón is Director of Education for the International Society for Contemplative Education. She has given hundreds of keynote addresses, and led workshops and research presentations for national and international colleges and universities, educational organizations, and nonprofit entities. She has held faculty and administrative appointments at a wide range of institutions including the University of South Carolina, North Carolina State University, Arizona State University, California State University-Long Beach, Iowa State University, and University of Texas-San Antonio. Along with *Sentipensante (Sensing/Thinking) Pedagogy*, she has co-edited nine books and monographs and has an extensive list of scholarly publications focusing on success for underserved student populations. In 2021, Rendón was recognized by the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) with the prestigious ASHE Bowen Distinguished Career Award. Her personal archives are a part of the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas-Austin, one of the premier libraries in the world focused on Latin American and Latinx Studies.

In 2016, Rendón stepped down from her faculty position at the University of Texas-San Antonio. In part, she says, her choice to retire was driven by a desire to make room for those who will pick up where she left off. Rendón is excited to see the work

of younger colleagues who continue to advance scholarship in her field. In support of their efforts, she established The Laura I. Rendón Dissertation Finishing Grant for Equity and Justice in 2022. The grant provides funding to Marsal School doctoral students in the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education who are researching topics related to justice and inequity in American society.

As she likes to tell her friends, “I’ve retired from the university, but I haven’t retired from the work.” Rendón is part of a network of public speakers affiliated with SpeakOut-The Institute for Democratic Education and Culture. She is regularly invited to speak at colleges and universities across the country, as well as conferences and organizational meetings.

**Rendón is excited to see the work of younger colleagues who continue to advance scholarship in her field. In support of their efforts, she established The Laura I. Rendón Dissertation Finishing Grant for Equity and Justice in 2022. The grant provides funding to Marsal School doctoral students in the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education who are researching topics related to justice and inequity in American society.**

“People are very interested now in how to foster the success of low-income, first-generation students. The research that I initiated such a long time ago is still very, very relevant today. It makes me proud that I’m able to make an impact at this stage of my life, and that people are still open to listening to the messages that I have.” ■