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A PROFESSOR OF CHANGE: Ruth Lopez Turley believes that with the right information and resources many more students will be able to attend college.

Closing the Educational Gap

Growing up poor in Laredo, Texas, Ruth Lopez Turley found out early that being a straight-A high school student didn't guarantee success in life. She discovered that she would need more than good grades to pursue a college degree and achieve her dreams.

She would need to know how to maneuver the college admissions process and how to apply for financial aid, but no one, including her counselor, informed her of this crucial information. It was her boyfriend and future husband, Steve Turley, who would guide her through this process.

Turley went on to receive her undergraduate degree from Stanford University in 1996 and Ph.D. in sociology from Harvard University in 2001 and then became an associate professor in sociology at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Today, she is an associate pro-

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Learning Begins With an Open Book

Limited access to higher education is one of the greatest challenges facing students today, both in the United States and abroad. For many years, going to college was an opportunity to which only the wealthy could aspire. Yet now, even with scholarships and government aid available, many students still cannot afford college.

One of the commonly overlooked costs associated with college affordability and student success is the price of textbooks and other learning resources. Many students are simply choosing not to purchase textbooks, especially in community colleges, where the cost of textbooks often exceeds the price of tuition.

The open education resource (OER) community has been addressing this problem in much the same way as open-source software developers: make something good

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fessor of sociology at Rice and directs the Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC), a center within the Kinder Institute for Urban Research that seeks to close the socioeconomic gaps in education achievement and attainment through rigorous research.

What propelled Turley to become a sociologist and create HERC was her experience in high school. “I was really drawn to studying education and education inequality because I saw firsthand that there are a lot of people who are smart and work hard but just don’t have the right information or the right resources to attend college,” she said.

Started in 2011 with a \$1.3 million grant from the Laura and John Arnold Foundation,

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—RUTH LOPEZ TURLEY

One is to create a longitudinal database that will allow HISD to track students from kindergarten to high school graduation. “We are creating a dataset that will allow us to predict things, such as who is most likely to drop out of high school,” Turley explained. This is important, she added, because measures can be taken to prevent a student from falling through the cracks.

A second HERC project is to evaluate

That sense of wanting to help others is a virtue that Turley picked up as a child, when her mother time and again would model examples of generosity. Turley was born in Laredo to parents who had children from previous marriages: her mother had four children, and her father six. Together they had two more. When Lopez Turley was five, her parents divorced; when she was 14, her father died.

To care for her family, her mother, Jane, did everything from being a waitress to cleaning construction sites and houses to working as a nurse’s assistant. She remarried a man who had three grandchildren, and to add to an already crowded household, she took in a friend and her daughter who were homeless.

“The thing that amazed me about my mother is that she would take in people and declare that I had to share everything with them,” said Turley. “As a kid, I was very upset about the situation because we didn’t have very much and we had to share everything.”

But Turley said she learned an important lesson from that experience. “I learned that it is totally different to be generous out of abundance than to be generous out of very limited resources,” she said.

Instilled with this sense of generosity, Turley said she wants to use her research to help solve the problem of educational inequality. “Even if I’m not directly involved in creating that change, I know that my research will be used to help others make informed decisions.”

DAVID D. MEDINA

Director

Multicultural Community Relations



A GAPLESS GOAL: Sociologist Lopez Turley talks to her HERC team about research that will be used to help others make informed decisions.

HERC has partnered with the Houston Independent School District with the goal of bringing together education researchers and education decision-makers. “It’s about researchers informing the decision-makers, and the decision-makers informing the researchers so that policy development and implementation can be more successful in Houston schools,” she said.

HISD Assistant Superintendent for Research and Accountability Carla Stevens said that HERC has proven to be an asset to HISD. “HERC has served as an external, objective partner to review our research processes, build capacity in our staff, offer training and skill building for our team, and assist with deeper analyses of our data.”

HERC is working on several projects.

HISD’s performance pay program known as ASPIRE (Accelerating Student Progress, Increasing Results and Expectations). “This is a controversial program that pays principals, teachers and other employees a bonus based partially on their students’ performance.”

The third project is to test an intervention designed to reduce test score gaps, specifically between whites and blacks and between whites and Hispanics. The intervention is being tested in three high schools. “Based on previous studies, we have reason to believe that it will work,” she said.

“Ultimately, what I want to do with all this research is to close the gap, and a lot of people tell me that’s ridiculous,” said Turley. “What’s really crazy is if we don’t do anything about this, that’s ridiculous.”