A Profile: President Mildred Garcia

Newly appointed CSUDH President Mildred Garcia has built a career out of pushing the envelope in diversity and education. Here, read a full profile on the university’s first female president.

Like many students at CSUDH, Dr. Mildred García held two jobs while attending college. Along with her many accomplishments as an educator and administrator, she feels that her life experiences have prepared her well to take the helm of one of the most diverse campuses in the California State University (CSU) system.

“I was a first-generation college student from a very humble family,” she says. “I’ve always wanted to give back to communities like the one I grew up in, to help others have the advantages I’ve been able to have in my life.”

The first female president of Cal State Dominguez Hills and the first Latina of 11 female presidents who have served the 23-campus CSU system, García is looking forward to “seeing how we can bring the good things about Dominguez Hills into more communities so that as many students as possible can take advantage of what we have to offer.”

“We have such a diverse student body, and the job market needs a workforce that is diverse,” she notes. “It’s a global world, no matter what industry you are in. Our students who would enter that workforce, our strong faculty and programs are all assets. Also, as part of the California State University, we are part of a system that prepares students for leadership.”

Leading a state institution in times of budget crisis does not seem daunting to García, who says, “While funding in California for higher education is a challenge, we’re going to have to find creative and entrepreneurial ways to move forward and not let that hold us back.”

She also feels that collaborating with industry and school districts is key to a university’s success in fundraising for the institution and networking to help facilitate employment for its graduates.

“We need to market Dominguez Hills with the success stories we have,” she says. “When we talk to potential donors to raise money, we have to say, ‘Look at what we’ve done. Now we need to help more students.’

“We have to be an integral part of the community. We look to the community to help us with projects and with getting our message out – it’s a partnership. If we work together on and off campus to help people understand the importance of education for economic development, for preparation of the workforce, and for the creation of new knowledge, the community will come to us when they need us.”

Positioning Cal State Dominguez Hills as a leader among urban institutions that serve underrepresented and working students is something that García is eager to tackle. She plans on backing up the university’s reputation as one of the most diverse campuses on the West Coast with evidence of that diversity as its strength.

“That we have a diverse student body is wonderful,” she says. “But what do we do with this diverse student body to move it forward is going to be our challenge as a community. I look forward to having discussions with our campus, our community, with all our stakeholders to look at what makes us so great and start focusing on that.”
García also feels that the university’s image should be bolstered from within, saying that, “As an institution, we have to take pride in what we are and be the best institution we can be with our own mission. We should be proud of what we offer. We don’t have to be like any other institution in the country. We will be the best at what we do and people will notice us for that.”

Establishing a strong team working towards a common goal is how García would describe her leadership style, saying that, “In every place I’ve worked, I have built a team that ... is ready to help them [students] realize their dreams, whatever those dreams may be.

“Everybody on this campus is an educator, no matter where they work. If you are a gardener, it is important that you provide a wonderful environment in which our students can live, learn and work. If you are an administrative assistant, how you speak to students when they come to you is important.”

A prolific writer, García co-published Assessing Campus Diversity Initiatives in 2001, which underscores the importance of assessment and evaluation. In 2004, she co-authored Transforming the First Year of College for Students of Color, and in 2000, she wrote Succeeding in an Academic Career, which looks at the issues surrounding faculty of color.

García would like to develop a faculty that more accurately reflects the student body. She notes, “It's a proactive search; you can't just put an ad in the Chronicle [of Higher Education]. You need to have relationships with Ph.D. programs where they produce people of color with doctorate degrees and you need to sell the institution as a great place to teach because people have choices.”

García recently wrote “Seeing Through the Eyes of Difference: The Strength of Women’s Multicultural Alliances,” an article published in the Association of American College and Universities’ online journal On Campus with Women. In it, she discusses the experiences of university administrators who are women of color working together to further their careers and support their students—alliances that she feels are critical in filling the educational needs of a student population at Dominguez Hills that is 70 percent female.

“There are certainly more women in higher administration today, but we have still not reached equity,” she points out. “While women in general have made progress, women of color have not made as much. As I say in the article, hiring committees need to look at the skills and traits that are needed for a position. Also, they need to consider that being a person of color and a woman is an asset, especially at an institution like ours, because we understand the culture from which our students come from.

“In the business world, they are thinking ahead of higher education on this. They understand that bringing in more women and people of color will move the business forward. We need to do this in order to help our students be more successful, to bring in more solutions and to deepen disciplines, because many perspectives create new knowledge.”

García’s extensive administrative and teaching experience in higher education includes her previous position as president of Berkeley College in New York. The college, which includes seven campuses in New York and New Jersey and Berkeley College Online, enrolls more than 5,000 students, including approximately 500 international students. Under García’s leadership, many new programs were added, including bachelor’s and associate’s degrees offered in an online format and the First Year Experience for first-time freshmen. In addition, two of Berkeley’s campuses opened new state-of-the-art facilities and renovated
existing facilities during her administration.

Prior to her presidency at Berkeley, García served as vice provost for academic personnel and was a tenured professor in the Social and Behavioral Sciences Department at Arizona State University West, and associate director of the Hispanic Research Center, Arizona State University, Tempe. She has also served as assistant vice president for academic affairs at Montclair State University, and as chief student affairs officer at Hostos Community College of the City University of New York (CUNY).

In 2003, García was appointed by former New Jersey governor James McGreevey to chair the Education Mandate Review Study Commission. She also serves as a board member of the American Council on Education; the National Council for Community and Education Partnerships; the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning; the Journal of General Education and is a founding board member of the Westchester, New York chapter of 100 Hispanic Women.

García is an active member of the American Council of Education where she serves on its board of directors. She also serves on the Editorial Advisory Board of Peer Review, Association of American Colleges and Universities; on the Advisory Board for Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education; and as founding board member of the National Council for Educational Partnerships.

A New York native, García received a Doctor of Education as well as a Master of Arts in higher education administration from Teachers College, Columbia University; an M.A. in business education/higher education from New York University; a B.S. in business education from Bernard Baruch College of City University of New York (CUNY); and an A.A.S. in legal secretarial sciences in business from New York City Community College of CUNY.

As a product of urban institutions and proudly claiming a culturally diverse Puerto Rican heritage that is a blend of African, indigenous and Spanish ancestry, García looks forward to serving Cal State Dominguez Hills and its community.

“I think that institutions like Dominguez Hills do so much more for our nation than the Ivy League schools,” she says. “At those schools, students will be successful no matter what. Our graduations mean a lot here because we have helped them see a new world and a new life. When our students achieve that bachelor’s or master’s degree, they have not only affected their lives, but the lives of generations after them and that’s a powerful thing to do.”

- Joanie Harmon