

# LATINO LEADERS NETWORK™

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MICKEY IBARRA, FOUNDER & CHAIRMAN

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**Remarks by:**  
**Dr. Francisco Cigarroa**  
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Francisco Cigarroa: Tony, thank you very much for that beautiful introduction. In many ways, I owe so much to Tony Sanchez. He's an individual who also was born and raised in Laredo. When I came to San Antonio as a young faculty member, he encouraged me to put my hat in the ring in regards to the presidency of the Health Science Center, then served on the board of regents who ultimately selected me as the president of the Health Science Center, and he had the vision of expanding the Health Science Center's presence in Laredo, in Edinburg, and in Harlingen where we were able and continue to enhance the platform for really medical education in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and dental education in Texas where so many, many students would never have had the opportunity to pursue what I believe is one of the most beautiful professions which is medicine. And so, Tony, I owe so much to you, and I will continue to do everything within the power that God gives me to continue to excel and really position the University of Texas System to even a higher platform of excellence. So, let's give Tony a big applause.

And also, I do want to give an applause to all the students who are here representing their high schools or are here doing internships during college because you are our future. And again, everything we do as educators is really focused on making sure that the next generation of American citizens and citizens from around the world have a better quality of life. I mean, it really is what we want for each one of our children.

To Mickey, thank you very much to you and your board, to the sponsors, for asking me to be your keynote speaker today.

Let me begin by expressing to you that my first few months as chancellor of the University of Texas System have really been a great joy. To have the opportunity to really visit the nine academic universities and the six health institutions under the University of Texas System ranging from all geographic regions of Texas really results in what I believe unlimited possibilities for this nation and for the world.

As Mr. Sanchez has stated, we are responsible for the education of over 193,000 students. And remember, education is also very individual. A parent leaving their most precious asset to a university for us to be able to provide them tools to become lifelong learners and really be the leaders of this nation into tomorrow.

Well, as Tony stated, I had no idea that when I came back from Johns Hopkins, finishing my fellowship, that I would expect to be in this current role as chancellor of what I believe one of the great institutions of higher education in the world.

I left Laredo, Texas and I embarked upon a higher education degree at Yale, and I will tell you that the most difficult transition in my life was that transition from Laredo to Yale. That first year, every time I received a grade, I thought that tomorrow would be my last day at Yale. But my parents, individuals who loved me, my grandparents, said, "Don't give up. Continue your focus. And if you love medicine, you still have an opportunity to do that."

Well, anyhow, Yale gave me a tremendous work ethic because I really had to catch up. I never let up in my work ethics of trying to do better. And by the time I got to medical school, it ended up being kind of a relatively easy road. Although after the third time of taking biochemistry, I decided maybe economics was for me. I remember in the library of Southwestern, I closed my book and I said, "I quit. I'm going back to Laredo and I'm going to talk to Dad." So, I arrived in Laredo, it must've been about 10:30 at night, Dad had about 100 patients in his clinic and it was probably about 11 o'clock at night before he got out of the clinic. And so, I stepped down from the hill which is where the hospital was and Dad was there and it was dark, and he said, "Carlos, what are you doing here?" I said, "No, Dad. It's Francisco." Because there was 10 of us and it was kind of dark. He says, "Oh my goodness. You know, Francisco, I thought you were in medical school." "Well, Dad, I need to talk to you about this." So, we had about a 45-minute conversation, and Dad is somebody who always wants the best for his children, he goes, "Well, son, I completely understand. You know, let's go talk to Mother."

So, it was midnight by the time I got to the house in Laredo and Mother was asleep, and so, we go to the master bedroom where Mom was and Dad goes, "Look who's here." And so, Mother asked a question, "Well, what are you doing here? I thought you were taking a biochemistry exam in about four days," because we'd always ask her to say a prayer before every exam. That started at Yale because I thought I'd flunk every test. When I told her what my new plans were and she goes, "Nothing of it," and she scolded both Dad and myself, Dad for agreeing, and that following morning, we took the 6 a.m. Texas International flight out of Laredo back to Dallas. She made Dad stay in class with me for three or four days, and we both agreed that the wrath of Mother was not worth it. We did not want to experience that again, that medical school would be a lot easier.

Well, anyhow, Southwestern Medical School ended up actually being a glorious time and there I was exposed to what I believe some of the greatest faculty that I've had the opportunity to work with, and it was Michael Brown who eventually got a Nobel laureate, but it's the power of how a faculty member can influence a young student. He asked me, "What are your plans?" I said, "Well, my plans are to go back to Laredo and really join my father's practice." He goes, "Well, have you ever thought about pursuing a career in academic medicine?" He was already thinking about how important it is to identify a young, bright, talented student to become the future pipeline of faculty members in academic health centers. And so, really, Michael Brown was the one who encouraged me to pursue a career in academic surgery. He wrote my letter of recommendation to Mass General. When I got accepted to Mass General, I ran back to Michael Brown and told him how ecstatic I was, and his remarks were, "Don't disappoint me." And so, I often will go back to him and ask him, "Have I disappointed you yet, Michael?" He goes, "No, but there's still time."

Well, anyhow, from there I was exposed to just incredible physicians, physician scientists, and that's where I fell in love with the field of pediatric surgery. From Mass General Hospital, I went to Johns Hopkins and did a fellowship in both pediatric surgery and transplantation surgery, because I took care of so many children with some terrible hepatic insufficiency problems.

But anyhow, at the end of my fellowship at Johns Hopkins, I was offered a wonderful opportunity to join the faculty of Hopkins, and that was to be the director of their pediatric transplant program. Well, I was about to sign on the dotted line, I came running home to the house to Graciela and my two children, Maria Cristina and Barbara, and I told Graciela about this great opportunity, she goes, "Well, that sounds wonderful. I think I'll come and visit you and the children every other

weekend." She had other goals in mind about going back to Texas.

She asked me a question, "Who have been the most important people in your life?" And I go, "Well, my parents, my grandparents, my cousins, my brothers and sisters, and also being in that enriched region of South Texas." And she asked a question, "Well, don't you want your children to be exposed to that environment? Don't you have a responsibility to give back to a region that has given so much to you? Don't you want your children to be exposed to the beautiful Mexican-American culture that we were a part of?" And I asked dad, you know, I was a little confused, and Dad made it crystal clear. Dad said he's still a practicing physician, 52 years as a practicing physician in Laredo, Texas. He said, "Well, are you concerned about that you need to be at a very large academic health center? Because if you are, I think you're missing the point. The point is that the relationship between a physician and a patient is just as powerful and just as important in Cotulla, Texas as it is in Baltimore or in Boston. So, you know, if that's what you're thinking about, I would ask you to re-assess." And we came back to San Antonio and I joined the faculty of the University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio.

No other university, I believe, would've given a young assistant professor the opportunity that the University of Texas gave me. They had the confidence in allowing me to establish a pediatric transplant program in San Antonio. Within five years we built one of the largest pediatric transplant programs in the United States. And it was that university that also allowed me one day to take care of the nanny who actually changed our diapers in Laredo, because one weekend that I was on-call, this person came in with fulminant hepatic failure and I ended up doing her transplant one week later. What are the chances of that happening? It goes back to coming back to the region that gave me so much. And so it was the University of Texas who gave me the platform through Tony's leadership to have the opportunity to become the president of the University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio.

I do have to express to you that when I did tell this colleague of mine at Johns Hopkins Hospital that I declined his offer to become the director of the pediatric transplantation, he commented, "You know, Francisco, I'm really concerned that you're committing academic suicide." Because they had a little problem imagining what the opportunities were in South Texas.

Well, five years I called them later after I started and I asked them, "Could you write a letter of recommendation for me?" And he goes, "Well, of course, Francisco. You must be being promoted to associate professor." And I go, "Well, that

happened last week. But I'm asking whether you'd write a letter of recommendation for me to become president of the Health Science Center." And there was a pause and he goes, "My goodness, things are going well for you."

Well, in December of 2009 when the board of regents asked me to consider being interviewed for the chancellor of the University of Texas System, they did ask for a couple of letters of recommendation. I couldn't help myself. I called this distinguished surgeon from Johns Hopkins and asked him, "Could you write me a letter of recommendation?" And he goes, "What are you up to?" And I go, "Well, I've been asked to interview for the chancellorship of the University of Texas System, one of the great institutions of higher E.D. in the world." And he goes, "My goodness. Can I get a job with you?" And I go, "I don't know. You be committing academic suicide."

Well, I'm also told that you want to hear a little bit about my personal story, and I want to begin before that addressing some concerns that I have seen as I've made my way throughout Texas and throughout this nation, concerns that must be a part of our continuing dialogue about education - Congressman Hinojosa - and the future of this great nation. The Hispanic population of Texas, as we all know, will soon be a majority. It is absolutely appropriate that we focus our attention not only on highlighting the successes of Latinos across the nation but more importantly on nurturing the talents and aspirations of the young Latinos who will soon take their rightful place as leaders at every level of governance and public service. This is exactly what this organization does.

These young people we're talking about stand on the strong foundation of courageous men, such as our ambassador, and women who have worked over generations to advance the cause of equal participation and responsibility, and we now stand at the threshold of the realization of their dreams. We share the obligation to usher in this new era in a way that makes all Americans grateful for its arrival, but it also means that we must be taking advantage of the opportunities in overcoming the challenges that affect disparities in public education.

A complete education, an education built at the intersection of knowledge and action, an education that harnesses great lessons of science, of literature, of history and the arts, is the greatest gift that we can give our children. And it is the bedrock on which leadership is built. The poet, Robert Frost, wrote verse with such a rich intersection of disciplines, and you can glean this from a lecture that Frost delivered in 1937 when he delved into what discipline, if any, was closest to poetry.

The great poet found at first glance that it was science. Frost said that science might be nearer to poetry than most because it is nothing if it is not achievement and if it is not creative. Frost also found akin to poetry and philosophy because this discipline fosters flashes of light, and he found it in athletics because poetry stirs words into motion, and in the English department who are keepers of the text. And so, if these various disciplines had not intersected in his own education, one questions whether his beautiful verses might have ever been written. Can you imagine a world without his lines from *The Road Not Taken* and listen to Frost's words? And so I'll be telling this with a sigh, somewhere ages and ages since hence, "Two roads diverged in a wood and I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."

Well, what an immeasurable loss it would've been for us if we did not have this verse to turn to today when pondering our life's choices. And those roads, these divergent roads were very important for me as I was asked to consider the daily life of a wonderful profession, pediatric surgery, or the daily life of a key administrative leader in higher education.

Well, it is an unsettling thought that Robert Frost might not have committed them to paper if he had not been blessed with a strong multidisciplinary education that he received. One's education is fundamentally that important. And unfortunately, as we all know, there is significant risk for the present and future generations if we don't boldly address the challenges that face us. The disciplines of art, science, philosophy, literature, mathematics require for integration of brilliance, not only in literature but in all the fields such as medicine or law or architecture are really sometimes no longer the consistent fabric of many American student's backgrounds. And our educational system is not where it needs to be and in fact continues to remain strained.

So, this crisis in education which I'm so pleased that the Latino Leadership Network is boldly looking at, and particularly in the education of underrepresented minority students, has been called a gathering storm. So, tomorrow's revered leaders that might've been are in jeopardy while we tinker around the margins of the concerted effort that we need to save them.

So, let me give you the evidence starting with a number of baccalaureate degrees that are being lost based on a study *Mortgaging Our Future*. During the 1990s, between nearly one million and 1.6 million baccalaureate degrees were lost among college-qualified high school graduates from low- and moderate-income families. And during this current decade between 1.4 and 2.4 million more baccalaureate degrees are being lost, and these estimates are very conservative.

These numbers exclude students who either did not graduate from high school or graduated but are not college ready. So, imagine as best you can the students' faces behind these staggering numbers since statistics mean absolutely nothing if you don't individualize it and personalize what they mean. So, think of the opportunities that have been missed and the numbers of young people gone astray and visualize the lives that they could've changed, the ideas and the innovations that they could have created in order to make this world a better place. So, it is absolutely essential that we as Hispanic leaders and individuals in this room do everything within our power to address these issues.

So, with these grim statistics affecting not only minorities but Americans, the Robert Frost might not have made it to the present, the odds would have been overwhelmingly that I would've been your speaker today as a Hispanic educated through public schools from a small border town in Laredo in the 1960s and the 1970s. So, given the scenario, in fact, it's probably not an exaggeration to state that only a small percentage of you might be occupying your seats right now. If you had gone through the strained public educational system that faces many of our cities in America, that we are losing a competitive student population, there's only one element of the storm, not only is the strain that I mentioned apparent in public schools at the undergraduate level, but it's also showing itself in our graduate schools, and I'm so pleased that you brought up the issue about how important it is to expose students to research environments, because the evidence is clear, many of those students will pursue graduate education and in fact pursue professional careers and be the future faculty of our American universities.

So, some are forgetting the prophetic words of Alan Greenspan, the former Chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve. He said if we were to remain preeminent in transforming the knowledge of the economic value, the U.S. system of higher education must remain the world leader in generating scientific and technological breakthroughs and in preparing workers to meet the evolving demand of skilled labor. In this instance, Greenspan was wise. He concluded toward the end of his career as chairman, "If you can solve the educational problem, you don't have to do anything else. If you don't solve it, nothing else is going to matter all that much."

The voices expressing concern over the weakening of our global competitiveness and the decline of our educational systems are many, but unfortunately, the response has been slow and the data are compelling: American 12th graders scored near the bottom on the recent Third International Math and Science

Study, U.S. students placed 19th out of 21 developed nations in math and 16 out of 21 in science. So, it's apparent that there is a lot of work to be done and I'm proud to say that the University of Texas System is addressing these challenges in a very deliberate way.

By sharing the blueprint of my career, I hope to give you some unique insight into what we are finding is working to ensure that we prevent the devastation to the educational opportunities for our younger generation.

First of all, I went through the public school systems of Laredo, Texas where I was growing up in a small border city. I was one of 10 children, or am one of 10 children, five sisters and four brothers, and I'm proud to say that during my growing up, the fundamental joy in our family was really, again, the love and respect for each other, the importance of education and then to give back to our communities. So, my grandmother, Abuelita, we'd get together every Sunday for comidas, 36 grandchildren. And Abuelita would each give us a dollar and then she'd take it back, and she'd go this, "This --," you know, we were thinking about super bubbles and candy -- but she'd take it back and she would tell us, "Mijito this is for your college education. This is a savings and I'm saving for you." She kept her word. When we graduated from high school, she'd give us a check and it was to pay for our part of our tuition in college. All 36 of her grandchildren received a college education. All 10 of my brothers and sisters not only received a college education but received a professional degree, and to this day that's what gives my parents the most joy.

Now, mother, as you can imagine, was a disciplinarian. I still have a couple of scars on my back. I may add, some recent. But she did demand of her children one thing because she felt it was under our complete control, and that was an A in conduct. She felt that if we received an A in conduct, you would be respectful of each other, you would listen, you would turn in your homework on time. She realized that not everybody could get an A-plus in calculus or math, but an A in conduct was extremely important to her. One day, three Cigarroa's, two cousins and myself, got a C in conduct. We were terrified. A cousin, my entrepreneur cousin felt that it was easy to convert a C to an A. That's when I learned the lesson of honesty and integrity, a day never to be forgotten in the Cigarroa household.

Well, secondly, growing up along the Texas-Mexico border region again was just a great joy. To really learn and live the best of both worlds, the United States and Mexico. My grandfather was a rancher in Mexico and that's where I learned the love of the land. My father, my uncle, my grandfather were



physicians in that border town, and I had the opportunity to make house calls with my father, seeing firsthand really healthcare disparities because those patients did not have access to healthcare unless the physician went to their home.

As a 15-year-old, I got to see my very first operation. My Uncle Leo, a general surgeon, would have to travel sometimes hundreds of miles because that region of Texas did not have a general surgeon -- going back to the vision of Mr. Sanchez about the importance of providing health professional educational opportunities because there were still profound health disparities.

I saw my very first operation in Roma, Texas with Mario Ramirez. It was a caesarian section. I remember I almost fainted. My vision of becoming a surgeon was rapidly evaporating, and Mario Ramirez, the person who he is, said, "It happens to everybody."

But anyhow, my growing up in Laredo gave me a roadmap of what works on the border in terms of education and the delivery of healthcare. Pediatric surgery, I may add, was the ideal background for leading an academic health center because it exposed me to one of the most demanding surgical fellowships in the world under the mentorship of outstanding clinician scientists. My surgical training provided strong foundations that I continue to rely on today. I learned that a surgeon needs to lead, needs to be decisive, needs to inspire a team of professionals to do their very best. And furthermore, a leader in surgery must hold himself or herself, along with members of the team, accountable when the expected patient outcome is not achieved. It's a microcosm of what goes on in larger life in regards to organizations, especially universities. And I may add there were many times that we were dealt incredible challenges.

I was two months into my fellowship in transplantation surgery, I was involved with a liver transplant of an adult patient with severe portal hypertension, and I was doing this and I was being guided through this operation by the master surgeon. And I remember as I gently placed the clamp on the inferior vena cava, the vein tore like wet tissue paper and the patient exsanguinated and died on the O.R. table. There is nothing more unsettling, more defeating for a surgeon. And you can imagine how badly I felt and then having to speak to the patient's family. Well, I thought I'd have a couple of days to recover from that, four hours later, I was back in the operating room doing another emergency liver transplant with the same master surgeon. I told this master surgeon, "Please, you proceed and I'll assist." Then he goes, "No. You must do the operation. You must learn from the past, but now your total

attention is on this patient, and here is the scalpel." And if that was not a growing experience for me, which means you must be able to pick yourself up, remain focused, and move ahead.

So, really in sum, every step of my collective educational life experience has provided me with the attributes necessary to lead a university system with both academic and health institutions and to acquire the trust of faculty, students, and staff so that I can carry out the mission of the University of Texas System, and I'm forever grateful to that board of regents who realized that despite Francisco Cigarroa not having any administrative background experience, that we felt that he could lead a university.

So, I remember the board gave that affirmation on a Thursday. I thought I would have November and December maybe to go to Harvard Business School and learn a couple of things. This gentleman over here goes, "Francisco, I want you to start on Monday." There is not a moment to lose. And so, I was terrified but here I was on Monday, bright and early, starting as the president of the Health Science Center and I went to Barnes and Nobles that weekend to learn *Robert's Rules of Order*. I hadn't chaired a meeting ever, but Tony said, "You can do it. Just go get that book and you'll be fine." So, anyhow, again, you really have to have individuals who have confidence in you and people who will support you like Tony supported me and has supported me just similar to my family.

Well, what are we doing at the University of Texas System to really address many of these challenges? First of all, we are very involved with what's going on in K through 12 through our institute of public school initiatives. We are involved in inspiring students who are interested in math and science, not only to consider careers in medicine but also to inspire them to be the future teachers of our young students in K through 12 because so many of our students aren't being taught by individuals certified in math and science, and it's important that we educate a cohort of teachers that will inspire our students to pursue those fields, to have a love of lifelong learning, but also to retain those teachers for the long term. Our community colleges in fact are so responsible for educating thousands and thousands of Americans. In San Antonio alone, they are responsible for educating over 70,000 students. And so, again, it's so important for our four-year universities to be very well aligned with our community colleges to facilitate success. In addition, we are providing an incredible amount of scholarships, such that no child who has the focus and the commitment to pursue higher education is ever deprived an opportunity from pursuing a higher education.

And we heard about the importance of science and technology and engineering and medicine, and I'm proud to say that the board of regents really implemented a competitive initiative that is investing over \$2.7 billion for the purposes of enhancing the S.T.E.M. fields across the University of Texas. And let me emphasize that that money is not just focused on the flags of UT-Austin. It is focused throughout the region that we serve which is all of Texas, with many of our campuses being along the Texas-Mexican border: UT-Brownsville, UT-Pan Am, UT-SA, UT-AP and UTEP. Imagine how transformative this can be.

So, then without these experiences, I would not have had the choices so beautifully described by Robert Frost as two diverging roads which for me came as a decision whether to practice medicine exclusively as a pediatric and as a transplant surgeon or to lead an academic health center as president and then the University of Texas System as Chancellor.

Tony knows very well, he was one of the very first individuals in October of 2008, about, I guess it was maybe the summer of 2008 that I called Tony. Tony has always been a great counselor to me. Now, Tony, "You know, Tony, I met all my objectives as president of the health science center. I've fixed the practice plan, I've enhanced philanthropy, I really changed the culture of this university. I believe it's time for me to go back to something I love to do every day which is pediatric and transplant surgery," because I continue to take call every other weekend. Tony said, "You know, Francisco, that's a great decision. You've accomplished your goals. It's time to set a new horizon." Little did I know -- in fact I announced in public that I was going back to surgery. Again, it was completely unexpected that the board of regents would ask me to again consider leading the University of Texas System. A very competitive process, I had to interview, I had to compete, but they wanted me not to close that door. So, again, another road -- should I do this or should I go back to pediatric surgery?

I brought it down to its element. The element was I came to the conclusion that higher education saves lives. Think about it. Literacy improves public health. It improves the economic vibrancy of this nation. It improves the national security, not only of this nation but the world. And if I could do a part of enhancing University of Texas System's success, then I felt I wasn't far from the Hippocratic Oath of improving the quality of life for others and, thus I made the conclusion to go ahead and interview.

Well, as Sandra Day O'Connor, the former U.S. Supreme Court justice so beautifully expressed, "In order to cultivate a set of leaders with legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry, it is

necessary that the path to leadership be visibly open to talented and to qualified individuals of every race and ethnicity. All members of our heterogeneous society must have confidence in the openness and integrity of the educational institutions that provide this training." So, let us ensure that incredible choices and junctures are open for future generations through the choices that we are making in public service. These choices have to do with which students we are reaching out to, which federal and state policies we may choose to become involved with, and ways to buttress our educational system in whatever manner we can in order to achieve a diverse, talented student pool from elementary school all the way to graduate education.

I may add that people prosper or fail, careers are developed or lost depending on what we choose to do, which path we choose to take, so we cannot any longer risk complacency as we face a looming storm that is nothing short of a public health crisis if we don't fix it.

So, we must ensure, in closing, that the student platform remains wonderfully competitive, diverse, open, and bountiful, that we ensure that our little children from kindergarten through college pursue knowledge through a deep love of learning, which can cross disciplines in creativity and flashes of brilliance, and that we must ensure that our educational institutions become conduits to serving the greater good. This moment in history demands such a collective effort in the spirit of what is best for our country, for our society, and for this world, so, let us choose to seize the moment and follow inspired decisions to their realization, many of the goals and principles of the Latino Leadership Network embraces. So, my belief is that this will make a world of differences for the next generation and generations to come.

Mickey, thank you very much for allowing me to express a little bit about my background, my passion for education, and the role that the University of Texas plays in making our nation more vibrant, more prosperous in this world a better place to live. Thank you.

[End of remarks]

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