

**An Academic Community
of *Hermandad*:
Research for the Educational
Advancement of Latin@s (REAL),
a Motivating Factor for First-Tier
Tenure-Track Latina Faculty**

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Introduction

Elsa Cantú Ruiz is an independent scholar and Margarita Machado-Casas is a professor in the Department of Bicultural and Bilingual Studies of the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Texas at San Antonio, San Antonio, Texas.

Research studies have found that an integral part of being a tenure-track faculty member is the relationship between the higher education institution and individual faculty members (Mawdsley, 1999). Tenure-track positions are competitive spaces that demand and expect assistant professors to excel in publishing, teaching, and scholarly activity. Astin, Antonio, Cress, & Astin (1997) found that, “At least 60% or more of the faculty of color reported ‘somewhat extensive’ to ‘extensive’ stress about the review/promotion process compared to only 44% of white faculty” (p. 81). The expectations and the daunting demands often lead the faculty member to feel isolated and to fear not getting promoted or tenured. As Rhoades-Catanach and Stout (2000) noted, tenure-track decisions

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have long-term consequences not only for the institution but also for the candidate. Mentoring, as other research studies have noted allows new faculty members to assuage feelings of isolation, and emotional trauma (Lang, 2002). Mentoring can also help in the promotion and tenure process; oftentimes faculty members who are not awarded tenure claim that they were insufficiently mentored (Fish, 2002). This article explores the experiences of two Latina first-year tenure-track faculty who while navigating and negotiating their new roles as assistant professors, joined a support group, Research for the Educational Advancement of Latin@s (REAL). Further, the article chronicles and reflects on the challenges faced by these two Latinas during their first-year as assistant professors at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA). Moreover, this article examines the role of REAL in their professional development and motivation to stay in the academy as Latina faculty working in a research-oriented HSI.

Context

UTSA has been designated a Hispanic Serving Institution. The Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) defined such institutions as “colleges, universities, or systems/districts where total Hispanic enrollment constitutes a minimum of 25% of the total enrollment” (HACU’s website). With a 44% Hispanic student body, UTSA more than qualifies as a HSI; additionally it serves a with a historically underserved population in a rapidly growing region in Texas (UTSA’s Strategic Plan: 2016). Because UTSA is an aspiring research institution, it has tightened the demands for tenure and newly hired faculty must face stricter and more rigorous criteria for promotion and tenure, UTSA’s goal is to be the first HSI to attain premier research one status.

Methodology

The methodological approach for this study relies on Crewall’s work in the area of narrative research. Thus, for this study narrative research becomes the lens through which the two participants who provide stories about their lives during their first-year as assistant professors negotiate their experiences. The study explores mentoring, the role of REAL and the professors’ experiences in general. The autobiographical writings used by the participants will be texts known as ethno-autobiographical because they will include the “development and growth of [their own personal] life over a period of time; moreover, they will highlight that part of [their] identity that relates to their ethnic heritage” (Shirinian, 1997, p. 77). Ethno-autobiographical inquiry is a self-exploratory journey that investigates the ethnic, cultural, historical, ecological, and gender background of the participants. This methodological approach allows the authors to reflect on the narratives and to arrive at certain conclusions.

Participants

The participants in this study are two Latina assistant professors at an HSI in their first-year as tenure-track faculty and their relationship with REAL as a community of support as they negotiate the demands of academia. Elsa, a Chicana from South Texas fully bilingual in both English and Spanish, is a first generation college graduate. She moved from her hometown of Laredo, a city on the border, to San Antonio when she accepted an assistant professor position at UTSA. Margarita, a multilingual Afro-Latina immigrant from Nicaragua who migrated to the U.S. as a young adult, like Elsa, is also a first generation college graduate and an assistant professor at UTSA. In the study the professors (Elsa and Margarita) write their ethno-autobiographical texts and throughout the study the professors switch voices as they share their *testimonios*, or stories. The Latina Feminist Research Group (2001) referred to such life narratives as *testimonios* in *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*.

By writing their own stories, the authors' engage in a process similar to the one experienced by the Latina Feminist Group's *Testimonios* [testimony]. That group collaboratively authored sections of the book, *Telling to Live*, while also working on individual pieces and offering each other feedback and support. Their process as described in the introduction speaks to the difficulties and challenges of crossing boundaries, even those that exist between *Latinidades* (p. 9). In the process of *testimoniando*, the group arrives at a method; the very act of *testimoniando* becomes a way of theorizing and of "generating knowledge" (p. 12). As Cherrie Moraga (1981) writes in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, sometimes it is easier to come together between the covers of a book than in coalition. Yet, the members of REAL have worked collaboratively and supported each other in feminist practice. In keeping with *testimonio* practice, within the manuscript and throughout the participants' narratives, Spanish will be interspersed in their *testimonios*, as it is the first language of both professors; doing this keeps their voices' authenticity and it adds value to the identity and culture of the participants.

Elsa

One of eleven siblings, I was born and raised in the border town of Laredo, Texas. I received my primary and secondary education in the Laredo public schools, and graduated from the local university. I became a secondary mathematics teacher and taught for over 25 years in a predominately Hispanic/Latino school district bordering Mexico. I eventually earned a Master's Degree and joined the administrative ranks of the district. I became a K-12 mathematics coordinator and supervised the mathematics education of the district. I was also the district testing coordinator and oversaw all local, state, and national testing processes for the district.

Wanting to influence the mathematics proficiency of Latin@s, I decided to pursue a doctoral degree so I could teach teachers how to teach mathematics with

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a sense of culturally relevant pedagogy. I received my Ph.D. from Texas A&M University in College Station in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis on Mathematics Education, moved to San Antonio, Texas, and accepted a tenure-track position as assistant professor in the College of Education and Human Development at UTSA where I teach undergraduate and graduate courses and currently teach the practicum and methods courses for pre-service mathematics teachers and graduate courses for in-service mathematics teachers.

Margarita

Civil unrest and political instability brought me to the United States at the age of fourteen. Originally from Nicaragua, my family migrated once before to Panama, before coming to the United States. After arriving in the U.S., my family settled in California where I earned Bachelor's and Master's degrees. In California, I worked as a bilingual teacher and was a community activist who worked to improve the lives of my students and their families. I obtained my Doctoral degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where I worked with newly arrived Latino immigrant families and was actively engaged with the community. I then completed a Post-Doctoral fellowship in Latino education and mixed methodology, also at UNC-Chapel Hill. After contemplating many options, I decided to come to Texas because I wanted to teach in a HSI in order to work in a place where I could motivate minority students and mentor them in the process of becoming professionals. I currently work in the Bicultural-Bilingual Studies Department where I teach undergraduates, master's, and doctoral students.

El Laberinto: Finding Our Way as First-Year Tenure-Track Faculty

Laberinto is a Spanish word that means maze or labyrinth. A *laberinto* contains places that are complicated and uncertain. When you enter a *laberinto* you don't really know the way or how you will get to the end. There is some uncertainty as to which way to go, or if the path that you have chosen is the "right" way. As one goes through the *laberinto* one feels overwhelmed because of the uncertainty of where to go. The one thing we do know about this *laberinto* is that one needs to figure out the road(s) that lead to the exit.

Being a new tenure-track faculty member in a higher education institution is like entering a "*laberinto*" because the need to figure out the road(s) to get tenure is evident, but the way to get there is uncertain. New tenure-track "faculty of color are less likely to be fully integrated into the academic culture at higher education institutions" (Barrett, 2005, p. 1) and thus, they may not be as likely to earn tenure or promotions at the same rate as their White colleagues. Latina academics often-times experience overt and covert forms of marginalization. For example, they may encounter racism, sexism, and classism, as well as self-doubt, the imposter syndrome, isolation, and invisibility (Achor & Morales, 1990; de la Luz Reyes & Halcon, 1988; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Turner, 2002; Turner & Myers, 2000;

Turner, González, & Wood, 2008; Turner & Thompson, 1993). Being first-generation professors, even though we may feel competent in our respective disciplines, we are unfamiliar with academic culture. Hence, the uncertainty of not knowing if we are doing the right thing, not knowing what is expected, and trying to keep up with the responsibilities of being a new faculty member constitute critical challenges for first year faculty members. In addition, academic culture and its specialized language must be learned and mastered to successfully navigate the academic laberinto. But, it is the uncertainty that can cause the most distress. Often times this uncertainty feels overwhelming. It might feel like one is drowning and needs a lifesaver—a *salvavidas*.

REAL: A *Salvavidas* for First-Year Tenure-Track Latinas

Although we teach in an HSI, we still work under the foundations of the White patriarchal cannon (Cleveland, 2004), which means that navigating through academia is like swimming in a “Whitestream” (Grande, 2000; Urrieta, 2004) pool of bureaucracy, politics, and work. The goal is to stay afloat and not drown. However, when one does not know how to “swim” or navigate the system, one feels an overpowering sense of drowning. Not being able to stay afloat, one is in high need of a *salvavidas*, a lifesaver. Right when we were feeling overburdened and undervalued, we were introduced to the newly-formed collaborative group, REAL, which we considered our lifesaver. According to Alanis, Cuero, and Rodríguez (2009):

Research for the Educational Advancement of Latin@s (REAL) [pronounced in Spanish as “reh-ahl”] is an interdisciplinary research collaborative housed in The Women’s Studies Institute at The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA). It is primarily comprised of Latina tenure-track faculty from UTSA and Trinity University who are interested in researching Latina/o issues in education from various perspectives (e.g., educational leadership and policy studies, bicultural/bilingual studies, curriculum and instruction, special education, and educational psychology). The purpose of REAL is to represent the voices of a new generation of Latinas in the academy and to document their journey through specific values of support, persistence, and legitimacy. The primary goals of this collaborative are: to engage in active interdisciplinary research with a focus on Latina/o issues, to present collaboratively at national and international conferences, and to provide collegial support through the tenure-track process. (p. 243)

The goal of REAL reflects what other researchers have stated about the necessity to advocate for equity for communities of color when conducting research, publishing, and living as Latino academicians (Bettez, López, & Machado-Casas, 2009; Murillo, 2002; Nieto, 1999; Suarez-Orozco & Paez, 2002; Trueba, 2004). Similarly, other groups have been started in order to meet the necessity to support faculty of color—particularly women in academic spaces. The *Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* (MALCS), was created by Chicanas in California in the 1980s as a support group for Chicana faculty around the U.S. Eventually, the

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MALCS organization widened its mission to include Latinas and Native American faculty. Their welcome statement reads:

MALCS is a national organization of Chicanas/Latinas and Native American women working in academia and in community settings with a common goal: to work toward the support, education and dissemination of Chicana/Latina and Native American women's issues. Through networking, occasional meetings and our annual Summer Institute, MALCS members share information, offer support, and continue their struggle for social justice. (html// [http://www.malcs.org/p. 1](http://www.malcs.org/p.1))

Another way MALCS supports women faculty of color is by offering a space where they can come together for various aspects of academic professional development. For example, the MALCS journal, *Chicana/Latina Studies*, has as an editorial practice that includes intensive writing workshops for aspiring authors; these workshops occur during the annual meeting of the organization and benefit academics early in their career with their writing skills.

For the purposes of survival in academia, REAL's founding members, decided to come together as they maneuvered through the process of getting tenure. As new Latin@ faculty were hired new members came on board. First meeting informally, and later as the group got bigger formally during monthly meetings and retreats, REAL became a space for academic, emotional, and professional support to the over twenty members of REAL. Through REAL, we were able to obtain the necessary knowledge, motivation, and mentorship to navigate the complexities of academia as first-year Latina tenure-track faculty. REAL provides partnerships, collaboration, socialization, and support to succeed in the laberinto that is academia.

The *Laberinto* of the Untenured, Tenure-track Faculty

When one thinks of academia, one immediately thinks about teaching, publishing, research, and tenure. However, one does not think about other important factors that can greatly affect our success such as the emotional aspects, and the need to feel part of a supportive community Elizabeth, a member of REAL, expresses on how supportive REAL has been to her.

Through our participation in the group, members of REAL learned about each other's families and celebrated milestones such as special recognitions and awards, weddings, and birthdays, beyond the university premises. These activities provided me and my children with the opportunity to become more integrated into the local community, and helped us to establish better work-life balance.

Similarly, AnneMarie, also a member of REAL, shares how REAL has been an integral part for her.

I moved to this city not knowing anyone, except for the people with whom I interviewed for this position and two friends from graduate school. Almost immediately, members of the group invited me to join in social events, such as birthday parties, and introduced me to other local scholars with interests in

Latino issues. To have members of the group take the initiative and reach out to me made a world of difference in coming to feel at home in this city. I know that these personal connections and activities really eased the loneliness and isolation I could have otherwise felt in moving to this unfamiliar place.

As non-tenured track faculty REAL provided us with three major components necessary for surviving our first-year: (1) emotional support, (2) academic guidance, and (3) community building. In the following section, each of these is described in detail. In addition, Elsa and Margarita share their own individual perspectives on the first two components and a combined perspective on the importance of building community in a system that operates around the discourse of individual success and isolation.

REAL as Emotional Support

There are many emotions that faculty experience when going through the first couple of years in academia. Emotions such as loneliness, sadness, feelings of “being undervalued, overburdened and often the subjects of unequal treatment” (Saunderson, 2002, abstract) are common among first-year untenured professors. However, emotions/feelings are not valued in academics. Often times in academia we are taught to avoid our emotions or at least to hide them. According to Brochbank and McGill (2007), “emotion is not and rarely has been valued in academic life... academics have been trained to ignore, mistrust and devalue emotion” (p. 53). Academics fail to recognize the significance of emotions when they should be aware of how emotions affect the productivity of faculty, in particular first year and junior faculty. Without adding all the specifics of teaching, service and publishing, going through the tenure process is emotional in and of itself. REAL provides a guide to get through the tenure laberinto that leads you to the other side (tenure) by recognizing that emotions are important and valid in this process and by providing the necessary support. The following examples show how REAL provided emotional support to each of us.

Elsa

The “imposter syndrome” or feelings of self-doubt, especially for anyone who has just stepped into a new role (Clance, Dingman, Reviere, & Stober, 1995) was taking an effect on me. The impostor phenomenon has been studied since at least the 1970’s when Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, two female clinical psychologists from Georgia State University coined the term to describe “successful women who, despite reaching significant intellectual milestones ranging from advanced degrees to professional awards, cannot internalize their success or convince themselves they deserve it” (Kaplan, 2009, p. 468). Since then other researchers (e.g., Brems, Baldwin, Davis, & Namyniuk, 1994; Jarrett, 2010) have acknowledged such fears in adolescents and adults of all ages. Early in my first semester as an assistant professor, I started feeling isolated and lonely. Loneliness and sadness were emotions becoming more and more common and I was feeling like a phony

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in a place where I did not belong, or as the saying goes I was feeling “*como chango en mecate ajeno*” (a monkey swinging on another’s rope). I was surely suffering the imposter syndrome.

One afternoon after a long morning of meetings, I was feeling overwhelmed with all the new jargon and all the learning that I needed to do. I was feeling that I did not fit in. All the talk about service, teaching, and research was impossible for me to handle. “How to do all three?” I wondered. I left the office feeling very low and went straight to the mall bought a very expensive sweater (that later my husband reminded me I did not need because of my already packed closet). I also bought a pair of shoes that I definitely did not need, thinking this would make me feel better. When I got back to the office, a REAL member invited me to go have dinner with them to celebrate a member’s birthday. I must admit I accepted the invitation very reluctantly since I really did not know anyone. Nevertheless, I accepted the invitation and now I am glad that I did. The group offered a warm welcome and invited me to join REAL. I was missing my friends and family, and REAL allowed me to overcome my loneliness by giving me an opportunity to be both a colleague and a friend. They very much reminded me of my Latina friends back home. They offered support and words of encouragement. I realized that I was not the only one who wanted to quit after the first few weeks. They also offered suggestions to help me with my research agenda and invited me to join their writing group and attend their semester writing retreat. REAL helps when we need a space for open honest communication in a friendly, nonthreatening way. It helped me with my loneliness and eased my sadness. REAL showed me the ropes and serendipitously that day when I most needed them, they were there. Now, when I feel the imposter syndrome creep in, I remember that I do belong, that I am not a phony or an imposter. REAL members helped me join the world of academia.

Margarita

A sense of being new is not always the most welcoming. After completing my Ph.D. and a postdoctoral fellowship where I was constantly surrounded by people—the role of a new professor was a shock to me. I was always alone and confined to my desk and my office. Starting as first-year faculty was nerve wracking, I often wondered if what I was doing was right. I felt alone and often wondered if this had been the right decision for me. I felt paralyzed by the fact that everyone around me knew what they were doing and I didn’t. I thought if this is what academia is about—I really don’t want to be part of it. I have to admit, I was depressed by the fact that the world of academia seemed to be about isolation. I began to feel sad, and withdrew myself more and more, until one of my co-workers, a member of REAL, saw me and told me that she wanted to speak to me. We met up in her office and asked me how I was doing, and how the transition was for me. Of course, scared to admit that I was scared, insecure, and felt lonely I told her that everything was fine. She then proceeded to tell me that I was doing way better than she was when she started. She told me that she was scared, that she felt so lonely, and that

she honestly thought about quitting, until she joined the REAL community. She explained what it was and honestly, I was nervous about adding “one more thing” to my already full plate. But, I accepted the invitation. I went to the meeting where I met so many Latina scholars who, asked me about my wellbeing and genuinely cared about my emotional sanity. They proceeded to share their experiences, and how academia can take a toll on your life if you don’t have the emotional support not just at home but also at work. I was so relieved to hear other Latina scholars tell me that I was not the only one, that what I was feeling was normal and that they were there to support me emotionally, help me deal with and discuss the issues that came up. But most importantly, they helped me realize that it was ok, to feel what I was feeling, that I was becoming an academic.

Overall, REAL provides some of the breathing space necessary to survive in academia. The world of a first year tenure track Latina professor with few Latinas as colleagues can be very stressful. Both of us (Elsa and Margarita) had found ways to deal with the stress we were experiencing by withdrawing into ourselves. However, we were reacting to our stress in very unhealthy ways. REAL provided us support and showed us how others have learned to recognize that stress is an emotional condition that can be handled in productive ways. Most critically, REAL served as a Latin@ safe space filled with other Latinas who were already tenured and willing to give us *Consejos* (advice), support, but most importantly, with Latina role models and *guías* (guides) to walk through the *laberinto*, to serve as our *salvavidas* in this process. These Latina *guías* provided a world of possibilities, of “*si se puede*,” and shed light on the fact that although traveling through the *laberinto* of academia is not easy; we too could get through this process just as they had done.

REAL's Academic Guidance

Academic performance is an important part of working in research institutions. It is used to determine whether you will keep your job, whether you are being productive, whether you know how to write and whether you are a good academic. According to Turner and Myers (1999), tenure and promotion are specially troubling and problematic for faculty of color who are at times subjected to higher standards than white faculty. It is the publish or perish game, which carries with it a history of silence, fear, and insecurities which makes it highly competitive to the point where we are often times competing against each other rather than supporting each other. It is a system of imbalanced meritocracy where we are often judged and compared to others who may or may not have the same course load or experience. According to Laden (2009), “faculty of color perceived that they were expected to work harder than White faculty or as some suggested, work twice as hard to be treated as equal” (p. 84). In this system, one knows the outcome (tenure) but not precisely how to achieve it. When the professors (Elsa and Margarita) got hired there weren’t any workshops or clear online guidelines for getting tenured, and the few guidelines that were available were vague and ambiguous. This ambiguity is what makes the

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process so uncertain; since no clear guidelines for becoming a researcher existed, yet we were expected to perform as if we did have these guidelines.

Elsa

Colleagues in my department often told me that publishing was necessary, and I should be doing more of that. They also stressed that I should also be teaching and getting good evaluations and that I should be involved in as much service to the department, college, and university as I could. I was told all these things but no one was telling me how to do all this, or how much was enough. One day, I was at my office with my door open and one of my REAL friends came by to visit. She asked how I was, and offered some advice. She recalled how it was for her the first couple of months in academia and how she also went through the same feelings and emotions I was going through. She offered hints and suggestions that would help me manage my feelings. I confided my concern about my writing and publishing, and how I thought I was the only one in that situation. She guaranteed that others go through the same feelings and she herself did and still does at times. She shared how it had been for her and how she had learned to overcome those moments of self-doubts and uncertainty. I felt comforted.

REAL offers its members a space to come together and network, provide each other support or lend a shoulder to cry on. In addition, REAL also offers writing retreats where the group spends a weekend either at a member's house or at a space away from the university environment and takes advantage of the time to write without worry of the family or work interruptions that can disrupt one's train of thought. We are able to discuss our research agenda and have an opportunity to learn about each other's research projects.

Margarita

There is something about being new faculty in academia. People know that you made it this far because you were able to master the necessary skills to become an "academic." Yet, when one arrives at a university as first year tenure-track faculty, it is difficult to know what an academic is, what we are expected to do, and how to do it. During orientation all I heard was: "You need to publish, publish, publish. You need to keep up with your courses, do service, and be a good colleague." Yet, no one tells you how to get there. On top of the normal feelings one experiences when one is new, one needs to deal with the issue of time management. As a new assistant professor, I did not know how to deal with all of these issues, I was stressed, and felt that my writing was taking a back seat to all of the other responsibilities I had in a heavy service-oriented institution. Also, there were no clear guidelines as to how much we were expected to publish. Some people would say 2-3 peer-reviewed articles a year and others would say 1-2 peer reviewed articles a year. It was so unclear.

During a REAL meeting, I mentioned something to one of my REAL co-workers who took it upon herself to sit with me. She gave me an example of a plan

that she created to keep track of her publications and to keep her on track. She sat down and explained how much each thing I do counts for and that at the end of the day it is about the publication—so I should give more time to that. She and I also made a writing plan and we began to check each other's work, and we started working with other REAL members. Some were able to go attend writing retreats, and others like myself, would meet during the workday or during lunch to go over and provide feedback on our articles. They gave examples of how others did it, provided writing support, and gave me the faith to believe that this was something we could all achieve. I learned that we were not competing against each other but rather working with each other. I gained a sense that we were together in this and that one person's success was a collective triumph for all. This by far has made me a better academic, and overall a better person.

Both of us felt the pressures placed on new academics. We were both trying hard to keep up and doing our best. However, oftentimes we did not know if what we were doing was the right thing to do or the right way of doing it. There was no blueprint, no guide provided, no directions for us to follow. Nevertheless, REAL through its genuine caring members, provided the guidance, support, assistance, and direction in a one-to-one personal way. REAL provided all these in the best way.

REAL's Community Building

For us REAL was essential in helping us join a learning community that builds on our cultural similarities and accepts our differences. REAL became a bridge that helped us connect with each other through communities that provided learning opportunities and support both socially and academically. As tenure track professors in an HSI, we have united through REAL to ensure that we can successfully educate minority students. We have a common goal, to advance the education of Latin@s. As a group, we recognize that what we do in academia today influences the lives of future generations of Latin@s in the U.S. Within REAL, we are accepted for who we are. It provides a space for us to use the language(s) we speak at home and find our own identity. More importantly, it provides for us a sense of belonging—a sense that *en las buenas y en las malas* [through thick and thin] we have someone that understands and is there to offer a cheer or a helping hand. The following examples show how REAL provides a sense of community for us.

Elsa

Growing up my mother would always make sure that we had at least cake and ice cream for our birthdays. As we grew older, we were allowed to invite a few neighborhood friends and have a party. I continued our tradition even after I got married and would celebrate my birthday with my family every year. When I moved to San Antonio to take a position in academia, I left most of my family and all of my friends back home. Therefore, when my first birthday in San Antonio came along, I wanted to celebrate with friends. I invited my REAL friends to celebrate my birthday and my new home. My REAL colleagues became my “real” friends

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in a very short time and are a great social group to celebrate not only birthdays but also accomplishments, honors, article acceptance or “just because” occasions. This is how *hermandad*, sisterhood, comes about.

Margarita

Coming from a close-knit family and in an environment that was communal to San Antonio, where I literally did not know anyone, was a shock to me. And although, migrating to San Antonio was not as difficult as migrating from another country in a way it felt very similar. I felt lost, and in a constant state of surveillance. As a mother of three, I felt that academia was not kid-friendly place that created a sense of guardedness in me. I felt that I was accepted but it was not necessarily my family. Until one day, I was invited to a birthday party for one of my REAL colleague’s daughters and there we had the opportunity to speak about community building as academics and as mothers. After a conversation, a series of REAL colleagues began to approach me concerned about my family and they began to introduce me to others where were on the same boat. Today, I have a network of REAL Latina professors, and others who are not in REAL but were introduced to me via REAL, who are become a big part of my life. These colleagues have become my survival network inside academia and outside.

The social component of the work environment is an important part of academic experiences. It should be an integral part of life as junior faculty is in a place that often times is away from home and family. I will be honest that is one thing that I did not consider when accepting a position in academia. Now I find it is an important element of this environment. Socialization within and without the academic environment is good for our own social aspect and just as good for our academic wellbeing.

Both Elsa and Margarita agree that they felt that part of community building is not only the academic support one gets from collegial collaborative groups such as REAL but, equally as important is the friendships, the kinships, and the *hermandad* (sisterhood) that are established when opportunities for these spaces are provided.

***Hermandad* through REAL**

As first-year faculty members, we deal with so many new things, our new jobs, our new lives, and new sense of self. The expectations of the *laberinto* often times are overwhelming and stressful, especially because one is isolated and alone in the process, and because most academic institutions lack *hermandad*. *Hermandad* is the Spanish word for sisterhood. According to Bettez, Lopez, and Machado-Casas (2009), *hermandad* is made-up of a strong tie that keeps women of color united and conscious of the struggles in academia amidst their differences. It is a way to recognize that as women of color in academia we are here together, and each other’s cause is a shared cause for voice, visibility, sustainability, and empowerment in academia. It is the legacy of the struggle of those who came before and paved the

way for us, which we will leave here in this world as Latina women. It is a legacy we will leave to the hundreds of Latinas who will follow us—it is a collective reality that leads to enduring collective success.

REAL has provided the professoriate *hermandad*, based on respect, support, shared concerns, and common goals—Latinas achieving tenure. As first-year tenure track faculty, REAL has provided us with the necessary assistance to be able to succeed as Latinas in academia. They have done so by covering the three major aspect of the professoriate life: (1) emotional, (2) academic, and (3), community. The emotional because they have made it visible that getting tenured is an emotional process that can take a toll on one's life, productivity, and reality. They have also provided us with real life examples of how to minimize our reactions to those emotions and to be “ok” with being emotional in academia. REAL has served as an emotional tool kit where one acknowledges that as a professor one cannot disconnect from one's feelings, yet we need to learn to recognize them, deal with our anxieties, not let it paralyze us, and continue with our work. REAL has provided us with academic support, such as how to manage our time (teaching, service, and writing). It has provided us with writing collegiality, the freedom to use our first language, and with an array of writing partners willing to work with us and guide us. In fact, this is how Elsa and Margarita got to work together on this article, because REAL provided the space for us to get to know each other and our experiences and to connect. Lastly, in the isolated world of the professoriate, REAL has served as a way to build community, to stay connected, to work collectively, to celebrate our achievements, and to help each other in our failures. REAL has served as an extended family that provides *hermandad* for Latina faculty.

Conclusion

Academia is a *laberinto* that is difficult to maneuver because although as academicians we are taught about theory, research, and writing—we are unfortunately not taught how to survive the difficult world of academia. In many cases we are asked the questions of whether we want to go to a teaching university or a research university. Often, the only distinction that is given between the two is that in a research university we will have to publish or perish. Yet, not much is said about all the other elements of a tenure track position which for many turns out to be the most difficult those unspoken, invisible, and intangible aspects of academia that perhaps one just takes for granted but actually have a lasting effect on the successful outcome of many Latinas in academia. As previously stated, the *laberinto* of academia was separated by different factors: (1) Emotional—the reality that going through tenure is an emotional process one that requires support and an emotional tool kit of ways to deal with and work pass allowing paralysis because of these emotions. (2) Academic—because it provided us with the human capital via role models and guides who help us through the intricate process of writing, and what it means to become an academic. (3) It helped us built community inside and outside academia—making it “ok” to have familial

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relationships with colleagues. REAL also built community by connecting us to a network of educated Latinas outside of academia who we can count on as well. These had equal weight and influence on our wellbeing and success. But without a doubt, the most critical and timely was REAL

To have someone throw a *salvavidas* (lifesaver) when you are drowning is a great relief. You hang on to it until you feel safe and can let go. That was what REAL was to us. We were desperately trying to successfully navigate the *labyrinth* of academia. And just when we were feeling isolated, lonely, and overwhelmed with the challenges and demands that being a first-year tenure-track faculty member entails, someone threw us a *salvavidas*. For us our *salvavidas* was the collaborative known as REAL. REAL provided for us the tools to build a unique *hermandad* that encourages collaboration, a collective awareness of what our goal is, what it means to be part of the academic world, and how to survive and be productive within this space. We hope that as the number of Latinas in academia continues to increase, other support *salvavida* groups emerge not only in the professoriate, but much earlier such as in graduate school like MALCS. These types of support groups are imperative and vital to the future success of people of color in academia.

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