

THE CHRONICLE INTERVIEW

# ‘We Live Very Segregated Lives’

By *Eric Hoover* | MARCH 12, 2017

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Mark Abramson for The Chronicle

Stella M. Flores

**S**tella M. Flores doesn't just talk about college access. She also wades into big pools of data to see how education policies affect low-income and underrepresented students on the path to — and through — college. Complexity? She embraces it.

Ms. Flores, an associate professor of higher education at New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education,

and Human Development, has written about demographic changes, admissions and financial-aid practices, immigrant students, and English-language learners. Recently she helped assess the "returns" for students who attend minority-serving institutions.

Growing up in Edinburg, Tex., near the Mexican border, Ms. Flores had role models for success that many teenagers lack. Her students now examine such barriers in "Inequality in American Education," a graduate course she teaches at NYU. A major theme: How early experiences in education can affect long-term outcomes.

Ms. Flores, who is also director of access and equity at NYU's Steinhardt Institute for Higher Education Policy, spoke with *The Chronicle* about the factors that predict college success and why society fears demographic change.

**How did your own experiences lead you to this field of research?**

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My parents, they really created the pathway. They were the lowest of low-income, who managed to get through high school and graduate from college. My mother came from Mexico as a child. My father was also a first-generation college student. He went to college because my mother said she wouldn't marry him if he didn't. He ended up finishing before she did. So I never had this expectation that I wasn't going to college.

Financial-aid programs made going to college possible for my parents. They were able to get loans and grants. I grew up understanding how these policies can be formulated to help college access, how these tools can make a difference.

For us it meant entry into the middle class, though it was a kind of unstable middle class — my parents had siblings to support. My mother was a teacher and an assistant principal. My father was a social worker, and he worked on programming that helped

disabled students find a way to college themselves. All that played a role in what I ended up doing.

**Tell me about an insight that has changed your view of access and equity.**

Equity is not just about admissions or outcomes. It's about processes connected to our federal, state, and institutional missions and policies. Every context has its pathway for equity, through laws, policies, programming, and leadership. If you don't set up the processes to have a good chance of achieving an equitable outcome, you are just counting the same numbers. To be equitable, you have to look deep within your processes and motivations.

**By focusing on students' personal qualities, like grit and persistence, can one lose sight of the role that those systemic supports and policies play?**

We often approach questions from our most comfortable disciplinary perspectives. That can be a natural reaction, but it is certainly not a sufficient strategy to reduce inequality in who gets access to higher education. Public policy absolutely can affect access to, and success in, college. We have evidence that changes in federal and state laws regarding financial aid make a difference in student decisions. This doesn't discount the contributions of other disciplines in explaining behavior. Drive absolutely matters, but so does the state you are educated in, and the likelihood that you will receive aid.

**You've written about viewing college success through a "K-20 lens." What does that mean?**

With access to great data, from kindergarten on, we looked closely at metrics that relate to college completion. Of course a student's



grade-point average plays an important role, but we also looked at racial segregation and access to rigorous courses in school. That played a bigger role in predicting the gap in college completion than the institutions themselves. The moral of the story here is that we might not have our thumb on the right pulse.

If we're really serious about college completion, we can't just talk about higher education. There's something along that sector border between K-12 and college that prevents conversations that need to happen. What if everyone woke up knowing that every day of high school played a role in college completion? How would our policies be different?

**You've helped track long-term effects of being identified as an "English learner" in school. What's the takeaway?**

It's not always a negative. It shouldn't condemn you to not having a college-success story. Once you're identified as an English learner, it can keep you from getting the rigorous courses that set you up for college.

But those who get back on track often do better than English speakers. Language is not the culprit for many students who don't succeed. We have early evidence that participation in an English-learning program actually has positive outcomes on those students, that it helps them get better access to rigorous courses and graduate from high school faster. So we have to rethink language as a variable in studies.

**How could the admissions process better serve underrepresented students?**

Many institutions have great ideas but often don't have enough resources to execute a comprehensive plan of admissions. However, we know what it is likely to *exclude*. And these exclusionary practices are often associated with a narrow focus on test scores, recruiting in places that are comfortable and easy to go, and outreach that is too late in the game.

What I'd like to see is information campaigns take a more multicultural character. To date it has been extremely focused on the average English-speaking family. Over half of the growth in population has been by immigrants and children of immigrants. Our interventions are not reflecting the reality of who's coming to college.

How might today's political climate, especially the debate over immigration, reshape the conversation about access?

Way back when, I looked at the effect of state "Dream Acts," and we know having in-state tuition policies increases enrollment for undocumented students. Research has shown these policies work. These students are college-ready human capital that we don't want to waste.

Years ago we saw more compassion for Dreamers. Now the immigration debate is in a different place. It's about border security, not letting people in. The irony is that these people have been contributing to our country. The question is whether we are going to make policies based on emotion or based on efficiency.

What's missing from the college-access conversation?

Sometimes it's easier not to talk about race and just talk about income. When the majority of students in public schools are nonwhite, we're not in a place where race can be left out of the conversation.

**I've heard demographic shifts described as a problem that colleges must endure. Do you hear it, too?**

The world is changing, and it's OK to acknowledge there's going to be some discomfort. At the same time, we need to reframe demographic change as an opportunity — an opportunity to keep our nation afloat.

Part of what's happening is that we live very segregated lives. Schools are very segregated, neighborhoods are very segregated, and that's where a lot of fear is coming from. The college classroom may be the only shot for some students to be around students who do not look like them. The college classroom is where diversity shines its light.

**What have you learned from the students in your own classroom?**

I'm constantly inspired by the side work they're doing. They're very social-justice-oriented, out in the community working with college-access groups and immigration groups.

I had this white student write a paper on black feminism. I was like, "Wow!" I was really impressed with her capacity to go beyond her own social circle and social norms to put herself into something other people might think is too radical to embrace. I find that brave. That's what we need as we're facing all these challenges in education.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

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