

FINDING A WAY:

Developing the Center for Mexican American Studies at UH

By Tatcho Mindiola, Jr.

The impetus for the Mexican American Studies Program at the University of Houston came from the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO), a student group that began pressuring the University to establish Mexican American Studies in 1970.¹ In the spring of 1971, a committee of faculty and MAYO representatives developed a proposal and the program became a reality in the fall of 1972. The university pledged to create several joint faculty positions between departments and the program with fifty percent of their salaries paid by the departments and fifty percent by the program. Though these joint positions proved to be controversial, they nevertheless laid the foundation for the legitimacy of Mexican American Studies as an area of interdisciplinary study.

[It has been suggested that] we should change our name to Hispanic Studies to reflect the diversity of the Hispanic community. But first of all, historically speaking, this earth here is Mexican earth, and it is filled with Mexicans' sweat and blood. We are the largest group of all Hispanic groups, especially in Texas. The rich history of the Alamo, San Jacinto battlegrounds, and our relationship with Mexico . . . is very strong and very prominent.²

Initially, it proved challenging to find a permanent director. The university twice turned to graduate students as interim directors and once to an assistant professor because few Mexican Americans held positions as professors either at the university or nationally. Guadalupe Quintanilla, a doctoral student in the department of curriculum and in-

struction in the College of Education, became the program's first director. Serving until 1978, she received \$25,000 for the program from the state legislature with the assistance of then Texas Representative Ben Reyes, largely as a result of MAYO representatives lobbying for the funds. Quintanilla fostered courses in literature, culture, politics, history, and folklore; began recruiting faculty and instructors; established a certificate in Mexican American Studies; and vigorously promoted the program to the public. Margarita Melville, an assistant professor of anthropology, served as the second interim director for one year. Hired in 1975 in a joint appointment, Professor Melville was the first Mexican American professor in anthropology. The program named Victor Nelson Cisneros as its third interim director. Cisneros, a doctoral student in history at UCLA, had come to Texas to gather information for his dissertation.

This succession of interim directors made it possible for the university administration to turn a blind eye to Mexican American Studies and delay its funding. When the search for a permanent director continued to prove unsuccessful, members of the faculty approached me to assume the directorship. The year was 1980.

Unless you have an administration that's willing to lean on departments and use their authority to hire faculty, then progress is slow. You are always fighting guerrilla wars of some sort, trying to find a way to do it.³

The university hired me in a joint appointment in 1974 as the first Mexican American faculty member in the department of sociology. At the time, I was writing my dissertation



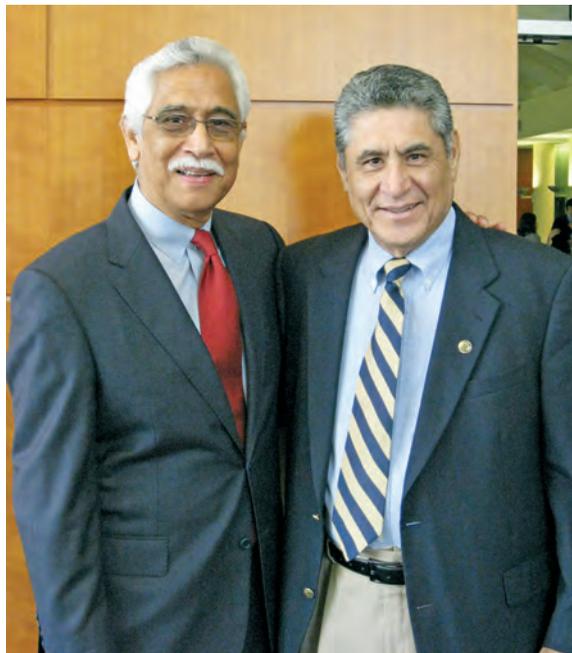
Located in the Cougar Den at the University of Houston, the "Chicano Student Mural," painted by members of MAYO in 1973, represents the history and struggle of Mexican Americans.

to complete my graduate studies at Brown University, where I received my Ph.D. in 1978. As a native Houstonian, my ambitions had always included coming home to teach at the University of Houston and becoming involved in developing Mexican American Studies. When asked to serve as the director, however, I hesitated because I did not feel prepared. I likewise had concerns about gaining tenure, but the faculty's request prevailed primarily because we feared that the program would suffer a severe setback if we failed to name a permanent director.

The program had made gains, but it did little more than sponsor classes because it lacked an adequate budget; without funds, the program could not develop. Indeed, when I became the director, we did not have an operating budget, and I spent a large part of my time seeking funds from the administration to no avail. I quickly learned that the provost and the dean would repeatedly lament, "I don't have any money." Eventually the provost's office added \$20,000 to our budget to recruit students, and we employed UH graduate Lorenzo Cano, our current associate director, to develop the college career days that continue to this day.

I was cynical that we existed more on paper than in fact because, I learned right away that if you do not have any money, you cannot do anything.⁴

In 1982, our fortunes began to change. The state legislature created a new state representative district in 1981 that



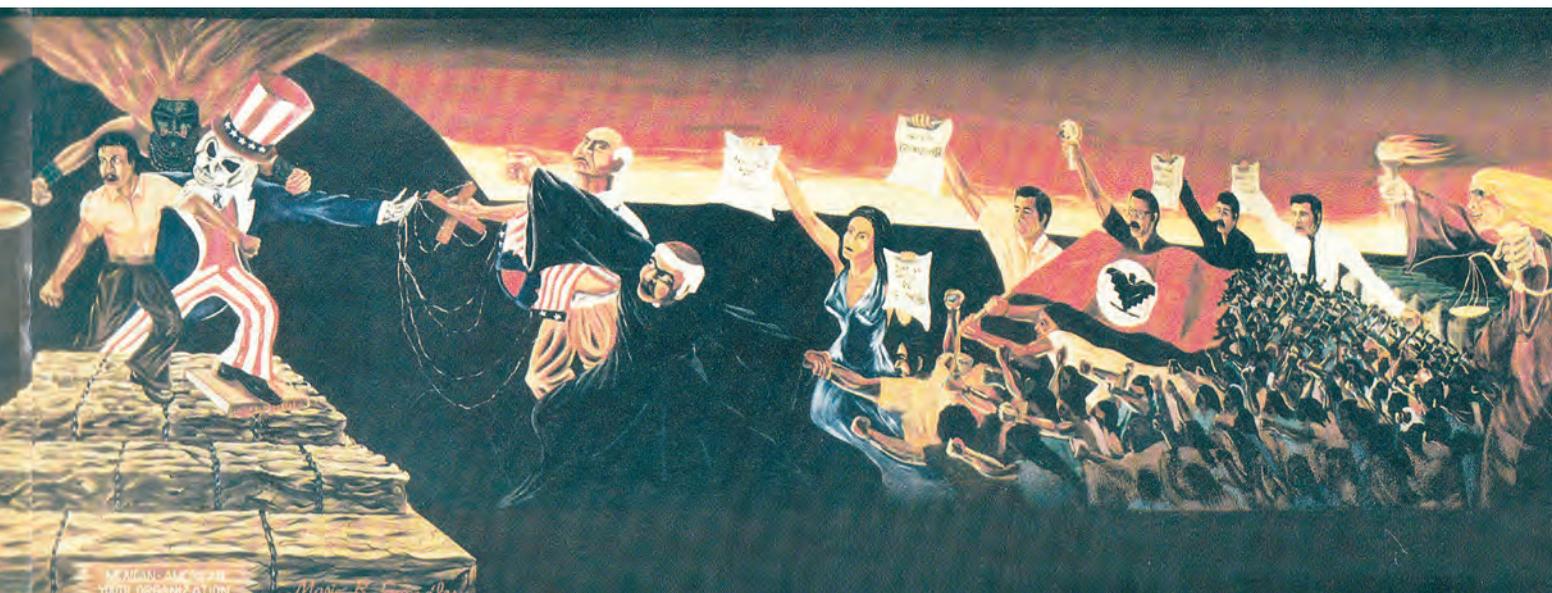
Arnoldo De León (right), the first CMAS Visiting Scholar, pictured with Tatcho Mindiola at a conference hosted by CMAS at the University of Houston in 2010.

All photos courtesy of Tatcho Mindiola, Jr., unless otherwise noted.

covered Houston's Northside barrios. The runoff election featured Roman Martinez, a new comer and protégé of city Councilman Ben Reyes, and Frumencio Reyes, a former protégé of Councilman Reyes and a prominent activist lawyer. The election divided the Mexican American community, and Roman Martinez won by fourteen votes. Trying to secure funding from the state legislature had occurred to me in the past, but I had a political problem. When I returned to Houston in 1974, I became involved with the Raza Unida Party, the first Mexican American political party in U.S. history, and the party elected me as the Harris County chair.⁵ The party recruited Maria Jimenez, a University of Houston graduate, to run against Democrat Ben Reyes, the lone Mexican American state representative from Houston. We lost the election handily and Raza

Unida became anathema to Ben Reyes and his allies. This left little chance that I would receive his support in seeking funds.

State Representative-elect Martinez, however, did not play a part in that history, so I took a chance and sought his assistance. During our first meeting, we spent very little time talking about Mexican American educational problems, rather we focused on how the program could make a difference. He mentioned my negative standing with our political leaders, but he nevertheless agreed to help because education, especially at the higher education level, ranked high on his agenda. He suggested that we pursue a





Immigration Panel hosted by Mexican American Studies at the University of Houston in the early 1980s. Seated left to right are Professors Jorge Bustamante, Armando Gutierrez, and Tatcho Mindiola.

line item appropriation, which is used for specific purposes like the university's Small Business Center and the Energy Laboratory. He believed that the need for educational programs for our community justified the line item funding. We developed a request and sent it forward to the administration. Even though the university accepted the request, it ranked very low in priority. The line item received little if any support from the administration, and Representative Martinez could not move it forward in the legislature.

In the 1983 legislative session, Representative Martinez gained a seat on the Appropriations Committee. Again we submitted a line item request, and again it received a low priority ranking and no support from the administration. I made several trips to Austin learning about the system and meeting with whomever Representative Martinez suggested. When the university's budget came before the Appropriations Committee, Martinez could not secure the votes for a line item but succeeded in amending the university's budget to allocate \$160,000 from the Continuing Education Program for Mexican American Studies. Continuing Education offers non-credit courses and certificate programs in a wide range of areas for people who seek to improve their skills or simply want to learn about a particular topic.

Representative Martinez called me in the wee hours of the morning shortly after the successful committee vote. He advised that I keep the matter private for it still had to survive several more votes, and he did not want it to receive attention. I felt so elated that I could not fall back asleep. Monitoring the university's budget as it moved through the process produced a great deal of anxiety. I feared that someone within the administration would notice the amendment and seek to stop it, but in the end it passed.

I then met with Dean James Pickering of the College of Humanities and Fine Arts, which included Mexican American Studies, and explained that Representative Martinez designated funds for Mexican American Studies and that I was seeking to have the funds transferred to the

program. This took the dean by surprise, and he asked how it came about. I explained that I did not know the details but that I knew that Representative Martinez cared about the issue of higher education for the Mexican American community. The dean said that he would look into the matter, and the next day I received a message saying that he wanted to meet immediately. When I walked into his office, I could tell that he was agitated as he stood behind his desk red-faced and with his tie undone. In an animated fashion he told me that I had made a lot of people angry, and politicized my budget. He doubted that I would get any funding because "my friend" had acted illegally. He also said that I could not have any contact with any legislator without going through the appropriate channels. I replied that I had spent three years trying to obtain funds from the university to develop much needed initiatives but that every request had been denied. I asked him, "Why should we work hard to elect our own to the state legislature if we cannot appeal to them for assistance?" I also explained that Representative Martinez was a friend, that I saw him frequently at functions in our community, and that I had every intention of speaking with him. The dean told me to "watch my step."

[When I asked for the \$160,000 awarded by the legislature] everybody was angry with me – the dean, the provost, everybody – told me I was politicizing the budget . . . I was respectful and polite in my responses but quite frankly, I did not give a damn. . . . I said, "You know, Provost, how many proposals have I submitted to you and you always tell me you don't have any money? That is not political. But now that I use my representative to help me get some money, that is political. The university is not going to have it both ways."⁶

Representative Martinez advised that I relay to everyone concerned that the state budget was law and that the university would violate the budget statute. Further, if the university did not provide Mexican American Studies with the funding, it would face legal and political prob-



Tatcho Mindiola, Jose Angel Gutierrez, founder of the Raza Unida Party, and Lorenzo Cano, associate director of CMAS, standing outside of an elementary school circa 1973, in Crystal City, built after the Raza Unida Party took over the school board. Amado Peña painted the mural in the background.



Mexican American Studies Leadership Conference for the Academic Achievers program, outside of the Alamo in San Antonio, Texas, 2001.

Photo courtesy of CMAS.

lems. The next day, I informed the dean that they should have the matter reviewed by the university's lawyers and reminded him that the university should seek to remain in Representative Martinez's good graces given that he sat on the Appropriations Committee. The representative informed me the following day that he had spoken with the university lawyers, and they acknowledged that his amendment was proper and legal and they had so informed the university.

The following Friday, I received a message from the Office of the Chancellor Ed Bishop, asking me to meet with him as soon as possible. We met at his office on Sunday morning, his only available time. Gracious and courteous throughout, he said that he had heard a lot about me and Mexican American Studies lately and that he wanted to meet to discuss our funding. He acknowledged Representative Martinez's interest in Mexican American Studies and expressed his appreciation of my cultivating his support. But, he continued, he had a political issue on his hands because Continuing Education became very upset over losing a significant portion of its budget. He also gave me his word that our request for a line item appropriation would rank among the university's top priorities during the next budget cycle. He then asked if the source of my funds made any difference to me and explained that he could transfer an amount equivalent to the amendment from Melrose Thompson Funds to Mexican American Studies and this would allow Continuing Education to keep its funds. He asked for my cooperation and again pledged his

support for our line item. I asked if I could give him an answer the next day to make sure that the arrangement posed no problem with Representative Martinez. The president agreed and asked that I tell Martinez that the president would like to meet the representative to discuss the line item appropriation and get to know him better. After speaking with Representative Martinez, I informed the president that I accepted his proposed arrangement, and the university transferred the money to the program. From that moment on, Mexican American Studies gained respect, however grudgingly it may have been earned.

The battle for resources is never really over.⁷

A few weeks before the 1985 legislative session began, Representative Martinez and I met with UH President Richard Van Horn, who had been briefed on past events, to discuss the line item. Martinez spoke cordially but firmly. He relayed that he wanted to help the university with its budget but he had to have a commitment that the administration would diligently support our line item request. If the effort failed, the university would, at a minimum, continue to fund Mexican American Studies at the current level if not indeed with an increase. The president appeared demure and repeatedly answered with "of course, of course." Later I heard that the president felt that Representative Martinez was "almost radical" in his conditions.

The university listed our line third in priority behind the Small Business Center and the Energy Lab when the session began. During the session, we took a group of students to



Fifth Annual Noche Cultural Scholarship Banquet for the Center for Mexican American Studies, Academic Achievers program, October 20, 1999. Students with Tatcho Mindiola (left) and Lorenzo Cano (center).

Photo courtesy of CMAS.

Austin to help lobby for the line item, but the effort failed again. Before the 1987 session began, we again met with the president and Martinez again repeated his support for the university provided Mexican American Studies received funding if the line item effort failed. Again the line item request ranked third in priority, and again we took students to Austin to lobby. This time Representative Martinez successfully obtained the line item but with a caveat. In 1987, Dr. Manuel Pacheco was named president of the University of Houston Downtown campus, the first Mexican American president in the history of the University of Houston. The downtown campus stood in Representative Martinez's Northside district while the main campus, which housed Mexican American Studies, sat outside of his district to the east. President Pacheco had appealed to the representative for line item support and secured a commitment. Obtaining two line items, however, was not feasible. Thus the downtown campus received the line item with an agreement that it would retain twenty percent of the item's funding and eighty percent would go to Mexican American Studies at the main campus. Initially I felt skeptical about the arrangement, but my doubts dissipated when President Pacheco gave me his assurances that the downtown campus would honor the arrangement.

The first history of Mexican Americans in Houston was written as a result of our visiting scholars.⁸

With our increased funding, Mexican American Studies expanded its services. In 1986 with the Melrose Thompson funds, we established the Visiting Scholars Program to generate research about Mexican Americans and other Latinos and to recruit scholars interested in remaining at the University of Houston in a tenured or tenure track position once their one-year residency as a visiting scholar ended. To date, thirty-four scholars have participated in the program, with forty percent of them later employed by the university. In conjunction with the program, we also established the University of Houston series in Mexican American Studies and have published seven monographs. The first, Arnaldo De León's *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: A History of Mexican Americans in Houston*, was the first history of our community in Houston, and our latest, *War Along the Border: The Mexican Revolution and Its Effect upon Tejano Communities* edited by Professor De León is in press and has already won the distinguished Robert A. Calvert Book Award from Texas A&M University Press.

Our graduation rate with the undergraduates is 77%. The university's is 48%. [CMAS] is a small program, but still we graduated a couple hundred students.⁹

Mexican American Studies also established the Hispanic Family College Project Austin High School (now the Academic Achievers Program). It seeks to reduce the

dropout rate and prepare students for admission to the University of Houston by mentoring and tutoring a cohort of students as they move through high school and offering them a scholarship if they gain admissions. We are now working with our sixth cohort.

In 1993, we created the Graduate Fellowship Program to increase the number of students who pursue master's and Ph.D. degrees. To date, forty-four fellowships have been awarded, and eighty percent of the students have completed their degrees.

In 1995, our name changed to the Center for Mexican American Studies (CMAS). In 1996, we established the Academic Achievers Program for undergraduates at the University of Houston to increase the number of Latino students who graduate. These full-time students receive a \$12,000 scholarship that requires them to maintain a minimum 2.7 grade point average, attend mandatory tutoring and skills workshops, and participate in leadership and community service. Their graduation rate is 77% in comparison to 48% for Texas and 60% for the nation. We raise the funds for the scholarships, tutors, and services we offer from the broader community, individuals and corporations alike. The program received the Star Award in 2005 from the Texas Coordinating Higher Education Board for helping close the educational gap between the Latino and majority population. CMAS has also established an endowment and is a source of information for local and national media and sponsors conferences and lectures.

In 1990, I met with Dean Pickering, who had met with Professor Elywn Lee, chair of the Black Leadership Network (BLN) and the interim director of African American Studies, and other members of the network. They expressed concern that the Center for Mexican American Studies was singled out for development by the university while African American Studies had been ignored. The African American Studies program had been inoperative for some time, and Professor Lee had assumed responsibility for reviving it. The lack of resources was an issue. At the dean's request, I met with Dr. Lee and members of BLN and told them how we secured a line item. Several months later, Dean Pickering was appointed provost. He received a request for a line item from African American Studies,

and he wanted to know if we would share our funding with them. "You know how difficult it is to get a line item," he said and added that the university believed increasing ours and splitting it with African American Studies would be easier than seeking a new one. He knew I would be skeptical, and he assured me that the university would launch an all-out effort to significantly increase the line item and that our funding would remain intact if they were unsuccessful.

I indeed felt skeptical. The control of our budget was at stake. Other Mexican American faculty felt the same way. The skepticism was tempered by philosophical and political considerations, however. Kindred feelings were involved. Both communities faced similar issues at the university and were stronger if allied. Also, I had met several African American legislators and considered them friends and supporters and alienating them was not an option. In the end, after speaking with the Mexican American faculty, Dr. Lee, and the provost, we agreed to share the line provided that our budget remained intact if an increase was not forthcoming. Fortunately, the line item was significantly increased, and the budget was split with African American Studies receiving 40% the first biennium, 45% the second, and 50% after that. Both programs benefitted from the arrangement.

I am calmer now. The Center has a lot more respect. We have landmark accomplishments, and we are now automatically written in as a part of the budget. . . . There are still issues, but we are a lot better off than we used to be.¹⁰

The lack of education, especially higher education, in the Mexican American community remains severe. At every level – undergraduate, graduate, and professorial – our ranks are thin. Although progress has been made, we still have a long way to go. It will take a concerted effort for an extended period of time to make notable gains. The Center for Mexican American Studies addresses these issues, and while we have not reached all of our goals, we nevertheless believe that CMAS is one of the premier centers of its type in the United States. We also believe that CMAS is vital to the University of Houston's future. Our significance enhances the university's reputation, as it should given our location, our size, and the history of the Mexican American community in Houston and Texas. Our goals include expanding the services we offer, establishing a major in Mexican American Studies, and obtaining new physical facilities.

We [CMAS] justify our existence. Personally, I think we make the university look good.¹¹

We have come a long way in our thirty-nine year history and recognize that this would not have occurred without the dedication of the students, former State Representative Roman Martinez, and our determination to find ways to make a difference. 

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George Diaz, the current and 34th CMAS Visiting Scholar, 2011.