

Diversity of Thought, Bipartisanship & Latino Leadership

Featuring Mary Ann Gomez Orta

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TRANSCRIPT

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Welcome everyone to the Wisdom and Influence podcast here at Cornerstone University. I am delighted to have a dear friend of, of mine in the university. She serves as the CEO and president of the Congressional Hispanic Leadership Institute in Washington, DC, has a wonderful career in the corporate world and academia, and just a dear friend.

Please join me in welcoming Mary Ann Gomez Orta. Mary Ann, thank you for being a part of our podcast.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Of course. Of course. Thank you for the invitation. I'm looking forward to this conversation.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Wonderful. I, I, I thought it'd be great if you could introduce the institute to our listeners. It's in Washington, DC, but you really have a national footprint, a national presence, and it'd be wonderful if you could just tell us about the institute, how it began, what it's doing now, and the great influence it has.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Okay. Well, good. Thank you. Well, the Congressional Hispanic Leadership Institute was founded in 2003, by members of Congress and some key, key corporate executives who basically got together and said, "You know what? We need to really get more Latinos into public service and get that pipeline working on the Hill, in the White House, in, in every aspects of federal government," mainly here in Washington. But also just to teach them more about public service, and if they end up not running for office, they would appreciate at least diversity of thought, different perspectives, the bipartisanship, and be able to be engaged.

You know, civic engagement at the local level is really, really important. That's where it all starts. And so through the years, we've been blessed with wonderful corporate board members, different members of Congress from both sides of the aisle. Again, a big focus of ours, our vision is advancing the Hispanic community's diversity of thought.

And so everything we do, you know, President Moreno-Riaño, is based on the diversity of thought and the bipartisanship. So we have a variety of, of programs. So for the students at Cornerstone and for others who have some students that you may work with or in the family, we have our flagship program called the Global Leaders Internship Program.

The interns spend two months on the Hill and then two months in a corporate office. Our sponsors cover the housing, the transportation to and from, a subway card, we get a little bit support on some other ways for the students. We also have a Summer Law Fellows program. We have a Public Service Leadership Fellowship named after our founder, Lincoln Diaz-Balart, who we lost last year.

And then, happy to say that, at the end of last year, we kicked off a program that I had actually started as my project during the Presidential Leadership Scholars Program last year, and it's called CHLI Level Up, and it's for young professionals ages 23 to 29. And it's an opportunity, you know, after you get that first job, or maybe you're trying to get to the next job, or you're trying to figure out to go to law school, back and forth.

It's, you know, we have such great talent in that age, right? And sometimes they just need a little bit more support, kinda maybe rough some, you know, soften up some rough soft skills. And so this is an opportunity to say, "Okay, here's, here's where you take it to the next level." Because me personally, and a lot of us at the staff and the board, we really want to see all students, but in particular Hispanic American students to, to get to their success a lot shorter than we did.

And anything that we can help along the way. So we've had programs across the country as well, and we've had programs at different universities, so look forward to, to going to Cornerstone University. But that's basically what we do, and because we are in Washington, again, the focus is really on the bipartisanship and learning how to work with each other.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mary Ann, thank you. And I should mention to our listeners that Mary Ann has been to our campus before. She was one of the, the very first Wisdom Conversation keynote participants. Thank you, Mary Ann, for that. And now you serve on our President's Industry Council, and —

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Yeah.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You'll be back on our campus this spring, so just thank you for your service to our university already and all you've done to help us. I wanna make sure our listeners know that, Mary Ann.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Oh, no, of course. I, I enjoyed being on the campus, and I also had an opportunity to speak to some students in a class, so that was always fun. So look forward to — hopefully, we can do that again when I'm there back in the spring.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Absolutely.

Mary Ann, I wanna ask, you know, it's fascinating what you just shared. I wanna share with you a conversation I had several weeks ago with some Hispanic pastors here in Grand Rapids and, and their perspective on education because when you speak about the incredible talent in the Hispanic community and the potential there and all the great work you're doing, one of the things that these pastors shared with me, and they're, they're, they pastor some significant churches and are part of a very large re-denominational group here in West Michigan and beyond, but one of the things they said to me was that the majority of Hispanic pastors here in West Michigan, and I imagine many other places as well, really do not encourage their young people to go to college, that the majority are encouraging their young people to go right into the workforce. Right? Graduate from high school and just bypass college and don't go there at all.

It reminded me of some of my own family. I'm a first-generation —

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Yeah.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Student who went to college, but I also remember some in my family telling me the same exact thing, "Don't go to college."

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Right.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Right? And, and just share with me your experience as you work at, at the, at the institute and throughout the country. What are you seeing? Is that something that's an anomaly, or are you seeing more of that or, you know, that thread throughout the Hispanic community, a hesitancy to, to go to college — or for adults to encourage their young people to go? What do you think?

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Yeah, so — So there's a couple things there. So one is, in general in the world of academia, right, you, you're in it, and so you've seen that, there's also a lot more women of all backgrounds going and attending universities, more than the young men.

Even like in our internship program, we're, we're always recruiting more young men because they don't always apply for the program. And so the ones that are in the university system are usually, like, super focused. They, they, you know, they, they've gotta finish in certain number of years because their scholarship is only for four years, or they're balancing working, going to school, maybe trying to get a loan but trying to avoid getting a big loan.

So there's a lot of, there's a lot more pressure and a lot more things to navigate for any student nowadays. You know, you know, when I graduated and I was in school, I had the scholarships — but you know, you, you seem like to get a lot more money, or at least I did get a lot more scholarships the first couple years, and then after that the scholarships weren't as high.

So that I think has gotten a little harder. You know, I grew up in a farm worker camp. I'm the first one in my family of all the cousins, 'cause I'm on the older side of the cousins to go to school. But you know, I also have cousins that would say, you know, things like, "Oh, th- th- el papelito, that paper, you don't need it to succeed. You don't, you don't, you don't need that."

And so they've also have children that maybe d- haven't been promoted or encouraged to go to college. Maybe they go to a community college, do a certificate program, do something at the community college, and then maybe get into trades or something else. The interesting thing about what's happening in the community right now that I'm seeing, and obviously the pastors, th- they know, right? 'Cause they're there, is that the university system as a whole and what people hear more than anything else is that it's expensive and that it takes a long time to get your certification or your degree, and in that time you could've been earning an income instead. And so it makes it a little, it's just a little harder, right?

Because there's certain voices that are, that are getting to our kids a lot sooner and saying, "Hey, you need to work." And the hard part is that to a lot of our first, you know, parents, immigrants, their mindset is to work hard. To work hard and, you know, get out of that, you know, survival mode and start producing in all facets for the family and the community.

And so we come, I think, generally from a very entrepreneurship, very utilitarian, very pragmatic kind of upbringings. Obviously, the majority of the families are Christian Catholic people of faith. And so that is never a question. But it's getting a little more challenging for the voices that wanna promote higher education to get through because of things that are happening that are so expensive at universities.

Now, we're promoting university degrees, and we're promoting the public service side, the civic engagement with students in particular to see that, you know, there's an opportunity for them and like I mentioned earlier, right? But that doesn't mean that we don't realize that there's a lot of students for whom the opportunity is not to go to college right now, or they don't understand those different opportunities.

And, you know, I have tios and tias too that would say, "Hija, you know, para que vas? Why are you going to college? You know, you know, I've got this friend at this factory, and they can help you get a job." So we just have to... I, I think we have to do a better job of communicating the different opportunities and giving the students the opportunities to hear those opportunities and to make a decision for themselves.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah, I remember. Thank you. I remember when I was a senior in high school and wanted to go to college, my father had very serious conversations with me about, "Don't do it." "Don't go. You know, stay here with me. We'll do this, we'll do that." You know, and, and, and then my mom would pull me aside and she'd say, "You better go."

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Yeah.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: "You have to, you have to go."

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Yeah.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And I had th- sort of this split personality home where my father was —

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Oh, totally.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Very s-

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Yeah.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Very strong, "You don't go. Stay in construction. We'll do all this construction work together and, and do this." My mom saying, "You have to go, you have to go, you have to go." And realizing that my mom's family, I had many, several had gone to college, her, her brothers and sisters. My father was not the case. So you had this, what I call this intergenerational —

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Oh, totally.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Problem —

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Yeah.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: In some ways, right?

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Yeah.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: That just propagates itself. And I guess one of the, one of the things I wanna ask you about, it's something that so often I don't hear a lot about. I hear a lot about the intergenerational transmission of poverty and the problem with that. But I see the intergenerational transmission of no education as a major, major problem for our country, for the Hispanic community, for other communities, where parents and family who don't value it because they didn't go to it, then tell their kids the same thing. And I'm concerned about what that will do to our country, to the democracy, to our republic, to the diversity of thought you've mentioned before, when you have so many who are saying no. So give, give us your thoughts on that perspe—

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Yeah, no, great point, is that — and, and I agree with you that, that I tell people, for example, we have a, you know, we'll have different conversations about the number of Hispanic Americans in this country, right? And yes, there's a lot of us, and there will be more based on the census projections.

The difference is that, one, we're not all registered to vote and the other is that we're not all educated. We're not even all educated with an AA degree, right? Let alone a, a bachelor's degree, and then a

master's, and then a doctorate. I mean, I'm, I'm speaking to one of the few PhDs y- you know, that are Latinos. I mean, that's, y- you know, that's, that's also rare. And so it is a big — it, it's one of those things that I think people don't really talk about, and obviously right now there's a lot of different things going on in the news. And so, but it is important in that we need to make sure that our children, our children are educated, because if they're not, we're going to be on the reverse.

What we're now creating then is by not encouraging them to go forward and get an education where they can improve their family's wellbeing and economic situation and the community, and they can be engaged, and they can be the voice for others when needed. When we don't have that, which is usually what comes when someone's educated, th- we're gonna go back to being a lot of us, but a lot of us being even more poor than we are now.

And it's gonna get harder, because now we're also incorporating into that layer the technology advances, right? And we're also competing, you add the layer of the global economy. You know, it, it isn't anymore where we're competing with the student in the classroom and our buddy in the classroom. We're competing with students across the globe we've never met. We're competing with countries and industries that, companies and organizations across the globe. And so the Latino community here in the United States really needs to up their game to make sure that we're ready and that our kids are ready. And so it, it is a little challenging, and I think part of it is that — you know, some of these conversations maybe aren't, like, the funnest, coolest conversations to follow on social media, you know?

So we're, we're not, we're not on those algorithms, you know? We gotta figure out how to get into them though. But I think that, along the lines of what the pastors were saying, you know, and sharing, I'm sure that also comes up is that the other thing that I think that we need to think about too, not just at Cornerstone University, at other universities and in our communities, is we really need to pay more attention to our young men.

I'm concerned that our young men are not getting the love that we once gave them, or the kind of love and attention that they need to, to really step up and feel seen and heard, and to contribute at the level that they can. Young men and women socialize differently. We all learned that during COVID. You know, how they navigated high school or college, it's just different. You know, it's just different. And so, we really need to encourage our, our young, you know, students in high school and college, and I encourage also the pastors to invite, you know, the university representatives, different people to the church and the place of worship to have different conversations, and maybe in a nice safe place, just have that opportunity to just share and learn.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: No, I, thank you. I, I'm so concerned. I, I have colleagues who've said this to me that... And I'm so grateful you brought up the technology dilemma now, because I do think we're at a very critical point here in our country for the Hispanic community and for just, you know, the working class and blue-collar families. I think that if they get left behind, they will never catch up.

I think it's gonna be very, very difficult, right, to do it with technology and what the technology is doing to differentiate now between those that, who have and those who have not. It's just a reality, and I don't see that train slowing down anytime soon. So h- you know, the, the importance thus of universities and the Congressional Hispanic Leadership Institute and other groups like this to try to get into these communities of our, of our friends and families and neighbors and people and get, and get them help.

But my deeper concern is that it all starts in the home, right? It all starts with the family and this bent toward for or against, right? Now my father's thrilled, by the way.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Of course.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: He's thrilled that I went to school. Un doctor a la casa —

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Right.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: La familia.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Of course.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Right, right. Presidente, of course. That's exactly. He's, he, he — he's thrilled. He's 90 years old. Every time someone goes to his home to fix something, he has a picture of me, he shows it to them.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Of course.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And he's, he's my president, he's all these wonderful things —

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Yeah, he's your publicist.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Before he wasn't —

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: He's your PR guy.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Right, right. Yeah, that's awesome. I love it. So it's ama- it, it's amazing, but the, the, the dilemma of being left behind and how do we get into the homes, into the families, right, to, to change that? And how do universities become more accessible, more friendly, right, more approachable maybe, so that that stigma of, of the university, whether it's the cost or the lack of access or it's that's for you, not for me, right?

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: It's for other people, but not for me, right? Well, you know, one of the things that, you know... I attended a small private university, the University of the Pacific, founded by Methodists. And interesting that the university is smack in the middle between two major streets in, in Stockton, where I grew up — but it was always like, "Oh, wow," like that university, like we would never go there because it was a private university.

We could never afford it. It was always, we'd go through the university, my dad would literally drive through to get to the other street. Like it was just the sh- the shortcut. It was never like we were actually gonna attend, you know, or, or we knew anybody there. But the university started a program. They started a, a scholarship specifically for children, students of the county, and they made a ex- you know, they made that effort to try to get more students of diverse backgrounds, not just Hispanic, but again, you know, those of us that maybe couldn't afford, different opportunities, right?

And we, we... You know, they gave us the different scholarships, the different, opportunities for different sponsorships. Different people were, you know, sponsoring certain students or first generation. And over the years, the program has grown and, and now there's a lot more people from the community, more blue-collar workers as well going and attending the university because of the very intentional program to reach and w- among the, the community itself.

I mean, we had people coming in from Hawaii and across the globe and paying, of course, full ride tuition, which I, I know universities also need. But there's gotta be a way to connect with the community to say, "This is also your campus. This is, you know, we're, we're going to have community events here." We need to, you know, have an opportunity to invite the pastors to the campus, right?

There's just different ways to do it, but it just needs to have a lot of intentionality behind it.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah, that, that's one of the reason we, I, I've reached out to the pastors, you know, to, a large number, have a meeting with them. But, but it's, it's slow going. There's lo- lots of

perceptions, misperceptions, not needed, well, whatever it may be, but you're right. We have to be deliberate, we have to be intentional, and we have to be involved there and bring real value to the community. I think it's one of the biggest challenges, and I'd like to- for you to comment on this, please. So often we in universities, academics in universities, believe that what we offer is just gold, 24 karat gold, right?

It may not be that in real life, but it m- it, we think it is. And I think what's happening now in the market, and it's been happening now for quite some time, but maybe in a more intense way, is that the market is saying, what you are offering really is not as valuable as you think it is. And it, it is make — it is making us re- having to, and it's a good thing, I think, rethink, you know, are our programs really relevant? Are they market relevant? Are they really gonna help people? Are they really gonna provide value to them? And, and, and, and that market adjustment is really, really, really important. Just a couple weeks ago at Da- at Davos, the Palantir CEO spoke for 30 minutes on AI, and at the end, they asked him about AI and universities.

And he said, "Look, in the, in the f- in the very, very s- near future, what artificial intelligence is going to do is it's gonna force universities to really come to terms with whether what they offer is valuable or not. For the market, for people." So that's one of the challenges we're, we're facing all the time, and we're thinking about it here at Cornerstone.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: But let's ensure that whatever we offer in our programs, certificates, whatever it is, it adds real value to the student right here, right now.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Right.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: And I think what... So, so yes, it, it is happening. And I think that what really amplified that more was COVID, right? When — when you didn't have to go or you couldn't go to the classroom, and some universities are trying to balance, you know, what class needs to be in person, which one needs to be, okay during, you know, a Zoom meeting or what have you.

And, you know, there's also some classes that there is no other way you're gonna learn except by being in person. You know, you need to — have the chemistry lab work. You need to do some kind of work together. It, it doesn't... You know, even if in, if it's in the trades, you still have to show up in person.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Right.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Right. And so, so I think that kind of, you know, maybe just amplified into your, you know, point, really challenged the universities to say, "Okay, now we really need to look at the added value, and see, okay, it, it is, is this a value? Is this important? Is this what the, the market is asking? Is this what the students..."

And there's a balance. And as I think what's happening too is that universities need to also... The, the leadership also needs to ask in the community, well, you know, the major employers, the, the middle-emphasized employers, "What kind of talent do you need? W- who are you hiring? How can we partner?" "What... Okay, great, we have this great degree. We have this great program." Maybe it's not serving the student body because it's not serving the community. There's a lot less —

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: People also moving away to school. There's more students staying around the family to go to college because it's less expensive. And unfortunately —

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: I agree.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Yeah. Like, many of us, we had to also take care of mom and dad or, like, you know, I have, I helped raise my little brother, so I went away, but not that far away, right? So if we're looking —

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: At the students in our area, and we know they're not gonna go far for an education because they need to be close to their family, then what do they need to thrive, and what kind of jobs are they gonna be able to get when they graduate? You know, for example, there's been a lot about a four-year program. Why is it four years? Some kids can do it in three, right? So some kids do a community college program for a year and a half, and they fast-track, and they're done in three years. So, you know, it's just one of those, again, opportunities to really see how do we serve our individual communities, and a little more focus on our communities versus being the university that everybody from other places is gonna come to.

Because a lot of students are not going away. So — you know, for example, in our internship program, most of the students that come to our program come from a university not that far from where they grew up.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Right.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: We don't have a lot of students that are from Southern California, but they happen to be studying in Oklahoma. You don't have a lot like that. The, the gems that are different like that, or like the unicorns that are different, are the ones that may be on a, on an athletic scholarship, right? Where only certain universities offer that blend of, "I love hockey, and I like this program," right? But the majority of students now are living closer to home or are living at home, and are going to a academic program within that space where it's less expensive, and they're also helping their family.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mary Ann, one of the things that I very much appreciated when I first encountered the Congressional Hispanic Leadership Institute and saw its mission w- were the words diversity of thought. Right? There, there's a tendency nowadays to paint the Hispanic community in, in a very monolithic way, and it's not that at all.

And I really appreciate even the founding of the institute bipartisan, right? And in many of the events I've attended there, and thank you for those kind invitations, I see that in the attendees themselves. So would you talk with our, our listeners about the importance of that, the diversity of thought in how we approach that today, especially as you know in the culture where there's, you know, there's been DEI for many years, now there's a backlash against DEI, and how do we really understand it in a thoughtful way, in a good way, not, not a destructive way, right? So maybe you can talk to us, share with us how you've done that from the founding of the institute as you've led it, you know, maintaining that diversity of thought in a very real robust way, not virtue signaling, but in a way that's, in a way that's meaningful.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: And so, you know, I, we mentioned this a little bit before, but the, the importance from the founders — the, the founders were three Cuban American Republican members from South Florida. Two of them were born in Cuba, and so they knew from the very beginning that what they really needed to have here, and what they didn't see, was the, the true bipartisanship, not just in the description of the organization, but in the actions and in the programs. And being Republican, they said, "Oh, no, no, w- we need to have our Democrat friends, and on top of that, we also need to have people at the table who aren't Hispanic."

Because it can't just be us talking to us, right? That, that's not, that's not gonna help. That's not gonna help our, our future talent if we're only just talking amongst ourselves. And be- with that really has been a focus in everything that we do. We literally will go through and make sure that we have people from both sides of the aisle, organizations from both sides of the aisle.

I'm a natural connector. I love it. I love connecting people who haven't met each other, especially anybody who is supportive of encouraging and supporting students of all backgrounds. Obviously, our organization's a little more focused on the Hispanic students, but we do help a lot of different students.

And so we wanna make sure that in anything that we do, we have the bipartisanship, one, and then the other is the diversity of thought is really, really important. S- you can see now that even in one party, there's diversity of thought, right? There's, there's the, that aspect of you need to understand it.

What we're getting into now, and I kinda joked around about it earlier about, you know, if, if your social media algorithms are just following the same kind of people with the same con- kind of conversations, you're not giving yourself that opportunity to really learn and get different perspectives. And the way that we grow is to get those different, different perspectives.

Let me, let me pivot a little bit, and, and share, you know, from a, from a Christian standpoint, right? How many times in those different conversations did Jesus wanna go and talk to a different group, and the people with him would say, "We can't talk to them. We've never talked to them. The last time we talked to them, they, you know, they stoned us. They this, they this." Right? And he says, "No, we're gonna go talk to them. We're gonna go and have a simple, open, curious, civil conversation." Right? We're gonna show up with peace, right? Instead of showing up with the anger from back when. And so I think we need to do a little more of that. We need to, we need to recognize that not everybody thinks the same way, not even in our own family.

Look, I grew up in a farm worker camp in Central California. My husband was born in Cuba. I never met a Cuban until I moved from California to Washington, DC. You know? So, you know, it, it's one of those things where, like, you have to be... I think really what's gonna happen is the people who are curious and take the time to have a conversation just to learn, not to judge, and not to force your opinion on somebody else, but just to have a conversation to learn — that is the group that is going to excel.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Now, you, I think you bring such a beautiful point about Jesus in the conversations, right? And, and so many, so many times you see, the authorities at that time condemning him because he was talking to people that you should not be talking with or having dinner with people you shouldn't be having dinner with. And he was coming with peace, and he was coming with truth, and he was coming with discernment to help.

And, that's a wonderful point. I've al- I've always appreciated about, about the institute and, and how you and, and, and your team really live it out because it's absolutely critical. I remember even in South America, you know, we moved here 45 years ago, but just the diversity of thought in South America, it's so easy for people to think it's a monolithic continent.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Right. It is not at all. No. No, it's not. Right. It's not at all. Yeah. And all the different countries —

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Right.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: And how they work together and how... You know, just to, just to navigate it all, right? And, and even though we speak Spanish, it's different Spanish, different accents. You know, it's just very different. Some people like spicy food, some people don't, you know? So it, it really is, it really is different. It's really incredible.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You know, something else I've noticed, I think it's important that I wanna get your perspective and comment for our listeners that I've seen, not, not just being a member of the Hispanic community in this country now for many, many years, but I see it outside of the Hispanic community as well. And, and, and, and I want to get your perspective on this. I saw it particularly in an event, several months back, it, it, it where, where a significant number of award winners when they would speak about receiving the award, they would also convey how frustrated or angry they were with society, with the country, right?

And they saw themselves almost as victims of the broader context, the broader society. Then the other half of the award winners saw themselves not as that at all, but said, "Look, you know, everyone goes through difficulties and trials and sufferings. Overcome it. Don't let that s- make you be this." Right?

I've s- and it's not just in the Hispanic community. I'm, I'm getting a sense that even throughout our own country, there are... It's almost like the, those who see themselves as the victim versus the oppressor, versus those who say, "You know what? I'm not gonna let that defeat me. I have the ability to, the agency to," if I can use that word, "to, to," right? "To, to grow, to buy, to be an entrepreneur, to, to overcome," on and on. So i- maybe if you, in all your travels and the work that you do with students, with interns, and, and members of Congress, talk to us about those two polar opposites, because I see it in a lot of people today, young people and older people, these forces of oppressor versus victim, but I also see how that defeats us and the defeatist mentality it gives to us.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Yeah, I think that, you know, from, from, from different communities and obviously from, growing up the way that I did, right? So y- you're... You know, my parents had a third-grade education. Mom finished third grade in Texas and then quickly was picking cotton. My dad finished third grade in Mexico, came to the US in a guest worker program. They met working in the fields in Northern California, right? So from the very beginning, we were, we were poor.

We were poor from a economic perspective. And there were just certain things that we really couldn't afford to do. So that it was very much a survival mentality. Like, we, we really just gotta, you know, bootstrap. We gotta do things. We got... And very resourceful. I think that, that my parents, for example, in that generation are very resourceful, utilitarian.

We can do it. I mean, you know, to, to grow up in Mexico and go to another country, or to grow up anywhere and, and leave your country for an opportunity for yourself and for your family or your future family even, right, is, is a big, is a big deal. And it was a, a situation that, that my parents were in.

And what happens is there's... There, there are people, like in this fork in the road, there are some people who have the agency, who are empowered, who figure out, "Okay, I'm in this situation, but I'm working hard. I know it's minimum wage, but I'm gonna get another job. I'm gonna figure this out." And they, they take that path that, you know, "I'm, I'm, I'm empowering myself and I have my agency and I'm gonna keep going."

And then there's another path which unfortunately, to be honest with you, this other fork in the road is a bigger fork. It's a bigger road. There's more people on it. Is the one that's like, "You know, we're all just gonna hang out together, and misery loves company." We're not, you know, we're not... We're, we're, we're, we're going at a slower pace.

You know, "I don't like what so-and-so said to me. I don't like how they looked at me. I don't like how they said this." And, and it, it, it counters your progress. Because if you're telling yourself, "I'm not gonna do it," or, "I don't know how to do it," then guess what? You're not gonna do it. It's not gonna happen.

But if you're on that other side where, "I'm gonna do this. I'm gonna figure this out. I'm gonna get..." And, and honestly, that takes more work, right? It takes a little more work. Some people are late bloomers, you know, they finally get there. Others stay with the crowd, and they don't really get there. And so I think that what's also been happening from, not just in the US but a global perspective, is that we're also seeing different communities, different, democracies, different, you know, globes, countries, where the people are now saying, "I, I'm, I'm tired of this. I'm tired of being told what to do," being all these other detail... You know, things they want in their life, and they're now raising their hand and saying, "We're not gonna do this anymore. We're, we're gonna speak up." And so you're starting to see people speak up. The challenge is that they speak up, and then there's no other action.

Because they've also d- haven't gotten the training. They don't have the education. They're not sure what else to do, right? And so it's important to really give some thought to the kind of society that we, we want, and then do your part. You don't have to be the president of a university. You don't have to be the CEO of a nonprofit. You know, what is it that you can do to, to help? Is it help a student? Is it helping your community? If we each do a little something, that would help. But I find that, you know, some of your observations as well, I'm also finding people that are, that are already done with the game. You know, they're ya se cansaron, they're tired. They're, you know, they don't, they don't wanna be in the game anymore. And, you know, li- life is pretty precious. And when you wake up and you get another day, I hope it's another day that you have an opportunity to do something small to be able to help somebody else.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah, Mary, thank you. I wanna ask you one, one final question. There's a lot of conversation, and we touched on it a little bit earlier, across the country now that, higher education, the college degree really is no longer valuable, right? There are very different pathways to, to, to pursue. At the last Presidents Industry Council meeting, our very first one, I think we talked a little bit about that, some of the data on the — on, on this, and we're seeing it, and, and consequently, you know, it, it makes us be sharp and refined in what we're doing.

But, talk, talk with our listeners about that based on what you're seeing in Washington, D.C., the interns you're working with, members of Congress, nonprofit corporate leaders. You know, what's the mood out there about a college degree, college education? You know, there's one — there, there certainly are the polls, but, you know, polls come and go, right? They, they shift, right? A- and so it's a, it's a temperature check, but may- may not always be the most reliable one. You, you, you look at enrollment declines, and they're real. Some of them may be rooted on that. Some of them may be rooted on demographic shifts. Some of them may be rooted on, on the very real problem you talked about before, that, that more younger men are just opting out, and that's a very real s- issue that's happening, right? So just give us your sense on what you're seeing ab- in this conversation about a college degree, valuable or not.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: The college degree is still very valuable. It's extremely valuable. And I would say that it's even more valuable and more important for Hispanic students and families. Because a college degree, like it or not, is basically the, the one ticket that is expected to get into certain positions, and not just certain positions, but to be promoted, and to be leading organizations, and to be bosses, managers, directors. And so if you don't have that entry ticket to get in, it's going to take you even longer to succeed. And it's gonna take longer for your family to succeed. It's gonna take longer for your community.

If I hadn't gone to college with the student loans and the scholarships and whatever else... My dad bought a used car for I think it was like \$3,500 that he got money from two other brothers. Imagine my dad and two other brothers put money together so that I could get a car so that I could go to the university. Okay? Because they knew that the next generation, which was me, needed a college

education. And so now I'm the eldest of five. All five of us have a college education. We all went to different universities.

But guess what? Now when Mom and Dad need something, they don't have to worry about it. We can provide. Now, we're not making a whole lot, but we're, we're doing well. We're able to help ourselves. Sure. We're able to help Mom and Dad. We're able to help give, you know, our nephews and nieces things that we didn't have, right? Things and, and opportunities and choices that we didn't even have, right? They were available to some people, and people will say, "Oh, well, it's just because they don't wanna participate." No, I'm sorry. But you know what? I was a good tennis player in high school, but I couldn't afford to be on the team because who was gonna pay Mom and Dad if they left the packing shed? Right? How are you gonna fill the gas tank to get Mary Ann to a tennis match? And who's gonna buy Mary Ann's tennis clothes and tennis racket, right? So there are things that sometimes seem like they're there, but for some communities, like in how I grew up, they're not accessible. They're not that close to us.

They actually make us even more frustrated because we can't get it. So a college education is going to change that for you, and I always say it changes for you and your family, 'cause your family is in it as well, and they're going to benefit from that education. And I'm concerned that we're not gonna have enough Latinos, students with a college education because what also happens, unfortunately in a lot of major companies, they'll say, "Gerson and Mary Ann, that's okay if you don't have a college degree. We got a job for you." Okay, great. There we go, and we're gonna be the, we're gonna be the most hardworking people, right? But then when it comes to an opportunity for a promotion, "Well —

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Or management.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: You know what?" Yep. "You didn't have that piece of paper, and so and so over here has this degree and has maybe less years experience than you, but took, you know, a management course. Oh, and they studied business, so they're gonna get promoted." And little by little then, then we're gonna get left behind because we didn't have that education. So I would rather that we have the education and then we do whatever we want with it, right? But I, it's, it's hard for me to explain, of course, because I have the education now.

You can talk to my husband. My husband has a college degree as well, but he didn't go to college the same way I did to a four-year university right after high school, because he was given different opportunities. But in his career, he figured out, "Darn, I need that college degree," and so he went to school at night.

So I think the other piece that we need to figure out is how do we serve a university program? Maybe it's not in person the same way we've always done. Maybe it's in a different format, a different style. Again, does it have to be four years? Do we have to look at the curriculum that maybe is a little different? Maybe we need to add something to a freshman seminar. You know, there's just different things that I think that we need to do to kind of be of, of better service to our families and our communities.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah. That's, that's so well put. We have, we have to serve the people. We have to serve the student and have that mindset, not, not what I'll, not what I would call the traditional mindset. It- the, the- it, you know, the i- the idea or the notion that a student can take four years off and study ideas for four years a- a- and, and live in a co- That's just... That was for a long time ago for a certain group. Today's, today's student, very, very different, and we have to go where they are. We have to go where they are.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: We, we need to meet, we need to meet them where they are. We need to provide them in the format that is best for them. And you know, it's also been really hard in the public

school education system, you know, K through 12. You know, we haven't had... Unfortunately, we're one of those countries that doesn't put enough money into the public school education system. We don't pay our teachers what they really should be earning, when you compare it to other countries. And so, you know, there may be some opportunities to, to do something even at the high school level, right? To really introduce the students to what a college education can be, and how to do that and really get them and, and motivate them, right?

I think that there's a lot of opportunities that, that we can meet the students, not necessarily in, in the college age, but maybe meet them a little bit younger. And like I said, meet them at the church. Meet them in different places, because darn, trying to get through their little social media algorithm is a little more challenging these days.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: No, you know, we, we, we, we launched a partnership last year with Vert-Vertex, Partnership Academies in the Bronx. So you may know the name Ian Rowe. Ian, at the American Enterprise Institute, he's also the founder of these charter schools in New York City in the Bronx. And, he heard of a partnership we set up with Project HOOD in Chicago and said, "Well, I really would like to set something up for my, my K-12 school in the Bronx."

So I went to visit them and spent two, really a full day with them. I will tell you, I was absolutely, absolutely bowled over with the maturity of those young men and women in that school, and the incredible job they do there. So we developed a partnership with them. This was late fall last year, and in a couple of weeks, eight of their students are coming here to Cornerstone to a s- to a s- yeah, to a STEM camp for our, our science health technology school.

And so eight of them are coming, high school students, and we think w- more will come eventually to become Cornerstone students. But that's what we did. We, we went there and we ha- we worked creatively with him and the team there and our own team to develop the right runway for this, because if you don't do it, they, they're, they won't come.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: They'll go somewhere else, or they may even go anywhere. Yeah. And, and there's gotta be some way to merge a formal trades, role with business or communication skills, something else, right? I mean, part of the challenge, for example, I remember years ago, we had a, a partnership with a corporate sponsor who specifically told us, "We hire engineering students all the time, but man, they have no communications and business acumen."

So can — so they gave us a grant to get engineering students into a university business boot camp program, just to get them some business terminology and different things like that, right? And so we did that qui- we did that I think for, like, three summers. And it, and it, we, we didn't continue the program because the, the partnership kind of shifted and, and it was an opportunity for three years.

But you really see, you know, for example, we, we wanna do more manufacturing in our country, yet we have people who don't wanna do the work, right? Or the people who are doing the work are more seasoned now and they're trying to pass it on to the kids or somebody else in the — even in their own business. So there's gotta be a way to learn how to, you know, do the business side and do the welding or — we've gotta figure — we gotta be creative.

We, we gotta be creative to, to figure out again, where do we meet today's young people with what they need? And, and the other thing I wanna add is we also need to show them some more respect. I see a lot of people who dismiss young people because they're young. And you know, being the eldest of five and, and having to take care of mom and dad and speak, you know, in English and interpret what I — I always say I interpreted and translated the language and the culture. You know, those of us that have to do that, we grow up really fast.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yes, you do.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: A- and so we're not just kids, you know? And so we know a lot. And so I think collectively our, today's high school students in particular, and maybe freshmens or so in, in universities, we don't res- we don't give them that adult respect that they're trying to get because we keep them down as kids. We need to respect them at their level, and they're young adults, and they're learning, and we need to give them that opportunity to shine that the way that they're going to shine.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mary Ann, I can go on for a long time. I j- I want to say thank you to you for spending this time with us and all that you've shared and the wonderful work that you do and, and at the institute in Washington, at the Congressional Hispanic Leadership Institute, and your friendship and partnership with Cornerstone University. It means a great deal to us, Mary Ann. Thank you so much.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Thank you, dear. And for everyone, have a blessed, wonderful 2026.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Wonderful. Likewise, Mary Ann. Great. Thank you so much. We'll see you soon in April.

Mary Ann Gomez Orta: Yes. Thank you.

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