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Finding fellowship: More than an opportunity for one, fellowships for students of color can bolster the ranks of academia and steer policy

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More than an opportunity for one, fellowships for students of color can bolster the ranks of academia and steer policy

Cal State Monterey Bay junior Melissa Montellano | Vernon McKnight

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By Claudia Meléndez Salinas

If you look for a description of Hunts Point Riverside Park, the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation will tell you the park is “a gateway to the revitalized Bronx River, a major connector to the Bronx River Greenway, and a home to kayakers, canoers, and paddlers from across the city.”

The description will also tell you the park was once an illegal dumping ground, but it won’t tell you how the area went from a cemetery of rubber tires to an award-winning waterfront oasis. It won’t tell you, either, the role that MacArthur Fellowship-winner Majora Carter played in transforming the dump.

Cal State Monterey Bay junior Melissa Montellano is fully aware of Carter and her urban development work — so much so that one day she hopes to achieve something akin to what Carter has accomplished.

Scratch the ‘hope’ part, Montellano corrects herself. She WILL achieve something similar.

Carter “created more employment referred to as green jobs,” the 20-year-old said. “It’s something that I’d like to do as a project of my own. I will figure out a way to integrate that into my capstone and other long term projects in the future.”

Montellano, a first generation college student, may be a number of years away from transforming communities, but she recently took a significant step toward that goal after receiving a fellowship from the Research Institute in Sociology and Social Inequality at Texas A&M. These fellowships are more typically given to students in the fields of science, technology, engineering and math; Montellano is believed to be among the first from the social sciences discipline.

“We have a huge number of students who do get these” for STEM careers, said Holly Unruh, associate director of Undergraduate Research Opportunities Center at CSUMB. “It’s much more rare that a student not on a STEM field gets one of these.”

Armando Arias | photo

Armando Arias, a professor in the school of social, behavioral and global studies and Montellano’s advisor, is almost ebullient about her fellowship, and he puts it not just in terms of the money. The access that comes with the grant will be priceless, he said.

For one, working side by side with professors at Texas A&M’s well-regarded sociology program will give the student an opportunity to demonstrate her abilities and skills.

For another, the program will help her polish her resumé, something absolutely needed for heading into academia and significantly more challenging for first generation students than for children with college-educated parents.

“A bit of guidance can take you a long way. It changes people lives. That’s the guidance that Melissa has been getting and she’ll be getting from me,” — and will get from Texas A&M faculty, Arias said.

Think of graduate school as a club where the right connections will get you in, people who can advise you what name to drop at the door and who's the cool bouncer who'll let you in for free. Lacking that knowledge, entrance can take a lot longer — if you ever get in at all.

"It's an endorsement. Somebody is investing in the student by saying that 'we want you, we want to support you,'" said Sarita Brown of Excelencia in Education, a Washington D.C. think tank that researches educational trends among the Latino community. "It's like somebody pulling the chair and saying 'sit down, join us.'"

"The strength of our people's skills are a big factor in how industrious and productive we are as a country." Sarita Brown, Excelencia in Education

Latinos have the lowest enrollment rate for graduate-level education proportionate to their population. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2012 only 7 percent of students enrolled in graduate programs in the United States were Latinos, compared with 60 percent who were white, 13 percent African Americans, 11 percent international students, and 7 percent Asian Americans.

There are myriad reasons, but two key factors are income — the median income of Latinos is lower than of other groups — and that Latinos are more likely to be first-generation students. Without parents to guide their offspring through the treacherous world of academia, it is up to the students to fend for themselves or find mentors.

As a first generation college student, everything in Montellano's academic life has seemed new and daunting, even while she was still in high school. The Sacramento native decided to switch from Hiram W. Johnson High to West Campus High for her junior year so she could get an edge when applying to college.

"That was a really competitive high school and I wanted to see if I could get in," she said. "That really motivated me through my high school years, just being

surrounded by other students who are competitive as well. I like to challenge myself, even though sometimes it feels like I may not accomplish some of the things I set out to do. I know challenging myself will get me to where I want to be."

Montellano was active in her school as the outreach coordinator for the California Scholarship Federation and with the Ronald McDonald House Charities to do beautification projects around her city and her neighborhood. The seed planted through those projects blossomed during her sophomore year, when she took a class in geographic information science, a discipline that uses spatial analysis to understand large-scale urban development — think freeways and housing developments, waste dumps and parks, shopping centers and baseball stadiums.

"In that class, a student had mapped out California (in relation to) the housing crisis. She had a line across California with the spots of most interest," Montellano said "That's what attracts me: looking at the bigger picture."

There's another reason why these type of fellowships are crucial for Latinos and other minority groups: administrators hope the exposure will serve as inspiration for students to apply to graduate school and thus bolster the number of professors of color at U.S. universities — akin to extending a welcome mat outside the club.

"That's our main focus of what we do in the program," said Mary Campbell, an associate professor of sociology at Texas A&M. "Over the summer (the students) work together closely with faculty mentors to see what grad school is like. They do research, but in addition, we spend time in the program explaining how graduate funding works, showing different kinds of options available for those who decide to get a PhD. We try to get at the 'hidden curriculum,' things that are part of school but never get explained in a handbook."

Latinos are projected to represent 31 percent of the total population of the U.S. by 2060 — a number that will be achieved solely with internal growth. By the time these American citizens grow and take their place in the workforce, it's in everyone's interest to have them as educated and productive as possible.

"The strength of our people's skills are a big factor in how industrious and productive we are as a country," Brown said. "When you look at this at the highest level and see what will propel this country going forward, it is the

people of this country. The stronger we are prepared to take advantages of opportunities that exist, the better (the country) will be."

Majora Carter gave an emotional presentation about her project, Sustainable South Bronx, at the TED conference in Monterey in 2006. After describing how urban planning decisions in the mid-1900s caused the economic, environmental and social degradation of her community, she urged the influential audience to embrace sustainable development. And she dared former Vice President Al Gore, sitting in the audience, to include grassroots organizations of color like hers to be invited to the decision-making table.

"I spoke to Mr. Gore the other day…I asked him how environmental justice advocates are going to be included in his new marketing strategy," she told the audience. "His response was a grant program. I don't think he understood I wasn't asking for funding, I was making him an offer."

Because if true progress is going to take place in this country, environmental justice movements — like academia — need to have true diversity and representation from every group every step of the way.

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About Claudia Meléndez Salinas

Claudia Meléndez Salinas is an author, journalist, open water swimmer, and cat lover. | Claudia Meléndez Salinas es autora, periodista, nadadora de aguas abiertas, y aficionada a los gatos.

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