



Generational Change

Rose Benavidez has broken barriers as ACCT's first Latina Chair and continues a legacy of leadership.



BY MARK TONER

THE DAUGHTER OF MIGRANT FARMWORKERS FROM the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, Rose Benavidez has shattered barriers as the first Latina to serve as ACCT Chair. At the same time, the South Texas College trustee has followed in the footsteps of her parents, who found in education a way to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty — and who, like their daughter, paid it forward through lifetimes of service educating others.

“To know my story, you must first know theirs,” Benavidez said during the 2022 ACCT Leadership Congress in New York City. “They each knew that without education, success could not be attained.”

As ACCT Chair, Benavidez stresses the importance of infusing that same sense of mission and purpose in trustees across the country. “We come across these individuals in our work every day,” she said. “For every one of us who has been fortunate to have support, there are countless others who remain on the brink, waiting for the opportunity that our work and our colleges can provide.”

Located along the Rio Grande in deep south Texas, Starr County has the highest percentage of Hispanic residents of any county in the United States, according to the Census Bureau. Historically plagued by high levels of unemployment and intergenerational poverty, many of its residents were migrant farmworkers. It's also where the Benavidez family story — and its contributions to the community along the U.S.-Mexico border — begins.

Benavidez's parents — Mexican-American migrant workers who were themselves the children of migrants — married young. At 18, her father, Manuel Benavidez, attended technical school to gain a family-supporting skill. But early in his career, a freak welding accident left him with a choice that would change the trajectory of his life and his family.

Following the accident, Manuel was given the option of collecting a lifetime of disability checks or pursuing a college education. He ultimately received his bachelor's degree in education at the age of 34 —



Rose Benavidez joined the South Texas College Board in 2009. The college has seen tremendous growth, adding bachelor's degree and dual enrollment programs.

the first in his family to receive a college degree — and began work as a migrant coordinator with the local K-12 school district.

“He was all about saying that we had this luxury, this gift — how do we use it to help other people?” Benavidez says.

Her mother had left high school as a junior without earning a diploma; she forced herself to return and earn her GED a year later. For the next two decades, she worked as a teacher’s aide, but “refused to give up on her education,” Benavidez says. At 47, after attending night school for 15 years, she became the second in the family to graduate from college.

As a result, for Benavidez, “it was clear that it wasn’t about whether I was going to college, but what college I would go to,” she says. She and her four siblings all went on to receive degrees and credentials; Benavidez would ultimately become the first in her family to receive a graduate degree.

Education proved a family legacy that transcended generations. Benavidez’s grandfather went back to school to earn his GED as he approached 60. He would often remind her and her siblings that he “rode in the back of a pickup truck so we could ride in the front of an airplane,” she says.

After graduating from high school at 17, Benavidez attended University of Texas–Pan American in the evenings, working during the day to support her studies. Majoring in political science, Benavidez initially planned to go on to law school, but a summer internship at the Starr County Industrial Foundation, a nonprofit economic development organization, turned into an offer to lead the foundation.

“My world was all about government and what I was going to do as a lawyer, but I was able to transfer those skills into a field that while male-dominated was one I would learn to excel in,” she says. During her time as president of the foundation, Starr County has seen \$3.5 billion in new investments in the commercial, industrial, and renewable energy fields. Unemployment, which had been higher than 60 percent in past decades, fell to single digits before the pandemic hit.

For her work, Benavidez has been honored on the Rio Grande

Valley Walk of Fame. She is a recipient of the State of Texas Women of Distinction Award from the Association of Mexican American Chambers of Commerce and was named a Woman of Distinction by the Rio Grande Valley Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

The foundation also provided Benavidez with the opportunity to work closely with her father, who was then serving as an administrator for the school district and as a trustee at South Texas College, which he had played a significant role in founding.

In the 1990s, Manuel was involved in state politics and “vocal about the need to improve higher education in the community,” she says. At the time, Starr County and the Rio Grande Valley were the only region of Texas without a college of its own, an area home to more than 600,000 people with the nearest institution an hour’s drive away.

Legislation that created South Texas College as the state’s 50th community college was signed into law by then-Governor Anne Richards in 1993. Manuel was appointed a founding trustee of the college by Richards and subsequently elected twice to six-year terms.

As Benavidez began her economic development career years later, her father was focused on establishing the county’s first early college high school. “That was one of the first policy experiences I had,” she says. “We worked together to bring that to fruition.” And when her father passed away at the age of 57, the intergenerational cycle would continue.

Benavidez was tapped to fill her father’s vacancy on the STC board in 2009 and easily won election that November.

“I went into that service as a way to finish off some of the projects we were working on together,” she says. “I had some semblance of what it meant, but it wasn’t until I was knee-deep that I realized what lifting people out of poverty really meant.”

Benavidez also quickly saw the connections between her work in economic development and her role as a trustee. “There was such commonality between the work I was doing and the college’s ultimate goal of creating a labor force that was skill ready,” she says. “My profession has given me context to what jobs are available, and where



Benavidez at the 2022 Community College National Legislative Summit with Education Secretary Miguel Cardona, left, and receiving the gavel from former ACCT Chair James Cooksey, right.



they are going to be available today and 5 to 10 years down the line... It gave me the right footing to push the envelope and ensure we were aligning training to occupations that were viable in the region and created real job opportunities.”

STC has experienced tremendous growth since its inception, adding bachelor’s degree programs and pathways for transfer to partner universities. More recently, the college has added dual-enrollment programs to area high schools that have helped reduce remediation rates for incoming students from 30 percent to the single digits. Almost 70 percent of students now go on to receive some type of postsecondary credential or degree, and through early college and dual enrollment programs, many graduate with associate degrees prior to receiving their high school diploma. In 2017, STC became the first college in the nation to graduate high school seniors with an associate degree in nursing.

Benavidez served as STC Board Chair during its 2013 bond and maintenance tax election, which passed easily. “This community has always been supportive of our taxing initiatives because they have witnessed the opportunities that have been created for our residents and their children,” Benavidez says. “It’s a stark reminder of how important education is in this community.”

It’s also a sign of how the community has been transformed by the college, Benavidez says. “When families once sat in dining rooms, the conversations for the vast majority weren’t about where they were going to college — it was where to work to help the family,” she says. “That poverty-driven cycle has changed significantly since the creation of STC. We’ve shifted to a community with a college-going culture that now has access to higher education right in its backyard.”

Benavidez’s first experience with ACCT came early. As an STC trustee, Manuel brought her to an association meeting in Washington, D.C. at a young age. Named a Regional Trustee of the Year and an ACCT Lifetime Member, Manuel later served as chair of ACCT’s Diversity Committee (now Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion), another path his daughter would ultimately follow.

Benavidez was first elected to the ACCT Board of Directors in 2017, representing the western region. “When I first became part of the board, I learned that my dad was part of the initial effort to promote passage of the DREAM Act when he was chair of the Diversity Committee,” she says. “It is an incredible feeling to know that years later, we are now working with the Administration and have taken that idea and moved it closer to becoming a reality.”

Along with serving as chair of ACCT’s Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee, Benavidez also served as president of the National Association of Latino Community College Trustees before being elected ACCT Chair in 2023 — “due in large part to the sheer will of the many Latinas who came before me,” she said upon accepting the gavel in New York last fall. “It’s not about proving ourselves, but improving everything around us.”

In that spirit, Benavidez is focused as ACCT Chair on infusing governance with a true “duty of care.”

“We want this to be about service to others and how it translates to those we serve,” she says. “For me, this is about shining a light on the value of ACCT and the work it has been doing for over 50 years, quietly but very impactfully.”

“As we continue to seek ways to expand our efforts, the reality is that our success can only be measured by the success of others,” she adds. “Together, and in the most simple and brilliant ways, we can and will continue to transform the lives of every young girl and boy who dares to dream by nurturing that seed of hope that serves as both our anchor and their sail.”



Mark Toner is an editor for Trustee Quarterly.