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## An Interview with Gloria Bonilla-Santiago, Director of the Center for Strategic Urban Community Leadership, Rutgers University

Harold Horton  
*University of Massachusetts Boston*

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# An Interview with Gloria Bonilla- Santiago, Director of the Center for Strategic Urban Community Leadership, Rutgers University

by Harold Horton

**Harold Horton:** This edition of the *Trotter Review* focuses on selected programs in American higher education that were specifically designed to assist in developing minority leadership in education. Please explain exactly when and why the Center for Strategic Urban Community Leadership (CSUCL) was started.

**Gloria Bonilla-Santiago:** The Center for Strategic Urban Community Leadership of Rutgers University was established in 1992. Since its inception, the center has been dedicated to the improvement and advancement of urban communities throughout the Northeast. The mission of the center is to foster the understanding and acceptance in American leaders of the importance of providing new organizational environments and strategies, and building partnerships between urban communities and academia for dealing with race relations and urban development. Through social action research, leadership development, training and community partnerships, the center provides a forum for the analysis, discussion and assessment of policy issues, while developing new knowledge of strategic approaches to meeting the changing needs of urban communities.

**HH:** What factors motivated you to establish CSUCL?

**GBS:** A major factor was the need to create a safe place and a forum for challenging and implementing social action research. Through a combination of innovative leadership projects, research, and crosscultural innovations and ideas, the center seeks to redefine leadership, to build new knowledge, and to re-examine old values and paradigms which prevent urban communities from moving forward.

The rationale for creating the center stemmed from the need to respond to the desperate plight of those who live in America's large urban areas. Effective local leadership within these communities, especially minority leadership, is critical. There are a number of key skills and qualities that need to be developed among emerging minority leaders, as well as new and innovative strategies in order to tackle the burgeoning problems affecting urban communities in

America. Overall, the center combines sound theory with practical skills and knowledge within a framework that reflects the values of social responsibility and self-empowerment. The center provides global and local perspectives that have increased the understanding of the complex challenges facing urban communities.

**HH:** Would you also describe the organizational structure and the major programs of CSUCL and briefly explain how the center is financially supported?

**GBS:** The center is under the provost's office. In addition to the director, the center has four, full-time staff members: a program coordinator for Project LEAP, a program associate for leadership programs, a bookkeeper, and a secretary. In addition, the center has six, full-time research fellows working on a variety of research and program development initiatives as well as consultants and researchers.

The center brings together national scholars and consultants to deliver training and lend their expertise in development areas. Included among the faculty scholars are Ralph Mitchel and Dr. Carole Leland from the Center for Creative Leadership; Dr. Jorge Del Final from the U.S. Bureau of the Census; Dr. Ruth Mandel from the Center for the American Woman and Politics; Dr. James Jennings from the University of Massachusetts; Dr. Derald Wing Sue from California State University; Charlotte Bunch from the Center for Global Women's Leadership; and, Alvin Herring and Kim Unyoung from the National Coalition Building Institute. Our consultants include Dr. Joseph Fernandez, president and CEO of School Improvement Services, and former chancellor of the New York City public schools; Dr. Joseph Harris from the McKenzie Group; and, Dr. Lawrence Leak from Morgan State University.

An important belief of the center's staff is that the future of our urban communities depends on the development of new transformational leaders who are empowered and prepared to overcome the political, social, and cultural barriers that impede their accessibility to leadership positions. To that end, the center has spearheaded a number of programs: the Hispanic Women's Leadership Institute, the Latino Fellows Public Policy Leadership Institute, and the Leadership Management for Urban Executives Institute.

**HH:** Please describe some of these programs for our readers. What is the Hispanic Women's Leadership Institute?

**GBS:** The Hispanic Women's Leadership Institute was established in 1989 to train Hispanic women for positions of leadership in the private and public sectors. The program has graduated 125 students who are making significant contributions in many fields. The institute's curriculum is designed to assist Hispanic women with personal, professional, and organizational competencies. Early sessions are largely devoted to understanding general concepts of leadership and management and identifying personal strengths and development needs, talents, and styles as they relate to leadership and professional advancement. Later, the focus shifts toward current issues

and community concerns, expanding outward from the personal to the political.

**HH:** What is the Leadership Management for Urban Executives Institute?

**GBS:** The Leadership Management for Urban Executives Institute (LMUEI) brings together African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans from urban communities for an intensive, year-long leadership training program. The goal of the program is to increase effective, multidisciplinary, and multicultural leadership in urban communities of color. This institute is based on a multicultural, holistic approach to leadership development which increases both the quality and quantity of leaders within local communities of color. The program focuses on issues of most concern to communities of color, analyzes leadership as a complex concept, and identifies the dimensions and components of effective leadership. The curriculum is designed to enable leaders from communities of color to bridge the social, historical, and logistical gaps between communities of color, as well as between academic and local communities, private and public sector leaders and urban communities, and local government and communities. Its goal is to develop organizational and political competencies including technical knowledge and skills in the following areas: crosscultural communication and collaboration; decision making, dispute resolution, and prejudice reduction; community development, empowerment, and leadership; and advocacy, legislative strategy, and community organizing. Finally, its aim is to build local coalitions and shared agendas in the common interests of communities of color in urban areas.

**HH:** What is the Latino Fellows Public Policy Leadership Institute?

**GBS:** The Latino Fellows Public Policy Leadership Institute is designed to meet the needs of many young Latino college students attending institutions of higher learning in New Jersey. The program provides students with exposure to public policy careers, while refining their academic and public policy skills. Latino students are encouraged to be involved in community projects and work settings which will enrich their theoretical and practical learning processes. Through this program, fifteen undergraduate Latino students are placed in a ten-week internship during the summer. This institute represents a partnership with the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs and various banking institutions in New Jersey.

**HH:** And, Project LEAP: Leadership, Education, and Partnership?

**GBS:** In addition to the leadership institutes, the center is spearheading the efforts of Project LEAP: Leadership, Education, and Partnership. Project LEAP was born out of the realization that the educational and social service needs of families in Camden require multifaceted, collaborative, and long-term solutions. Through a planning grant from the Delaware River Port Authority, the center has engaged in a three-year research and strategic planning process that

focuses on developing holistic models for providing educational, human, health, legal, and business services, and training development opportunities to the Camden City Public School District. The Project represents a multilayered and multifaceted collaboration between Rutgers University, the Camden public schools, the Delaware River Port Authority, and a range of parents, community, human and health service providers, and business organizations. The focus of Project LEAP is the development of a community-based school for grades PreK–8 in math, science, and technology that will reflect several kinds of pedagogical and organizational innovations based on proven reform initiatives in urban education and the generation of supportive environments for parental and community participation.

**HH:** Since the establishment of CSUCL, what comes to mind as some of the major highlights or accomplishments of the center as related to developing leadership for urban communities?

**GBS:** A major accomplishment for the center has been the award of a \$1.6 million research planning grant from the Delaware River Port Authority to design the Project LEAP Academy, a collaboration and partnership of university leaders, the Camden Board of Education, and the Delaware River Port Authority.

Another significant achievement of the center has been the graduation from the Hispanic Women's Leadership Institute of 125 women students who are now making important contributions to their communities. Among these success stories are: Frances Colon-Gibson who became the first Latina to be appointed superintendent of a public school district; Iliana Colon-Okum, who was recently director of the Office of Bilingual Education and Equity Program for the State Department of Education; Viviana Pelicot-Santiago, who is first vice president and financial consultant for Smith-Barney; Dalia Georgedes, recently appointed director of Special Initiatives for the New Jersey Department of Education; Dr. Zenaida Otero-Keil, appointed director of development for the Engineering School at Rowan College; Debbie Aguiar-Velez, an engineer and president of SISTEMAS Corporation, who was recently appointed to the Board of Trustees of Corestates New Jersey National Bank; and Ramonita Santiago, appointed assistant for Academic Affairs at Douglass College.

Alumni from the Leadership Management for Urban Executives Institute are also representative of the emerging talent and leadership in our urban communities: Maria Vizcarrondo-De Soto, who was elected surrogate for Essex County; Edward De Jesus, who was accepted as a Kellogg Fellow this year; Laura Nakatani, who was appointed codirector of the Act Project in Washington, D.C.; and Irving Bridle, who was recently appointed manager of Affirmative Action and Equal Employment Opportunity for the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey.

The center has published a number of monographs on important topics: *State of Affairs of Latinos in New Jersey* (1993); *Women, Latinos, and Public Policy: A National*

*Priority for the New World Order* (1992); and *Celebrating Diversity: Building Leadership* (1991). In addition, the center has designed crosscultural training curricula for private and public agencies and corporations and sponsored conferences and public forums on issues related to urban communities and leadership development.

**HH:** Universities and colleges across the country are faced with significant financial constraints. How does such a fiscal situation affect the budget and operation of CSUCL?

**GBS:** We are partially funded through the university and through external grants. We believe that if our programs are to survive in the long term, they need to become permanent budget line items in the university system.

**HH:** What, in your opinion, has contributed significantly to the decline of urban areas in America?

**GBS:** No single factor adequately describes the complicated character of the problems found in America's large urban areas. These problems include homelessness, crime, homicide, drugs, inadequate housing, teenage pregnancy, unemployment, AIDS, domestic violence, illiteracy, high dropout rates, vandalism, alienation, and, above all, abiding hopelessness and deep despair.

During the 1950s, inner cities across the United States were considered to be the backbones of the American economy. In the late 1960s, however, as industry and the middle class moved to the surrounding suburbs, poor African Americans, Latinos, and whites were left jobless in decaying cities. With little else left, these men, women, and children increasingly turned to public assistance for support and entered a cycle of poverty.

For a time, events this spring in Los Angeles focused national attention on America's inner cities. As a result, we now have before us a variety of both new and recycled policy initiatives all claiming to address facets of the problem. These initiatives, and the concerns they reflect, portend an era of social action in response to what the editors of *Newsweek* have referred to as "the past-due bills of 25 years of societal and governmental neglect."<sup>1</sup> Welcome as these expressions of concern may be, resulting initiatives cannot hope to succeed without effective local leadership capable of bridging the chasm between the groups most desperately in need of services, programs, and resources, and the government agencies and private foundations that will have to provide the necessary financial support.

The critical importance of local leadership was the focus of an article in the *Economist*. Commenting on the response of national political leaders and elected officials in Los Angeles to that city's riots, the editors point out that "the answers to many of America's most pressing urban problems are more likely to be found in the cities themselves. All over the United States, local groups (often not-for-profit organizations) and even individuals have found ways to tackle urban illiteracy, delinquency and joblessness which big government has failed to do."<sup>2</sup> They go on to quote from a report about urban programs by the Milton Eisenhower Foundation. This report found that

"non-profit organizations, not government, were often best placed to set youth and community programs in motion . . . and that, too often, ventures failed because they did not have enough money."<sup>3</sup> They conclude, "The unfortunate truth for a federal government which would like to come up with lots of new initiatives and not spend any money is that it would be more useful to do the opposite."<sup>4</sup>

The point is that long lasting solutions to the urgent problems of America's inner cities require the formation of a coalition of public and private institutions capable of funding necessary programs, and local individuals knowledgeable about and sensitive to the needs and circumstances of those who are to be helped. In particular, local leaders must be capable of maneuvering their way through the complex maze of public and private bureaucracies on whose support the survival of such programs depends. Because it bridges the gap between those in need and those who control resources, local leadership is pivotal.

**HH:** Do you believe that institutions of higher education located in urban areas are meaningfully involved in attempting to address and resolve such critical urban problems as housing, employment, health, or education?

**GBS:** We at Rutgers University are definitely committed and involved in redefining new ways for solving some of the problems of the fourth largest poor city in the United States—Camden City. Institutions of higher education cannot longer afford to be "ivory towers," functioning in isolation from surrounding communities. The CSUCL represents a major initiative on the part of Rutgers University to redirect its human and physical resources, knowledge, technical expertise, and talents in providing services to the Camden community. The center's projects provide the opportunity to pull together collective experiences in urban community service and develop a unified approach to urban problems.

**HH:** How would you rate, on a scale of one to ten (one the lowest, ten the highest) the extent to which leaders in the various communities of color collaborate to address and resolve urban problems of mutual concern? Please elaborate.

**GBS:** If I were to rate the extent of multi-ethnic collaboration and coalition building, I would have to give it a three. Not only do we need urban leaders who understand the complexities of our policy-making systems, but who are also willing to build alliances in moving their agendas forward. It will no longer be possible for them to proceed alone. These groups, though sharing a common plight, have shown a destructive tendency to turn on one another rather than present a unified front in their dealings with the outside world.

To accomplish this task, they will need to learn to work cooperatively with one another. The reason for this lies in basic demographic changes that have been occurring in the United States in recent decades. Going into the last decade of the twentieth century, demographic trends clearly indicate that the United States is undergoing a profound

demographic transition and is fast becoming a multicultural society. Martha Fransworth Riche notes that “the government will find that as minority groups grow in size relative to one another, and as the minority population gains on the dwindling majority, no single group will command the power to dictate solutions. The debate over almost any public issue is likely to become more confrontational. Reaching a consensus will require more cooperation than it has in the past.”<sup>5</sup> Cornel West calls for a new kind of leadership that “must be grounded in grassroots organizing that highlights democratic accountability. Whoever our leaders will be as we approach the twenty-first century, their challenge will be to help Americans determine whether a genuine multiracial democracy can be created and sustained in an era of global economy and a moment of xenophobic frenzy.”<sup>6</sup>

**HH:** What leaders of color in urban communities across America do you believe appear to be on target in addressing critical problems that people of color are currently facing?

**GBS:** I would say that among the national leaders who are on target in addressing critical problems in urban communities are: Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children’s Defense Fund; Raul Yzaguirre, president of the National Council of La Raza; Barbara Jordan, the former congresswoman from Texas; Dolores Huerta, vice president of the United Farmworkers; Dr. Sara Melendez, president of the Independent Sector; Congresswoman Pat Schroeder; and Henry Cisneros, secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez continue to be role models and sources of inspiration and guidance. As Cornel West also stated, “The major challenge is to meet the need to generate new leadership. The paucity of courageous leaders . . . requires that we look beyond the same elites and voices that recycle the old framework. We need leaders—neither saints nor sparkling television personalities—who can situate themselves within a larger historical [context] of this country and our world, who can grasp the complex dynamics of our peoplehood and imagine a future grounded in the best of our past, yet who are attuned to the frightening obstacles that now perplex us.”<sup>7</sup>

**HH:** Based on the relatively short period that CSUCL has been in existence, what advice would you give to your colleagues at other campuses who are interested in establishing such a center?

**GBS:** Any center of this type should be under the auspices of a provost’s or president’s office; multidisciplinary in its structure, programs, and innovations; and tied to academic programs, research, professional development, and public service programs. The stakeholders and supporters of the

center need to feel that they are in concert with the mission of the university and the institution cares about it in a serious way. What is more impressive is the respect for diversity, social action research, and credibility that an institution like Rutgers University brings to a community of academics, students, and local urban residents, a true partnership of community and university leaders finding solutions to new problems. A mainstream center like ours, must be part of the university mission and strategic plan. We must all invest in finding new solutions to the urban crisis, if we are to survive in the next decade.

**HH:** Finally, as Rodney King said with regard to the issue of racial, ethnic, and cultural strife in America, Can we as a nation learn to live together?

**GBS:** I believe that yes, we can, we will, and we must in order to survive in the next decade. We must learn to appreciate and respect each other’s traditions, and validate each other’s work, histories, cultural heritage, and contributions. More importantly, institutions of higher learning need to take leadership by supporting programs like ours, because we are the means to their future success in dealing with issues of racial and ethnic diversity and new leadership. It is in academia that minority scholars can afford to do research and test new ideas for solving the most pervasive urban problems. This is what real social action research, policy creation, and change is all about. We are making a difference in our institutions of higher learning when we take the leadership to be innovative, creative, accountable, and provide solutions for our institutions who need us to be partners in this effort.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Newsweek* (11 May 1992): 54.

<sup>2</sup> *The Economist* (23 May 1992): 25

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Martha Fransworth Riche, “We’re All Minorities Now,” *American Demographics* (October 1991): 26–34.

<sup>6</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 7–8.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Gloria Bonilla-Santiago is director of the Center for Strategic Urban Community Leadership and a professor in the School of Social Work at Rutgers University.

Harold Horton is associate director of the Trotter Institute and teaches courses in the graduate program in education at UMass Boston.