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Research Leads to Leadership Conference Invitation for Guzman '16

Feb. 26, 2016

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— At first, Melissa Guzman '16 thought the email had been sent to her by mistake.

Guzman's inbox contained a message from Sylvia Torres, a Chicago-based alderman. It read: "Will you go to this event with me?" Torres was referring to the annual United States Hispanic Leadership Institute Conference. Guzman had never heard of the event, and Guzman and Torres had never met, though they'd spoken by phone.

An Illinois Wesleyan University [political science](#) major, Guzman had interviewed Torres for a senior seminar project examining the underrepresentation of Latina elected officials in Illinois and identifying obstacles that are specific to Latinas. Representing the City of Chicago Heights' 7th Ward, Torres was among the 15 women Guzman interviewed by phone last fall.

Expanding her project for honors research, Guzman is now surveying Latino men and non-Latina women who hold public office in Illinois. Guzman will also ask additional questions of her original subjects, which is why she'd emailed Torres earlier this month and received the unexpected invitation to attend what Guzman learned was the premier Hispanic leadership conference as Torres' guest.

At the conference, Torres and Guzman networked with national policymakers and attended a forum hosted by broadcast journalist and former CNN anchor Soledad O'Brien. Guzman said that an underlying theme of her conversations with participants throughout the day focused on helping Latinos get elected to public office and to increase civic participation at all levels among Latinos.

Guzman is keenly interested in these topics and has spent a considerable portion of her college experience investigating them. Two years ago she interned with the Bruce Rauner gubernatorial campaign after he tapped Wheaton City Councilwoman Evelyn Sanguinetti as his running mate. At the end of the summer of 2014, Guzman was offered a staff position as special assistant to Sanguinetti. Although it meant Guzman would have to miss the fall semester of her junior year, Guzman said the opportunity was something she couldn't pass up.

"I had an insider's look into campaigning and witnessed what it's like for a candidate in the heat of a campaign," recalled Guzman, a native of Chicago. Crisscrossing the state, Guzman worked with Sanguinetti nearly every day as the candidate attended interviews, fundraisers, parades, meetings, ceremonies and other public events. Sanguinetti's election in November 2014 made her the first female Hispanic lieutenant governor in the United States. "Working on the campaign only increased my passion that the country needs more Latinas in office," said Guzman.

She broadened her perspective on women in office during an internship at Running Start, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization working to train young women to run for political office, while she was enrolled in the Washington semester program at American University. The internship led to introductions at Spanish language network Univision, where Guzman interned during the summer of 2015.

At Univision's Washington office, Guzman worked with a government advocacy group and attended the Young Elected Officials National Convening. Representing Univision at several events that summer, Guzman was struck by some recurring themes: the percentage of Latinos who don't vote, the potential influence of the Latino voting bloc, and the fact that many of the young elected officials of color were the first in their districts, wards or counties.

All of these experiences led Guzman to refine her interests into the senior research project. Under the guidance of Associate Professor of Political Science Kathleen Montgomery, Guzman's project included research into overlapping and intersecting social characterizations particular to Hispanic women. "Latinas are part of a disenfranchised minority and also a gender that isn't well represented in government," said Guzman. "I wanted to see what kind of obstacles women who are Latino face when seeking office."

This spring Guzman, the daughter of Mexican immigrants, will graduate from IWU, the first in her family to earn a college degree. She hopes to work with a nonprofit or advocacy group to encourage more women and Latinos to run for public office. She prefers working behind the scenes of campaigns — conducting research, advising and networking — but feels somewhat hypocritical encouraging others to run for office when she's not doing it herself. So she's not entirely ruling it out.

No matter in what capacity, Guzman is sure she will continue her advocacy for representation. "Hispanics are the largest minority group," she points out. In Hispanic share of state populations, Illinois ranks 10th, according to the Pew Research Center. "I just believe more attention should be paid to representation of this group of people."



Melissa Guzman '16

