

The Making of President Ricardo Fernández

By Don Sutherland

The Spring 2016 edition of *Lehman Today* contains a lengthy [piece](#) to commemorate Lehman College's retiring President Ricardo Fernández. The article provides a rich biographical sketch and provides milestones from his 26-year tenure as Lehman College President. It also provides insight into the attributes that contributed to his success, two of which are highlighted in this blog.

The article talks about his struggling with math in grade school. During that time, he discovered that his difficulty had nothing to do with the subject matter in question. Instead, he found that his challenge was rooted in the course's having been taught in English rather than his native Spanish. "That was my first awareness that I needed to master my second language English, to succeed in school," he explained. Over time, he more than mastered the English language.

Frequently, when challenges arise, leaders embrace what appears to be the immediate cause of the challenge that confronts them or their organization. However, good leaders resist the temptation for easy answers and quick fixes. They look deeper. Often, the actual causes of various challenges lie hidden from easy view. They can only be found after a good deal of exploration and examination. It is that discovery that leads to effective solutions. Dr. Fernández's grade school experience provided an invaluable lesson toward that end. Math—the seemingly most obvious explanation—wasn't the problem. His understanding of the English language, at the time, was the real problem.

The article noted that his affection for "love of baseball" guided President Fernández to study at Marquette University. "The Milwaukee Braves were well known because they had defeated the New York Yankees in the 1957 World Series. It was my love of baseball that led me to the Upper Midwest," Fernández revealed. This little anecdote brings home another important lesson. The pursuit of one's interests or passions can lead one to opportunities. Some of those realized opportunities can be life-changing. In Dr. Fernández's case, his time in Milwaukee led to his involvement in the educational needs of that city's Latino community. In turn, that involvement solidified a trajectory that culminated in his becoming President of Lehman College in 1990.

The overall lesson from these two anecdotes is that one's experiences matter greatly. The experiences one has, the choices one makes, and the outcomes of those choices, contribute, at least in part, to where one goes in life and what one achieves. One can find similar outcomes in the biographies of history's prominent political and business leaders. President Fernández was no exception the role his experiences played in shaping his life. He is keenly aware of that reality.

The *Lehman Today* article highlights his understanding of the important role experiences played in shaping his life in its closing paragraph:

For him, his years of service to Lehman College and the Bronx can be traced back to his childhood. "As a product of a Jesuit education, I know full well their motto 'men and women in the service of others,' he said. A commitment to serve was inculcated in me by my teachers and mentors early on and it continues to inspire my efforts to this very day."

That commitment to serve was crystallized in President Fernández's placing emphasis on the student before the U.S. Department of Education and various accrediting agencies dramatically shifted their emphasis to student success. In 2010, as Lehman College completed its strategic planning process, President Fernández explained, "We will continue to plan and act—not according to this moment's crisis—but focused on the faces in our classrooms, on their futures, and on the world we wish to shape." The College would not be distracted by transitory short-term matters, even the painful fiscal challenges brought about in the aftermath of the 2008 Financial Crisis and Great Recession that followed. It would look to something more enduring. It would play a role in shaping the world. To do so, it would serve its most important constituent, the student.

Today, the kind of long-term focus on student success articulated by President Fernández is increasingly defining public expectations for Higher Education. There is growing consensus that colleges and universities are responsible not only for providing students with the skills, knowledge, and opportunities to prepare them for professional and civic life while they are on campus, but also that they bear a degree of continuing responsibility for the success of such students after they graduate.

President Fernández's philosophy of focusing on students and their futures in helping shape a better world was ahead of its time. It is an intangible insight that has put Lehman College in a good position to navigate the challenges and opportunities of today's increasingly student-focused Higher Education landscape.