

AN  
*Interview*  
WITH...



# Marta Tienda

*Marta Tienda, who served for eight years as a trustee of Carnegie Corporation of New York, is Maurice P. Daring Professor in Demographic Studies and Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs at Princeton University, where she served as director of the Office of Population Research. Previously she was Ralph Lewis Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago, where she served as department chair and editor of the flagship journal, American Journal of Sociology. Tienda also held positions at UW-Madison and a visiting position at Stanford University. Tienda is past-president of the Population Association of America and a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Graduating magna cum laude with a B.A. in Spanish from Michigan State University and M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in sociology from the University of Texas at Austin, Tienda has been the recipient of numerous fellowships and honors. She is interviewed here by the Carnegie Reporter.*

**Carnegie Reporter:** *Let's start with some of your recent work. In the last few years you've been doing specific demographic research focused on young Hispanics and immigrants and their advancement in higher education. It was as you wrote up your findings that you became very outspoken about the need for affirmative action, but you didn't expect that to be your conclusion when you began your research, did you?*

**Marta Tienda:** When I began the work in higher education, about six years ago, it was an outgrowth of my broader concerns with equity, access and opportunity. In that context, I was certainly aware that the political climate around affirmative action was in flux. There had been some progress—perhaps not enough—but the benchmarks for affirmative action were

not clear. And it was becoming increasingly apparent that existing affirmative action policies could not continue ad infinitum without some clear justification. But when I began to look at the evidence, the possibilities and alternatives that were “race neutral” in a society that in many ways had become race stratified, there didn’t seem to be answers. After studying the data, I concluded that there was simply no hope

ple from achieving the kind of educational success that will lead to career and economic gains. As a society and as a nation, we simply can’t go on allowing so many with so much to contribute to fall between the cracks.

**CR:** *And you considered it imperative to support your arguments with data and detailed research?*

**MT:** Absolutely. And in doing the research, there were several things that

diverse nation in the world, are we representing that diversity in our leadership? Are we using higher education to plan for the future? And that means making sure that the diversity of society is reflected in all its institutions and aspects—but in my research, I didn’t see that.

In my research, I also focused on the alternative affirmative action plan underway in Texas known as the Ten

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that an individual could break the chains of educational inequality without affirmative action.

Reflecting on my own educational opportunities—I was the first person in my family to go to college, for example—it seemed to me that there were fewer opportunities today than in the past for minorities to access higher education and to advance in that environment. Through my research, it became clear to me that there is a lot of untapped talent out there, young people who, because of different kinds of situations, because of accidents of birth or other factors, are simply being held back. They went to the wrong school, their parents lost their jobs—all sorts of circumstances can prevent young peo-

jointly led me to the conclusion that there is a continuing need for affirmative action. First of all, I started to read broadly on the subject, steeping myself in issues ranging from the Bakke decision<sup>1</sup> all the way forward to see what the trends were. And though you can look at this as a glass-half-empty or half-full issue, it is the case that while the proportion of blacks and Hispanics in higher education has risen, you have to factor in that they also now account for a higher percentage of the population than twenty-five years ago when the Bakke decision was handed down, so there have been no real net gains in over two decades. Therefore, we have to ask ourselves, while we have become the most

Percent Plan.<sup>2</sup> It’s a strategy that is allegedly race neutral and is supposed to provide equal opportunity, but while a bold experiment, to be sure, it capitalizes on the very inequities that required affirmative action in the first place. It attempts to level the playing field by guaranteeing automatic admission to the state’s public colleges and universities for high school graduates in the top ten percent of their class. But there’s a great deal of criticism of the plan because it allows kids who are attending less competitive schools to have an unfair advantage and also doesn’t take into account other factors that may prevent high-achieving, low-income minority students from attending college.

<sup>1</sup> In 1978, the Supreme Court ruled, in the case of the University of California vs. Bakke, that Allan Bakke, a white man who was not accepted to the University of California medical school, which had admitted less academically qualified blacks, had been illegally denied admission, but also said that medical schools were entitled to consider race as a factor in admission. The ruling was seen as upholding the general principle of affirmative action.

**CR:** *In studying the data, you also found that there were geographic and family factors that were critical to whether a student had access to higher education and actually graduated from college.*

**MT:** There are a number of circumstances and characteristics that affect who goes to college and who doesn't. We know, for example, that if parents have a higher level of education, their

particularly Hispanics—are growing. How are we going to stop that? If we, as a society, are going to accept that there are tolerable limits of inequality and that there will always be some form of economic, class, or racial inequality—not that I endorse that point of view—then don't we at least have to say, if these are the tolerable limits, can we afford to let them get worse?

The widening gap in opportunity and achievement between whites and Hispanics—in education and other areas—is particularly important to focus on because Hispanics are growing so fast as an

essary [to promote educational access].” If we are going to meet that charge a quarter century from now, we have a big job to do. To begin with, we have to break the connection between parents' educational attainment and the probability that a child will go to college because so many young Hispanics today have parents who didn't go to college.

The only way we can address some of these inequalities is by taking deliberate and systematic steps forward, and that means that for now we need

children are very likely to go to college. For some young people, the idea of attending college is always on their radar screen. As a first generation college goer, I can tell you that isn't always the case for many of us, which has been confirmed by the data.

But what's important is that when we think about the sources of diversification of the U.S. population, the fastest growth is in the number of kids whose parents don't have any higher education. Consequently, even in those instances where the parents have moved up economically and socially, the probability of their children achieving a higher level of education than their parents is not clearly in evidence. But what is clear, as demonstrated by the data, is that the educational disparities between whites and nonwhites—

ethnic group. The Hispanic second generation, the children of immigrants—the children whose parents tend not to have higher education—have a median age of 12.7 years. That's an enormously significant bulge moving through the population pipeline, and has major implications if you think of the words of Justice Sandra Day O'Connor who said, in an opinion handed down in the recent Supreme Court decision upholding the University of Michigan Law School's affirmative action policies, that she hoped “...25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be nec-

to use affirmative action to make sure that we're getting the best and the brightest into the schools that will position them for opportunity and achievement.

**CR:** *You've never been an outspoken supporter of affirmative action during your career, so did this conclusion surprise you?*

**MT:** I was teaching a six-week seminar on affirmative action at the time that I started this project and I told my students that I didn't think affirmative action was the best solution to the problem of educational inequality and that one of the goals of the seminar would be to identify alternative strategies. At the end of the seminar, I was stunned that I had to retract my statement and say that I didn't think there

<sup>2</sup> An alternative to affirmative action for individual students, the Ten Percent Plan admits the top 10 percent of every high school graduating class into state institutions of higher education.

was an alternative to affirmative action.

During that seminar, one aspect of our research focused on when young minorities began thinking about going to college, and for many, it turned out to be late in the game—nearly one-third of those we questioned as part of a survey we conducted said they didn't think about college until high school or middle school. That's too far along in their educational career, especially if that



decision isn't made until high school.

I was lucky, personally. When I was in seventh grade, a teacher asked me, "What are you going to do when you finish high school?" And I said, "I'm going to be a hairdresser." I'd seen people do hairdressing and I thought that it looked like fun. But then the teacher said to me, "Don't you want to go to college?" It was such a riveting moment for me that I even remember what the teacher was wearing that day. Until then, I thought that college was only for rich people and I was from a working class family. But when my teacher suggested college and told me that there were scholarships to help good students like me get to college, that was it. College was what I was doing and where I was going. And I never let go of that idea. Once I realized that I

could *earn* a scholarship, that's when I thought, well, I'm going to continue as far as I can go.

**CR:** *It was important to you that you could earn the scholarship? That it wasn't free?*

**MT:** Yes. I don't believe in free. I think you need to work for what you get. I make my kids work for things. The only things they don't have to earn are books—books are given. If one of my kids wants a book, I always buy it. I never argue with them, never ask why they want it, and they know that. Everything else is negotiable. And that's just the way it is.



**CR:** *You once told a professor that you were going to quit because you felt he was urging you to go into Women's Studies or Hispanic Studies and towards work that you felt would pigeonhole you. It's interesting, then, that in last few years, besides focusing on minorities in higher education in general, you have also focused on young Hispanic women. What made you change your mind and focus your studies on the ethnic group that you are part of and on young women in that group in particular?*

**MT:** Well, because I can do it now. I can do whatever I want. And nobody's going to say "It's just because she's one of them." I've made my reputation and achieved what I needed to; my aca-

demic credentials are a matter of public record. So when I take on a project, I'm known for addressing the issues involved scientifically, as an investigation. I don't approach my work with preconceived beliefs—I do have hypotheses; I have expectations based on what I know and what I've learned. But that doesn't mean I'm going to confirm them with my research.

So now I am in a position to carry out objective research about Hispanics and Hispanic women. And it's even



more important because of the role model issue. It was an important and lasting lesson for me to think about the fact that somebody might be looking at what I do and who I am to legitimate herself. I had never experienced that because, being raised in Michigan, I was not a typical Latina—there were not a lot of people like me where we lived. So I never felt uncomfortable because of who I was or worried about the fact that I was Mexican or that my family spoke Spanish.

Being poor, though, I remember very well, so that was an issue, but my ethnic identity was not. And about being poor, my main thoughts about myself in relation to other people were that maybe I'm different from you, but I'm not less than you. I had heard the expressions, "poor Mexican" and "dumb Mexican,"

but I never understood why those descriptions should apply. I certainly knew that I wasn't dumb, for instance. I wasn't at the bottom of my class, ever, so nobody could call me "dumb Mexican." It never fit. And if somebody tried to put me into that kind of box, I never let it happen. I resisted it, which is why earlier in my career I resisted doing women's studies or Chicano studies. I always wanted to go where my curiosity and my

and hard work—there are no short cuts. None at all! But once you reach that mature status you can choose the issues you want to explore and make the kinds of scientific contributions that are going to have lasting impact.

A young woman who came here to Princeton for a special summer science program had an opportunity to do the calculus workshop but was told by another colleague, "You don't need cal-

always tested better in math and the hard sciences and I wanted to be a biologist. I loved natural sciences when I was going to college but I was told that you couldn't combine humanities and science. It wasn't true, but that's what happened, so I just stayed on the literature route because it was something secure that I knew I could do. But then, when I got to graduate school, I just gravitated toward the quantitative. It happened that in the summer

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intellect took me. So that was the star that I always followed.

It was in graduate school at Stanford that I first realized who I was and what I did could have an impact on other women. It was a discovery for me that someone would look up to me and say, she's like us. Young women identified with me because of how I look and the way I dress. And they said, you know, you're like us. You dress like us and you talk like us and we see you standing up for yourself. That makes us feel that we can be like you. We feel legitimated by your example.

**CR:** *So being an established scholar, recognized for your science and your work, liberated you to work on Hispanic and women's issues?*

**MT:** Becoming a mature, established scholar takes time. It takes many years

and hard work. You'll never use it." When I heard about that, I sat her down and said, "Excuse me, you invest now. Your job is to learn everything you can and invest it in yourself. You need calculus because, for example, that way you have the opportunity and the flexibility to become a demographer in the future or take mathematics or economics. But if you say no to calculus now, you've closed those doors and years from now you may find yourself wishing that you had taken the workshop." There are some times when windows of opportunity appear and you just have to take advantage of them, even if it means making sacrifices.

**CR:** *How did you end up choosing a career as a demographer?*

**MT:** I actually have an undergraduate degree in literature though, ironically, I

between my junior and senior years, I started working with migrant farm workers, helping them to certify for food stamps. At the time, I had been thinking about becoming a Spanish teacher, but I had already done some student teaching and was demoralized by it, especially by what went on in the teachers' room. I heard teachers simply writing students off. So when I went to graduate school, I knew that I wanted to change fields from teaching to something else. My professors all said, "Oh, Senorita Tienda, that's because you had a very exciting summer. It will wear off." But it didn't. Being involved with migrant workers gave me some insight into the challenges faced by the census, for example. During that summer, I heard many people talking about the "fourth count," which, though I didn't quite understand it then, was

aimed at analyzing 1970 census data by certain race-ethnic groups, so, for instance, you could get an idea of how many Mexicans were living in Michigan. I was intrigued.

The rest was really sort of serendipitous. At Michigan State, where I went to college, there was a professor named Harley Browning who was a very respected demographer. He eventually became my major professor, but I met

*foundation. How important do you think foundations are? Are they “levers for change” in our society, as many say? Are they important institutions that deserve the support and protection of the tax exemption they currently have?*

**MT:** I’ve had a wonderful opportunity to serve not only the Corporation but also on the boards of the Russell Sage, Kaiser and W.T. Grant foundations as well as on the board of the

keep asking, where are we going? Are we still being true to the mission that our founder gave us?

In the same way that Supreme Court justices interpret the Constitution, the board of trustees at a foundation also interprets a foundation’s mission within the contemporary period. What does it mean today versus what it meant when the institution was founded? And while supporting projects that further the mis-

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him because I was taking a course on Mexican society and in that class I did some work that attracted his attention: it was a hypothetical interview with Gloria Steinem, the leading feminist, in which I asked about her views on Mexican society. Professor Browning was intrigued with the paper and he said, “Well, you can really write. Come see me.” After a couple of papers he said, “Do you want to be a demographer?” I said, “That sounds like a good idea.” The rest is history.

**CR:** *Now let’s turn to the world of foundations. You have served on a number of prominent foundation boards—including Carnegie Corporation of New York—and you are also the recipient of foundation grants. I think you have a unique perspective on this not-well-understood American institution, the*

Jacobs Foundation of Switzerland and have some insights as an academic who has sought and won foundation grants.

From my perspective, the importance of foundations—where they are indispensable—is that they can afford to take risks as well as trail blaze, set standards and study issues in ways that our government, for instance, cannot. Second, foundations have the organizational capacity for change and for maintaining institutional memory, qualities that are not endemic to government, particularly at high levels, because they’re constantly churning with political shifts and currents. Foundations have a vision, a mission. At the Corporation, we have revisited our mission many times and asked, what did Andrew Carnegie really want to do? Even in setting our spending rules we

mission, how do foundations make the most effective use of their limited resources? To answer those questions, foundation trustees and staff must do quite a bit of strategic planning.

But with focus and strong leadership, foundations can make a huge difference. At the Russell Sage Foundation, for example, the area of behavioral economics was something that was nurtured. At first, the staff of Russell Sage was seen almost like a band of renegades. Behavioral economics? People asked what that was. Now it’s a very established part of how social scientists think about the combination of psychology, economics and individual behavior that transcends any one of those single fields alone.

At the Corporation, support for different aspects of education at differ-

ent times in the foundation's long history has always been the key to fulfilling Andrew Carnegie's mandate to promote "the advancement and diffusion of knowledge and understanding." Take the Corporation's current work in teacher education: it's always been accepted that teachers are trained, that it's just something that happens. But we've also taken for

**CR:** *You're saying that foundations have the capital and the patience to support such projects?*

**MT:** Yes, they do and they have the flexibility to decide, for example, that they will work on an issue for five years or ten years and stay the course. That's hard, not to look for the quick fix. Redesigning urban high schools, which is also a top priority now for the Corporation, is a difficult problem to tackle, but it hasn't stopped us from investing millions of dollars in big cities, including New York, with its large, comprehensive high schools that have not been the most productive or efficient or produced the best educational outcomes for students. If institutions like the Corporation turn away from problems like that, who will take them on?

Another important role for foundations is their emphasis on public policy—you can't be any more strategic than trying to have influence in that arena. And one way to have that kind of influence is through the support of research and scholarship targeted toward specific problems. Policymakers need that kind of information to develop effective programs and policies, but in academia—the main source of the type of research I'm talking about—professors don't often think about how they can play a role in the public policy dynamic in this country or about the more far-ranging implications of their work. They just carry out the scholarship or the science, have it published and then the work ends. But foundations can help with the follow-through. It's like tennis: if you just hit the ball and you don't follow through, you don't know where the ball is going to go. Foundation support for research—and its dissemination—can help get the

results into the hands that can do the most good with it, help to connect academics and policymakers so that high-quality, effective research findings can be used to arrive at solutions for the problems that beset society—or at least, to start along that road.

**CR:** *Dissemination is critical in your view?*

**MT:** I always tell my students that if you don't write down what you think or what you learn, you can have the most brilliant idea of the century but it will get lost. Many foundations have made getting the word out an integral part of their mission because what good does the most valuable research do if nobody knows about it? But the success and importance of foundations doesn't rest on one single factor. Leadership and vision are paramount—there's just no substitute for them. They set the tone, the direction and the priorities, but no single person can be responsible for that alone, especially in larger organizations. After serving for a number of years on foundation boards, it's clear to me that a well-balanced board is important because it adds perspective. A good board is a working board that is there to support the senior staff and the entire leadership of a foundation, but it also doesn't just sign off on everything because then there's no value added.

The government doesn't realize what an ally it has in the foundation world. Foundations really do buttress many government programs, which in countless cases have been implemented as the result of foundation-supported research or models. Foundations are the nation's partners in addressing many of its most critical problems, and will certainly continue in that role for years to come. ■



**Marta Tienda and her sons Luis and Carlos.**

granted that the training was good enough to produce high-quality teachers who can provide effective education to all students, which is not the case. By working with schools of education through the Corporation's Teachers for a New Era initiative, the foundation is helping the schools to improve, to do better in training and nurturing the best possible teachers, who studies have shown to be the most important factor in student achievement. It's a long-term undertaking.

The data also shows us that teacher expectations have a lot to do with how a child performs in school. Foundations can support that kind of research and learning and truly make a big difference in how people craft programs and policies, and in how successful interventions get implemented.