Salisbury President Brings Passion for International Study – and a Transformative Love of Hispanidad – to Maryland Shore

by Linda Morales

“I am stronger because I bear in me not my little life, but all the lives, and I walk steadily forward because I have a thousand eyes.”
– Pablo Neruda

In 2000, Dr. Janet Dudley-Eshbach became president of Salisbury University (SU) on Maryland’s Eastern Shore. A Latin American literature and Spanish-language scholar, she was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Indiana University who had earned her Ph.D. from El Colegio de México. The “Shore” is part of a peninsula stretching along three states – Delaware, Maryland and Virginia. She knew it well, having been born outside Baltimore and growing up in Wilmington. As a child, she vacationed at Delmarva’s beaches with her family and had come to love getting “sand between her toes.”

A few weeks after her arrival at Salisbury, a university then of some 6,400 students (now 8,400) with a solid reputation for undergraduate teaching and learning, the 47-year-old president addressed the inaugural meeting of a newly formed campus group, Bienvenidos a Delmarva. Bienvenidos was established by BEACON (Business, Economic And Community Outreach Network), which is part of the university’s Perdue School of Business. BEACON’s director, Dr. Memo Diriker, had done research even before the 2000 Census and realized that the Shore was facing a new and unprecedented influx of immigrants from Latin America. Delmarva’s rural communities were unaware and unprepared. Bienvenidos was founded to bring together community and service organizations that could assist these new residents, from hospitals and boards of education to nonprofits and businesses that were hiring and selling.

As Dudley-Eshbach addressed representa-
A booster of international engagement by faculty, this past year SU was recognized as a top producer of Fulbright Scholars in the nation.
Diversity and hired its first director, who report-
ed directly to the President’s Office, making the
position one of the highest and most visible on
campus. She was steadfast in her priority of cre-
ating a diverse campus culture.

This academic year, more than 23 percent of
SU’s freshman class is from diverse families, and
in the past decade, the number of minority stu-
dents at SU has more than doubled. The number
of Hispanic students has tripled.

One effort that garnered headlines was a five-
year pilot study that began in 2007 to make
SAT/ACT testing optional for applicants with a
GPA of 3.5 or better. At SU, the greatest indicator
of success has been high school grades. “Among
Hispanic applicants, as with those from other
backgrounds, there are some with varying
English ability and access to test-preparation
resources,” said Aaron Basko, admissions direc-
tor. “The test-optional policy allows us to work
with anyone who has a consistent record of high
classroom achievement.”

“President Dudley-Eshbach wanted us to be
able to consider the whole student,” he added.
“Students know that factors including work ethic,
level of involvement and even the cultural expe-
rience they can share on campus are valued – not
just test scores. This encourages a broader range to
apply to SU.” Salisbury was the first and so far only
city in Maryland to pilot such a policy.

For Dudley-Eshbach, diversity also has
included people with disabilities. Her cousin,
Rick Dudley, who was born with cerebral palsy,
was among those impressed by the award-win-
ing barrier-free campus. Following his death, he
bequeathed to SU the first scholarship endowment
fund in the University System of Maryland for graduate students with disabilities.

Diversity among faculty and staff also has
been important. Dudley-Eshbach worked to
increase and retain those from diverse back-
grounds, including Dr. Leticia Ortega, an educa-
tion professor, to serve as role models and men-
tors to students.

“Janette, tú eres más mexicana que las
mexicanas.” The years Dudley-Eshbach studied
in Mexico as an undergraduate at Universidad
Ibero-Americana and then at El Colegio were,
using her word, “transformational.” These expe-
riences led her to become a champion of inter-
national education. Upon reflecting back on her
time living in Mexico City and traveling through-
out the country, she says: “I wore ‘Mexico as if a
garment of clothing, and it fit me like a glove. I
absorbed Mexico, and I became at least a little
bit Mexican.” One roommate told her that she
talked in her sleep in Spanish. Local friends said
her Mexican-Spanish — modismos and accent —
along with her worldview, passionate nature and
gusto para la vida made her seem more
Mexican than the Mexicans!

The impact that study abroad had on her life
was something she knew students at Salisbury
would need to experience. “Think globally” was
more than a bumper sticker. She hired the uni-
versity’s first director of international programs
in 2001. Five years later, she cut the ribbon on
the Center for International Education (CIE).
This academic year, she opened an English
Language Institute. During the decade, the num-
ber of students studying abroad more than dou-
bled. According to CIE Director Brian Stiegler,
each year some 12 percent to 14 percent of SU’s
students now engage in international study,
exceeding the national average of 9.4 percent.
More than 20 percent choose Latin America; the
number studying for a full semester or longer
has increased sixfold.

Because the president did not want concerns
over finances to prevent students from partici-
pating, she personally donated $10,000 to create
a scholarship for students seeking immersion
experiences in any Spanish-speaking country of
Latin America. She also supported CIE’s creation
of Salisbury Abroad: Ecuador, one of four pro-
grams that allow students to learn in other coun-
tries for the same tuition, room and board costs
as in Salisbury.

She often has accompanied students on
international trips, particularly those involving
community service. Most recently, she joined a
group in Aguaescalientes, Mexico, to partner with
social workers on clean water, sanitation and
health projects for residents.

“Janet sat by grandmothers who were caring
for their grandchildren and listened to their sto-
rise,” said Dr. Laura Marasco, trip leader and
education professor. “She would hold the chil-
deren as the women talked to her, woman to
woman, mother to mother. They were astonished
that a president from an American university
would want to know them personally.”

“Our students were able to see their presi-
dent interacting fully with the people.” Her
model “made them want to learn a language and
volunteer again for a service experience,”
Marasco said.

SU has expanded its academic offerings in
Latin America. In addition to Spanish and
Hispanic culture, students may study coral reefs at
Rotan Island in Honduras, business in
Buenos Aires, the Amazon rain forest in Brazil,
and the geography of the Caribbean in Puerto
Rico, to name a few. A new Latin American stud-
ies minor became a model for similar European
and East Asian programs, created with Dudley-
Eshbach’s blessing. The Modern Languages and
Intercultural Studies Department also began
teaching a wider variety of languages such as
Chinese and Arabic.

New support services on campus include a
Center for Student Achievement, which offers
tutoring and workshops on such topics as time
management and study skills. A recent $1.2 mil-
lion TRIO grant will help first-generation college
students (many of whom are Hispanic), as well
as those with low income or disabilities. The uni-
versity also received a $1 million Science,
Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) grant focused on serving underrepre-
resented groups and expanding access. Nursing
grants of $1.7 million also are helping in work
force development, including scholarships for
minority nursing students.

The admissions office builds bridges to stu-
dents’ high school counselors and advisors in
community-based organizations. Counselors are
invited to serve in an advisory capacity. The
office arranges bus trips for students from
diverse backgrounds and sends current students
to represent the university at college fairs and
schools. The goal is to build partnerships sup-
porting Latino student success.

The Salisbury University of 2010 is very dif-
ferent from that of 2000. Socially, Hispanic cul-
ture has blossomed. When singer Lila Downs
performed, Dudley-Eshbach hosted a pre-conc-
cert dinner to honor the southern Mexico native
and later introduced her to the audience. During
a lecture series devoted to Latin American Nobel
Laureates, Dudley-Eshbach read and discussed
the work of Octavio Paz. With the president’s
support, Cultural Affairs Director June Krell-
Salgado has been able to attract such artists as
guitarists Manuel Barrueco and Javier Calderón,
and the Ballet Hispanico. Last fall, the presi-
dent’s office financially sponsored a Latin
American Cultural Immersion Day in
Washington, D.C., and Dudley-Eshbach recently
enjoyed a performance by Ballet Folkloríco de
Veracruz on campus. Latino Heritage Month and
Cinco de Mayo celebrations have grown in popu-
ularity, particularly the dining services’ menus for
ethnic dinners. The university also has invited
such distinguished educators as Dr. Sonia Nieto
to lecture and work with future teachers.

The world of Hispanic art and thought are being
woven into the fabric of campus life.

Ashley Ramirez, a marketing and manage-
ment major from New Jersey who is an admis-
sions office guide, enjoys the personal touches
the president brings to her role as leader — from
helping students build a snow sculpture of the
SU mascot to her own son attending the universi-
ty. One favorite story: At open houses, Dudley-Eshbach will ask students and parents what they think is good preparation to become a university president. Their replies suggest degrees in business, psychology or education. The president will then tell them she majored in Spanish and Latin American studies. With a twinkle in her eye, she also shares that her mother worried she would never find a job. The important thing, says Dudley-Eshbach, is to follow one’s passion.

This commitment has had an impact on students. Breanna Núñez, an education major from the Washington, D.C., suburbs, is the Student Government Association’s vice president for diversity, a position created during Dudley-Eshbach’s tenure. “She’s really supportive of our events; she shows an interest in me,” said Núñez. “I love that she’s so passionate about diversity, and I know that I can ask her for advice and talk about new ideas, and she’s going to back me 100 percent.”

One hundred percent is a good way to describe Dudley-Eshbach’s leadership. For years, she has worked with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities as a mentor for new presidents at Puerto Rican institutions and is now on its International Education Committee. She also has served on its board of directors. As a member of NAFSA: Association of International Educators’ delegation to Cuba, she explored faculty and student exchanges with Cuban universities and brought the Cuban people needed school and medical supplies. A booster of international engagement by faculty, this past year SU was recognized as a top producer of Fulbright Scholars in the nation. Statewide, she has been named one of Maryland’s Top 100 Women three times and was inducted into the program’s Circle of Excellence.

Dudley-Eshbach’s desire to have SU become the premier Latino-serving institution in Maryland is visionary. There are four Historically Black Institutions in Maryland, but none that are committed to addressing the needs of the state’s most rapidly growing demographic group. During campus Latino Heritage Month celebrations, U.S. Assistant Attorney General Tom Pérez, one of the highest-ranking Latinos in the federal government, told her, “This university is one of the crown jewels of the University System of Maryland, and that’s due in large part to your leadership. I could not agree more that the commitment to excellence and the commitment to diversity go hand in hand.”

Novelist Toni Morrison once referred to Bill Clinton as America’s “first Black president.” At SU, many think of “Dr. Janet” as SU’s first Hispanic president. That makes her smile.

About the Author: Linda Morales first met Dr. Janet Dudley-Eshbach in 1994 at the State University of New York (SUNY)-Potsdam. Morales counseled students through an Educational Opportunity program; Dudley-Eshbach chaired the Modern Languages Department. “Profesora Dudley-Eshbach” helped Morales and her Latino advisees as they planned that campus’ first Hispanic Heritage Month event. Both left Potsdam, Morales for SUNY-Binghamton, where she established its first Multicultural Resource Center. Fast forward 16 years. The two former colleagues reconnected, and Morales was invited to serve as interim chief diversity officer for Dudley-Eshbach, who was well into her second presidency at Salisbury University. Morales, who coordinated SU’s first Latino Heritage Month celebration, feels as if she is working with mi gente when she speaks with the president, something hard to find for many Latinas in traditional higher education settings.