

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

by Linda Morales



**Dr. Janet Dudley-Eshbach, President**

*“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-

tives of some 70 groups assembled, she began speaking to them in Spanish. “She got it,” said Diriker, himself an immigrant from Turkey. “She understood and was supporting us. A leader sets the tone, and she did just that.” In the coming decade, the documented Latino population on the Shore would double, even triple in some areas. Bienvenidos, whose membership has been recognized with the Maryland Governor’s Hispanic Heritage Award, continues to serve.

And Dudley-Eshbach continues to open doors of consciousness between her university and the world.

A recent celebration marking the 10th anniversary of her presidency saluted “A Decade of Distinction.” Many speakers noted national rankings in guidebooks, new buildings, increased enrollment, expanded academic programs and improved community relations as signs of achievement – and they are. But one particular point of pride is the diversity of faces, thought and culture that now permeates SU.

Two weeks before her inauguration, Dudley-Eshbach addressed the University Forum, a governance group of students, faculty and staff. A major theme of her speech was the need to create a campus that looked more like Maryland and the world. At that time, SU was not a very diverse community (only about 10 percent of the students were minority). Dudley-Eshbach wanted an enrollment strategy “whereby we balance the need for high standards in admission policies with a commitment to student access and diversity.” In her inaugural address, she reiterated this commitment: “In a world that is growing even smaller and becoming increasingly integrated through technology, my plans include greater emphasis on globalization and diversity issues.”

True to her vision, within a year she announced new initiatives that included more funding for recruitment and scholarships for minority students. She created an Office of



Agua Calientes Study Abroad



Center for International Education opening



JDE with Tom Pérez, U.S. Assistant Attorney General



Latina Student Leaders at Salisbury University with Tom Pérez, U.S. Assistant Attorney General



Talmadge Branch campus visit

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Diversity and hired its first director, who reported 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 creating 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 students 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 director. "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 experience 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 public university 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-winning 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 backgrounds, including Dr. Leticia Ortega, an education professor, to serve as role models and mentors 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 experiences led her to become a champion of international education. Upon reflecting back on her time living in Mexico City and traveling throughout 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 university'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 number of students studying abroad more than doubled. 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 participating, 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 programs that allow students to learn in other countries 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 Aguascalientes, 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 stories," said Dr. Laura Marasco, trip leader and education professor. "She would hold the children 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 president 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 Roatan 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 studies 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 million TRIO grant will help first-generation college students (many of whom are Hispanic), as well as those with low income or disabilities. The university also received a \$1 million Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) grant focused on serving underrepresented 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 students' 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 supporting Latino student success.

The Salisbury University of 2010 is very different from that of 2000. Socially, Hispanic culture has blossomed. When singer Lila Downes performed, Dudley-Eshbach hosted a pre-concert 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 president's office financially sponsored a Latin American Cultural Immersion Day in Washington, D.C., and Dudley-Eshbach recently enjoyed a performance by Ballet Folklórico de Veracruz on campus. Latino Heritage Month and Cinco de Mayo celebrations have grown in popularity, 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 Ramírez, a marketing and management major from New Jersey who is an admissions 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.*