

*Awilda Hernandez, Jeannesis Rodriguez,  
and Shinade Ramirez*



# Latinas Driven to Succeed

By Jo Schloeder



**M**aybe it was a by-product of women's lib. Perhaps it had something to do with the Vietnam War. For whatever the reason, 1978 marked the first time in U.S. history that more women than men began enrolling in college. The gender gap continued to grow, and by 1990, 55 of every 100 students were women. By 2003, the number of women on campus had climbed to 57 percent and has been hovering there ever since.

However, according to a study released in January, there is one exception to the college enrollment plateau: Latinas. The analysis, *Gender Equity in Higher Education: 2010* published by the American Council on Education, shows that Hispanic women are enrolling in college at higher rates than ever before, and they are more likely to attain doctoral degrees than their male counterparts. The study further revealed that Hispanic females surpassed all groups—across gender, race, or ethnicity—in their self-rated drive to achieve.

## Simply put, Latinas are driven to succeed.

That's no surprise to Shinade Ramirez, Jeannesis Rodriguez, Awilda Hernandez, or other Latinas on campus. Nowhere is their growth—or success—more evident than here at Georgian Court University:

- ☉ Sally Santiago, a senior, represented GCU at the 2009 Clinton Global Initiative University and represents Georgian Court University on the official CGI roster;
- ☉ Sophomore Samantha Arias is vice president of GCU's chapter of the America Chemical Society;
- ☉ Class of 2011 president Iveliz Crespo, a poet and aspiring lawyer, works summers at the Camden Aquarium on programs for children;
- ☉ In sports, Lisette Zayas, LisaMary Figueroa, and Billeny Rivera are making their mark; and
- ☉ Emilia Lopez is busy reshaping the vision of GCU's Latin-American Student Organization (LASO).

The percentage of Latinas at GCU has grown steadily, surpassing the national trend. In 2005, just over 5 percent of the undergraduate students were Latina. In the past four years, that number has grown to nearly 10 percent.

Here, *GCU Magazine* takes a look at three of the many high-achieving Latinas on campus, their influence here and beyond our gates, and what they see as the keys to their success.



## Awilda Hernandez '11

Major: Criminal Justice; Minor: Spanish

When speaking with GCU's Latina students, the topic of family is one that arises often. They speak of earning the respect of family, the influence of parents and older siblings, and the impression they make on younger brothers, sisters, and cousins. It is a responsibility they don't take lightly.

"In my family, I am a role model for many young women, and it is important to me to show them, and others, that one can go above and beyond the finish line others draw in front of them," says Awilda Hernandez of Perth Amboy, New Jersey.

For this 20-year-old native of the Dominican Republic who has only been in the United States since 2004, going "above and beyond" means keeping a full course schedule, serving as president of the Criminal Justice Club, and participating in WILD (Women in Leadership Development) and the Mercy Collegiate Society. The eldest daughter and the very first in her family to earn a degree, she embraces the responsibility and is fully aware of the obstacles. She perseveres—for herself and for her *familia*.

"When no one in your family has obtained a college education, the pressure is higher and there are more challenges to conquer. And, as the oldest daughter, my family always expects me to give the very best in everything I do," she says.

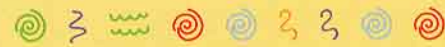


*Awilda is the oldest daughter in her familia, which includes mother Dulce M. Rodriguez, father Felipe Hernandez, and dog Tommy. Awilda also has a younger sister and brother.*

"Being successful and achieving all my goals is an everyday challenge, because I always want to make my family prouder of my accomplishments," she says and adds with conviction, "the pride of my family and their hopes of a better future lay in me."

Yet, Awilda is honest in her assessment that her pursuit of a higher education isn't solely for them, it is also for her: "I love the idea of having a more productive life and being a well-educated woman who is financially independent and lives on her own. A college degree will ultimately give me the power I need to change the world."

Much insight can be gained from her e-mail signature, which reads, "What lies behind us and what lies before us are small matters compared to what lies within us." Of it she says, "Both my accomplishments and my mistakes shape me. What lies within me is what encourages me to better myself."

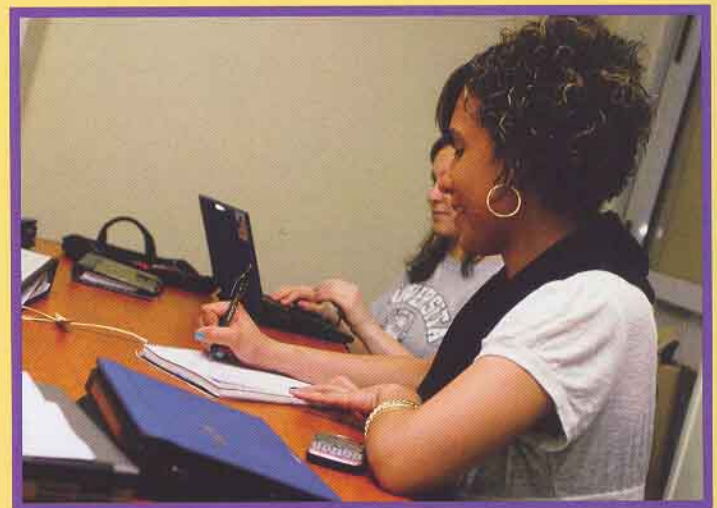


## Shinade Fernanda Ramirez '13

Major: Social Work; Minor: Spanish

"When I was younger, I was told multiple times that just because I am Hispanic, I could not make it into college. But my mother always told me that there are plenty of things that can be taken away in life, but nothing and no one can take away an education," says 19-year-old Shinade Ramirez.

With that advice, Shinade became motivated not just to succeed, but to excel. As a result, the first-year student from Paterson, New Jersey, is vice president of the Class of 2013 and a member of WILD, the Mercy Collegiate Society, LASO, and the Social Work Club. She is also involved in the What About Wednesday Committee of the Student Government Association (SGA), models in campus fashion shows, and dances in the Latin class of the Dance Theatre Club.



*The busiest students are often the most successful—they know how to manage time! Here, Shinade meets with her fellow Class of 2013 officers to plan an SGA event.*

Her drive, Shinade claims, is as equally linked to having been told she'd never make it as it is to the simple fact that she is of Dominican and Puerto Rican descent, and that Latinas, she says, are born to accomplish.

"The more a well-driven Latina is told she cannot do something, the more she is motivated. She is going to prove not only that she can do it, but that she can do it 10 times better than expected," she says proudly. "Being a Latina is all the more reason to strive for the best. It is definitely the drive that keeps Latinas rising to the top."



**A mentor in the making: Shinade remembers to encourage all her classmates.**

wonderful First-Year Seminar teacher, Karen Souffrant [assistant dean for student development]. She is now my mentor and she honestly has done more for me than I could have imagined,” Shinade explains. “I was challenged every day, but it is amazing how much I have learned and changed. . . for the better.”

The supportive nature of Georgian Court faculty and staff are often integral to the “change” that students like Shinade and others experience, says Ms. Souffrant.

“For the people who work with students, their work is not just a job—there is a calling, a mission behind it,” she says. “Sometimes that means listening, being a shoulder to cry on, or on some days, being an advocate for them. It means empowering them to speak for themselves and influence others in a positive way.”

That’s exactly what Shinade plans to do. After graduation, she’ll pursue a master’s degree in social work and hopes to help families, especially Latino families, who do not always get the help they need.

“I hope to become a social worker who can assist families that have serious domestic conflicts involving child or spousal abuse,” she says. “I also want to work with the schools so I can serve as the link between families and the school to ensure that students reach their academic and personal potential.”



### Jeannesis Rodriguez '11

**Major:** Business Administration with a finance concentration;

**Minor:** Accounting

“If one word could identify me, it would be *purpose*. My purpose is to influence and motivate others in a positive way,” says junior Jeannesis Rodriguez of Rahway, New Jersey. “I am constantly changing and learning with the purpose of becoming a better leader and a better human being.”

That’s a pretty lofty mission for any person, let alone a 20-year-old woman who says she was raised in a culture that typically limits the female’s place in society. But for Jeannesis, it seems to come naturally.

“Professional opportunities for women in general have been limited for decades. Additionally, in the Latino culture, the male

“Opportunities are basically there for everyone,” she adds, “It’s just a matter of who is going to put their best foot forward. In today’s society, education is the key to success.”

For her, Georgian Court is an integral part of that recipe.

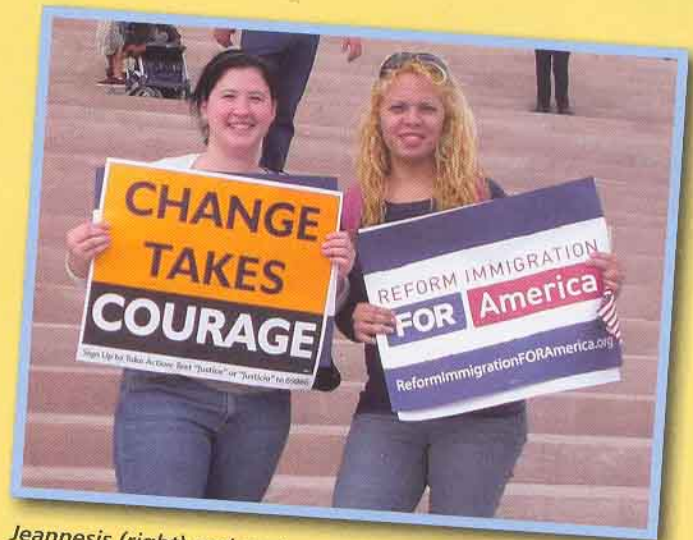
“To my surprise, GCU has impacted me in several ways. I was blessed with a

in the family makes all decisions and the wife is to tend to the house and his every need,” she explains. “Presently, Latinas are increasingly more aware of the possibilities and opportunities available in our society, and there are no barriers to hold us down any longer.”

Just a year away from earning her bachelor’s degree, Jeannesis already plans to attain her master’s degree by May 2012. Yet, she finds time for Campus Ministry, WILD, the Outdoor Adventures living-learning community, and Invisible Children, for which she is treasurer. She is working with Tina Geiger, RSM, director of service learning, and Kathryn Quinn-Sanchez, Ph.D., associate professor of Spanish and director of world languages, to organize a service trip to Peru this summer, and is also considering being an Orientation leader. With a mix of Spanish, French, and Dominican racial backgrounds, she is trilingual in English, Spanish, and French, which she says sometimes challenges her grammar.

Jeannesis, like all the women interviewed for this story, say that Latinas bring diversity, vibrancy, and new perspective to the GCU campus. That diversity, she explains, is rooted in the fact that although they may all share a language, their customs, traditions, and their use of the language often differ. And, like the other women interviewed, she has overcome some personal and familial struggles to get where she is today. But, she says the struggles are few when compared to the benefits of a Georgian Court education.

“At Georgian Court, I have become more aware of myself and my unique qualities; I have discovered my leadership style; I have the opportunity to work with admirable young women and to influence others,” she says. “My education is the key to discovering my position in the outside world.”



*Jeannesis (right) and senior Amanda Brown (left), pictured here at the base of the steps to the Supreme Court in Washington, D.C., traveled to the nation’s capital on March 20 with 11 other GCU students to lobby for immigration reform. Jeannesis hopes to earn law and doctoral degrees and work in corporate law.*