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UCSB Professor Wins W.T. Grant Scholars Award for Research on Improving the Lives of Young Latinas

A faculty member at the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education at UC Santa Barbara is one of five young scholars nationally to be named one of this year's William T. Grant Scholars.

Laura Romo, an assistant professor in UCSB's Gevirtz School, will receive \$300,000 over five years from the William T. Grant Foundation to support her research on ways to improve the life chances of young Hispanic girls.

The highly competitive awards support the professional development of early career scholars who have had demonstrated success in conducting high quality research on improving the lives of young people aged 8 to 25.

Through her research, Romo seeks to develop effective ways to teach the mothers of young Latinas to be more comfortable and effective in discussing pregnancy and HIV prevention. In addition, her project will encourage mothers to foster their daughters' educational and career aspirations.

A specialist in the study of social, cultural, and cognitive influences on health behavior, adolescent sexuality, and women's reproductive health, Romo will collaborate with Girls, Inc. of Greater Santa Barbara. Working with Kary O'Brien,

director of program services at Girls, Inc., Romo will tap into the agency's curriculum and adapt their pregnancy-prevention program to meet the specific needs of young Latinas by adding cultural and contextual themes relevant to Latino families.

"The rates of teenage pregnancy are declining, but Latinas still have the highest birth rate compared to other groups," said Romo. "Pregnancy prevention teaches about birth control, but for low-income Latina girls, pregnancy prevention requires much more than information about contraception. Many girls from disadvantaged backgrounds typically don't get the message they can do something with their lives other than having babies. They don't see a different future for themselves."

In a series of studies, Romo watched several hours of videotaped conversations between 120 Latino mothers and their daughters on topics including dating, sexuality, and AIDS. She sought to identify the factors that contribute to effective communication. She found that 70 percent of the mothers encouraged their daughters to make education a priority in their lives.

For Romo, that debunked the myth that Latino families don't value education for their daughters. "But at the same time, they don't know how to help their children access it," she said. "They don't know about financial aid, for example, and may not encourage their children to consider college because they know they won't be able to pay for it."

The goals of Romo's project--to teach pregnancy prevention, foster a desire for education, and enhance mother/daughter communication--support one another, she noted. "Educational aspirations and sexual outcomes go hand-in-hand," she said. "If the girls are highly motivated to go to college, they also will be highly motivated not to get pregnant. And if they don't get pregnant, they'll be more likely to see college as an option."

Romo's research interests include child and adolescent health, adolescent development and sexuality, and family processes. She came to UC Santa Barbara in 2002 from the University of Texas Medical Branch, where she served as an assistant professor in the obstetrics and gynecology department.

The W.T. Grant Scholars Program has a 25-year history as a stepping-stone for early career researchers in the social and behavioral sciences. "The goal of this program," said Robert C. Granger, president of the Grant Foundation, "is to identify exceptional early career scholars and give them the financing, mentorship, and interdisciplinary

experiences to make them even better."

Since 1936, the William T. Grant Foundation has worked to further the understanding of human behavior through research, focusing on improving the lives of young people in the United States.

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