

Making history: Aurora University names a Latina as president

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A Ball State University provost and vice president for executive affairs will head to Aurora this summer to lead Aurora University.

Susana Rivera-Mills has been selected as the university's next president. She is the first Latina to lead the university since it was founded in 1893.

Rivera-Mills will replace outgoing Aurora University President Becky Sherrick, who will be stepping down at the end of the 2022-23 school year after 22 years at the helm. Sherrick, the first woman to lead the university, is the university's 13th president.

Rivera-Mills, 52, will begin her presidency on June 1. She was selected following a six-month national search that included a committee made up of trustees, alumni, faculty, staff and students.

"She is a dynamic, authentic leader and a thoughtful listener who has lived the experience of many of our students," said John Ammons, AU board of trustees chairman and chair of the presidential search committee. "With her servant leadership style and passion for bringing education to a broad population, her vision and values along with AU's inclusive, student-centered mission. She is the clear choice for president at this time in the university's history."

A native of El Salvador, Rivera-Mills came to the United States at age 12 after her family fled a civil war. Like other immigrant children, Rivera-Mills became the family's "linguistics broker" after she quickly learned the English language.

A simple but profound word choice in a conversation with a high school Spanish teacher helped her realize anything was possible when the teacher simply stated "when you go to college" instead of "if you go to college."

During her five years as provost at Ball State University, Rivera-Mills supported first-generation college students, played a key role in developing and implementing the university's strategic plan and helped lead academic departments through a new incentive-based budget model.

She also worked to encourage equity and inclusion in hiring, promoting and retaining staff.

Rivera-Mills also served as vice provost of academic programs and learning innovation, dean of undergraduate studies, executive associate dean of the liberal arts college and department chair of modern languages at Oregon State University from 2007 to 2018. Before that, she served as a faculty member at Northern Arizona University for 13 years.

She focused much of her academic career on Latino communities, the Spanish language and culture, and issues in sociolinguistics. Her current research is focused on issues that affect higher education, including leadership, student success and retention and budget models.

In a news release, Rivera-Mills said she was humbled to be selected as the next president and noted that Sherrick has put the university on a path for a "bright future." During Sherrick's tenure, AU launched its first doctoral program and was recognized by the U.S. government as a Hispanic-serving institution. Sherrick also helped build up the university's athletics program and helped strengthen the university's diversity. "Higher education is in a place of increasing challenges and accelerated change," Rivera-Mills said. "AU's resilience and strength are evident in all of its accomplishments, and we will continue to courageously tackle these challenges.

"More than that," she said, "we will be a model of excellence and innovation for what the future of higher education needs as we serve a diverse community of learners."