

Interviews with Influencers: Gaby Gomez



Interviews *with* **INFLUENCERS**

GABY
GOMEZ

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While Gaby Gomez didn't set out to be in higher education policy, she's made her mark as an advocate for today's students. Gaby has worked as a lobbyist for the American Federation of Teachers, served as the lead higher education policy advisor for the House Committee for Education and Labor under Chairman George Miller (D-CA), worked at the Department of Education where she led the Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs, and served as the acting assistant secretary for the office in charge of budget and policy efforts—all before taking on her current post as interim director of US Program Policy and Communications at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

We knew her diverse experience working at a teachers' union, on Capitol Hill, in the administration, and now in philanthropy would give her a unique perspective on our nation's higher education system and were thrilled to sit down with her for our *Interviews with Influencers* series. And as we suspected, her interview did not disappoint!

Q: Why education? Tell me a little about your journey

Q: Why education. Tell me a little about your journey into working in education, and specifically, postsecondary education.

A: It's interesting, for me, in retrospect, it feels really natural (that I ended up in education). The way I think about it is, you grow up in a family where, first of all, it was expected that you were contributing to doing something positive every day or else you're wasting space. But then I became really committed to public service and now I am always telling anyone who will listen there's so much fulfillment you get in participating in your government or figuring out different ways to contribute in a specific way. So I feel like I had that desire very early on, and then it just started to click as I came to D.C. and saw what the barriers to success were, and education felt like the natural place for me to commit and get involved.

One of my first experiences on the Hill was working in education policy and it just felt like it made a lot of sense, especially with the leverage of the federal government in trying to incentivize those types of changes. I got into higher education by accident, because as someone who came fresh out of graduate school, I would think, "K-12 education, that's the policy I want to get into." Me, and everybody else.

There wasn't someone covering higher education, so I just started to develop a muscle around it and really liked it. And I kind of liked that there weren't a ton of people in the space or paying too much attention to it at the time back in 2001.

Q: So, tell me about your time on the Hill, specifically working as Senior Education Policy Advisor for the House Committee on Education and Labor. When you reflect back on this time, what is something you deem as your greatest accomplishment during that time?

A: Because I had started in the minority, and then all of a sudden it was a flip of the switch and the Democrats were in the majority (*after Obama was elected in 2008*) and everyone was like deer in the headlights. So, I reflect on that crazy time period and think about how great that time was. I was proud about two things: our process and our content. From a process perspective, we really worked on trying to build something together. And we knew we weren't going to agree on everything, but I feel as if a lot of that is lost, and that may be unfair thinking about that right now, but I just really enjoyed that. Hindsight is 20/20, but that's one of those things I am very proud of.

From a content perspective, we were dealing with some tricky stuff. This was during the time the banks were going under, and instantly we had to jump in to figure out, "How do we keep this afloat?" Forget about the banks, how do we make sure that the students who need the access have the access? So, really being able to jump into that felt important. There was that

access, have the access: so, really being able to jump into that felt important. There was that instant gratification of figuring it all out. However we feel about the overuse of loans, at the time being able to sustain that was very important, and we all worked very closely with Secretary Spellings' office to get the direct lending program sustained and available to students.

We were also very focused on putting the issues and needs of low-income students at the center of the movement and using the assets from the FFEL lenders (Federal Family Education Loan Program) to help. I reflect back and think about myself as a student and trying to push myself through college and worrying about how I was going to finance my education and being able to think through providing incentives or support to students was really meaningful.

Q: Talk about your time working under former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. Is there, a favorite memory that you have from that work?

A: I thought making that switch was going to be a lot easier than it was. And again, in retrospect, it allowed me to really understand the distinctions, of our branches of government, even though it was the same party. So, the transition to the administration was interesting. But of the things I think about there are the people who just got up every day, both political and career employees, who were pretty awe inspiring. They were committed to their particular job, and some people came out of industry, dropped everything and wanted to just be committed to working for the administration, and Arne Duncan. So that was pretty cool.

Being able to feel like you're in the trenches with people who really wanted to make a difference, and we could disagree or agree on what the "difference" was. And then in particular Arne—however you felt about Arne Duncan, and I adore him and I think he's amazing—is that he woke up every day committed to helping students and families, with an attitude like, "I'll talk to whoever. I'll go wherever. I'll do whatever needs to be done. "

He felt personally responsible for students. He was an incredible person to learn from, with an unbelievable moral compass.

Q: So, we have a leaky pipeline in higher ed, where less than half of students who start, earn a degree. So, why is college completion so important? And, what is the Postsecondary Success strategy at Gates doing to address the completion crisis and to help get more students across the finish line?

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A: Right now, we know that nearly all jobs require some sort of education after high school. And if someone enters into a postsecondary program and they've taken out too much money, and then struggle to find a job with their degree or certificate, it's hugely problematic. That's the risk that we are trying to avoid. Any amount of education students pursue beyond high school is really important, but we need to make sure it means something, and its quality programming. That's the challenge we're currently tackling in our Postsecondary Success strategy.

We're trying to anticipate the needs of students and specific programs, so we can fill in the gaps by really try to look internally as to what are the things they need and what our research can provide. Whether it's by strengthening advising programs or school infrastructure, it's all important.

It's also about making sure that anybody who wants to better themselves and their situation, has the access to the right program, to the resources to be successful. So, we think that that helps on both sides, by working internally with institutions and then posing these really important questions through our Value Commission.

The reality is, foundations are not a long-term solution. But if we can get into the mindset that the best role for foundations to play is to bring together the right thinkers to have the right conversations and put information out there for decision makers to make, we'll be in good shape.

Q: If you had a magic wand, what's one change you'd make to federal higher education policy?

A: I think some of this is already happening, and it's due to a lot of folks out there starting to create a drumbeat. But, when you start to look at the actual nuts and bolts of what the HEA (Higher Education Act) covers, it's no longer reflective of today's student population. Students today, more so than ever before, are not your typical students leaving high school, going to and completing college in four years. They are up against so many more challenges than ever before.

So, I think if I could wave a magic wand, it would be to reset and focus on developing a federal program that's serves today's college students.

Q: Who are your influencers in education and beyond?

A: Well, it's funny because, I actually think of people like my mom who's not in education, but she just reinforced the need for single moms to be educated. I'm so inspired and influenced by people who are working multiple jobs, who have kids, who are going to school or bettering themselves. And against all odds are doing it. I also think about individuals like Dolores

Huerta, who I met last year. Gosh, she is so amazing. She's in her 80's and she's still

Lucella, who I met last year. Gosh, she is so amazing. She's incredible and she's still organizing, and empowering parents and communities to bring their voice to the school boards.

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