‘Éxito!’ Welcomes Second Class of Latino Doctoral Hopefuls

SAN ANTONIO (Sept. 22, 2012)—Elie Benavidez, a master’s-degree student at The University of Texas at San Antonio, already is making strides to improve the lives of Latinos. She teaches elementary-school students and volunteers her time to increase local access to healthy food.

Now Benavidez, inspired by her mother’s cancer battle, is considering seeking a doctoral degree and doing cancer research.

That’s why she and 19 other master’s-level students or health professionals joined the Institute for Health Promotion Research’s second-annual Summer Institute of Éxito! Latino Cancer Research Leadership Training on June 7-11, 2012, in San Antonio.

Éxito! encourages participants to pursue a doctoral degree and careers studying how cancer affects Latinos differently.

“Éxito! has given me so much more confidence than what I thought I had in myself, just by hearing everybody’s stories and the path that they took to get where they are now. I feel like I have what it takes,” Benavidez said. “I feel like I can do anything I put my mind to.”

Éxito! (English: Success!), led by the Institute for Health Promotion Research (IHPR) at The UT Health Science Center at San Antonio and funded by the National Cancer Institute, annually recruits master’s students and health professionals to build the field of those working to reduce Latino cancer health disparities.

Participants attend a five-day Éxito! summer institute that enhances understanding of: the power of research to affect change; research methods, theory and interventions; cancer control; and networking and skills to successfully apply to a doctoral program.
Participants also are eligible to apply for paid internships.

The hope is that participants go on to earn doctoral degrees and conduct novel research on why Latinos suffer worse outcomes from cancer and chronic disease.

“We believe training new Latino researchers will increase the number of Latinos in cancer control research, which will increase work being done to reduce Latino cancer,” said Dr. Amelie Ramirez, director of Éxito! and the IHPR.

At the first Éxito! Summer Institute in 2011 and the second one in June 2012, a total of 37 participants heard from Latino role models and researchers, such as Dr. Cristina Barroso of Arizona State University and Jose Pagan of the University of North Texas Health Science Center. Participants also learned about cancer, research, culture and career options.

Several Éxito! participants already have been accepted into doctoral programs:

- **Maria Brietzke** – PhD in Health Behavior and Health Education, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill (2011 Éxito! alumni)
- **Marivelisse Soto-Salgado** – DrPH in Social Determinants of Health, University of Puerto Rico School of Public Health (2011 Éxito! alumni)
- **Mary Vanellys Diaz-Santana** – PhD in Epidemiology, University of Massachusetts Amherst (2011 Éxito! alumni)
- **Lizette Rangel** – DrPH in Health Promotion and Behavioral Sciences, University of Texas School of Public Health, Houston (2012 Éxito! alumni)
- **Laura Rubalcava** – PhD in Clinical Psychology, George Washington University, DC (2011 Éxito! alumni)
- **Donaji Stelzig** – DrPH in Health Promotion and Community Health Sciences, Texas A&M Health Science Center, School of Rural Public Health (2011 Éxito! alumni)

“Being in the Éxito! program, I’ve been able to see a lot of Latino role models, and how they’ve undergone a lot of hardship, and they’ve been able to do it in spite of that,” Rangel said. “In Mexico we have this saying, si se peude, we use it for soccer. Definitely now, being in this program, meeting these professionals, these Latinos, and also being able to meet other students that are in the situation, they have hardships, I felt like, si se puede. Yes we can.”

Learn more about Éxito! [here](http://ihpr.uthscsa.edu) and get details on the next Summer Institute June 3-7, 2013.

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The Institute for Health Promotion Research (IHPR) at the School of Medicine at The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio investigates the causes and solutions to the unequal impact of cancer and chronic disease among certain populations, including Latinos, in San Antonio, South Texas and the nation. The IHPR, founded in 2006, uses evidence-guided research, training and community outreach to improve the health of those at a disadvantage due to race/ethnicity or social determinants, such as education or income. Visit the IHPR online at [http://ihpr.uthscsa.edu](http://ihpr.uthscsa.edu) or follow its blog at [http://www.saludtoday.com/blog](http://www.saludtoday.com/blog).