

In Memoriam: Richard Tapia, Bridging Excellence and Equity

A Personal Reflection by Larry Lesser

Dr. Richard A. Tapia passed away at 88 on May 22, 2026 after a long career at Rice University, where he achieved excellence in his mathematics research (especially in numerical optimization) as well as in his leadership and advocacy for equity. Rather than just repeat the stunning quality and quantity of accolades from the feature on p. 29 of the Fall 2011 issue of *TEEM* and various recent “in memoriam” pieces (e.g., Spafford & Garfinkel, 2026; Leeson, 2026; Williams, 2026), I offer a more personal reflection incorporating my first-hand experience and connections to *TEEM*.

The son of Mexican immigrants and first from his family to attend college, Richard Tapia inspired me long before he collaborated with leaders from my current campus (UTEP) to support students from groups historically underrepresented in STEM. As a Rice undergrad, I had the good fortune to take classes from him that proved to be pivotal in my journey. His MASC 310 (Linear Algebra) restored my confidence that I could still major in math after my rough time in sophomore honors calculus, and his MASC 460 (Optimization Theory) gave me the confidence and interest to pursue graduate school. I still remember the day when I asked a question in that latter class and he responded that my question was particularly insightful and at the level of what a graduate student would ask.

No less important or memorable than course content was the wisdom he would casually impart during office hour conversations. Seeking clarity about my own path, I remember once asking why he chose academia over industry. He said, “No special reason – I could have been happy either way.” I remember that he even took class time to invite us to think about a bigger picture. Each Friday of that MWF optimization theory course, he would pose the “Friday Question” that was “unrelated” to math and we would discuss it for about 15 minutes before resuming the regular curriculum. While I don’t remember what some of those Friday Questions were (it’s been 4+ decades!), I absolutely remember that he did it, and the feeling of how it built classroom community, humanized the course, and encouraged us to think beyond the box and beyond minimum requirements. In the spirit of the TODOS mission, Tapia helped *all* achieve excellence while maintaining particular interest in students from underrepresented backgrounds, including many of the 38 doctoral students he supervised.

Fun fact: as a teenager, he built a car with his twin brother, Bobby, that in 1968 set a fuel dragster world speed record: a quarter-mile in 6.54 seconds! Years later, he wrote mathematical articles and gave talks on drag racing – you can find online his talk “Math at Top Speed,” his article “The Fair Head Start in a Drag Race,” etc. He was also a passionate restorer of classic muscle cars, most notably his award-winning custom 1970 Chevrolet Chevelle named *Heavy Metal*.

Showing up as a whole person is a powerful, beautiful thing, and the way he embraced and integrated his personal and professional interests and identities inspired me to later do so with mine. His contributions to uplifting the field and making it accessible to all inspired me to similarly strive in my own way, on my own scale by moving to an open-access Hispanic Serving Institution doctoral research university (The University of Texas at El Paso) in 2004, exploring culturally relevant pedagogy (e.g., Lesser, 2022), doing research on and with emergent bilinguals learning statistics (e.g., Lesser, 2020), and serving *TEEM* as Founding Editor, then Associate Editor.

Tapia’s research has yielded 100+ research papers, editorships of three mathematics research journals, and many huge (inter)national recognitions. Rice University gave him the very rare honor of University Professor (there have been only 10 others in Rice’s history), a title which Rice states is “awarded to select outstanding faculty members who, because of their groundbreaking accomplishments and eminent national and international stature, qualify for an appointment that transcends any single unit.... A university professorship allows the titleholder to teach in any department at Rice.”

And no less significant was his commitment to equity, from being a founding member of the Society for Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans in Science (SACNAS) to publishing a book (Tapia, 2022) discussing causes and remedies for underrepresentation. And in 2011, when President Obama presented him the National Medal of Science (the government's top honor for scientists), both areas were explicitly mentioned in the citation. It's hard to find anyone who has given more in *both* realms (mathematics and advocacy work) combined. Guillermo Mendieta, inaugural recipient of the TODOS Iris Carl Leadership and Equity Award, said: "Equity without quality is useless, quality without equity is unjust." And Tapia clearly saw equity and excellence as necessarily related: "In talks and interviews across four decades, Tapia described his work using a single sentence: 'I have to serve as a role model by first being an excellent scientist.' Excellence in the discipline was the precondition for the mentorship mission. He believed the field would not open itself to students from underrepresented groups until they saw researchers from those communities doing first-rate technical work. Therefore, he insisted on doing it himself" (Spafford & Garfinkel, 2026). The excellence-first sensibility is in the name of the Tapia Center for Excellence and Equity in Education (<https://tapiacenter.rice.edu>) that Tapia founded three decades ago. The center offers residential professional development camps for K-12 educators and residential STEM camps for secondary school students. That excellence-first sensibility is also reflected in the order of words in the name of this journal, *TEEM*.

His name will live on through Rice's Tapia Center, the CMD-IT/ACM Richard Tapia Celebration of Diversity in Computing Conference, the Blackwell-Tapia Conference, and the Dr. Richard A. Tapia Bridge (formerly, the Sam Houston Tollway Ship Channel Bridge)! How appropriate for someone who built bridges in so many ways – among people and between excellence and equity. I'm forever grateful for his well-lived life of facing challenges with great humility and humanity, passion and purpose. May his example continue to uplift us all, as we recall one of his favorite sayings: ¡Sí, se puede!

References

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