

Making the Next Generation Our Greatest Resource

by Sarita E. Brown

One of the most important lessons in my life began with a brash response during a job interview at the University of Texas at Austin 25 years ago. The university wanted to address the embarrassingly low number of Latinos and African Americans in its master's and doctoral programs by hiring someone who would reach out to these groups and perhaps help build a program to increase their numbers. Being an activist undergraduate in minority student services and a brand-new UT bachelor's degree holder, I was invited to apply for the job. In the course of the process I was interviewed by the charming graduate dean who asked why I believed the university had this problem. I bluntly told him that the university was guilty of selective stupidity.

Taken aback but intrigued, he asked me what I meant. I pointed out that the university managed to secure rare artifacts, such as the Gutenberg Bible, and the national archives of several Latin American countries, from far corners of the world and build libraries and museums to put them on public display. I also noted that despite fierce competition, the university had built one of the nation's top collegiate football teams. The point, I said, was when the university wanted to do something, it did it. The same could not be said, I added, about its commitment to enrolling minority students.

He must have liked my response because I got the job. More importantly, together we started efforts that grew over the years to encompass over eighty grad-

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uate programs and hundreds of students, faculty members, and administrators and—most importantly—produced results. By the time I left the university in 1993, UT-Austin was awarding more doctorates each year to Latinos than any university in the United States and was ranked twentieth nationally in the number of doctorates awarded to African Americans.

The life lesson that began with my interview and has been confirmed every day since is this: First you must commit. As institutions or as a nation we cannot reach or advance underserved Americans without deliberate and intentional action. Ideas are important. Great speeches and stimulating books inspire and

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motivate. This is not enough. Decisive action, guided by clear goals, and sustained commitment, is required to capture the promise of tomorrow offered America by the sheer size and thriving raw talent of the Latino community.

At this moment of seismic demographic shifts in the country, one of my greatest concerns for the future of this country is the extremely low number of Latinos receiving doctoral and professional degrees. Nowhere is the shortage of Latinos with advanced degrees more evident than on the faculties of our colleges and universities. In 2003, a mere 4 percent of full-time professors in higher education were Latino.¹ Latino faculty members—already few and far between—are graying fast. With so few Latinos pursuing advanced degrees, replacing them is problematic. Consider that in 2003–04, only 3 percent of all U.S. doctoral recipients² and just 5 percent of all master’s degree recipients in the United States were Latino.³

Our colleges and universities need the broadest possible representation of this nation’s population in order to prepare students for a future in the global community of ideas and its different people and multitude of perspectives. Proficient in helping students from all backgrounds thrive academically. Academia is supposed to prepare students for life: It may be unable to complete this mission if there are too few Latino faculty members in the classroom.

Latinos in higher education is not solely a matter of numbers. The academic and intellectual interests of the faculty primarily drive the institution’s curriculum and graduate research agendas. While it is an open question, declining numbers of Latinos on college faculties could prompt less rigorous research and fewer contributions to Latino-related studies, disciplines, and research in higher education. This potential risk comes as society’s need for knowledge about this fast-growing,

heterogeneous population is becoming increasingly important. Consider the following when calculating the liability for not addressing this challenge.

In every discipline, Latino scholars shape the state of knowledge and produce important research. Américo Paredes' seminal work in the 1950s on the *corrido*, the Mexican folk ballad about Gregorio Cortez,⁴ led to pioneering scholarship in folklore and humanities and blazed a trail for generations of Latino and other scholars on the life experience of people living in *La Frontera*—the culture along the U.S.-Mexico border. Today's students and policymakers alike are informed by

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scholars from varied academic disciplines, whose writings and research tell the story of the Latino community in America.

In education, science, arts, and humanities, Latino scholars have created a foundation of knowledge and the basis of our current day understanding. Yet, given current Latino doctoral production, too many of these scholars are approaching the end of their careers worried about where the next generation of Latino scholars and educational leaders will come from. With so much at stake, and with a relatively small financial investment in new fellowships and in proven models such as Preparing Future Faculty,⁵ and the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Pre-Graduate Internship Program at UT-Austin, American higher education can address the issue and ensure that its strength grows with Latino talent and scholarship.

HOPE AMID OBSTACLES: A SNAPSHOT OF LATINO TRENDS

In today's knowledge-driven economy, a college degree is critical to the success of a competitive workforce. Yet in 2007, only 13 percent of Hispanics, 32 percent of whites and 19 percent of Blacks age 25 and over had earned a bachelor's degree or higher, according to the Department of Education. Given the current educational attainment levels for Latinos, demands for economic competitiveness, and projected Latino demographic growth in the United States, increasing American college degree attainment requires a policy focus on young adults generally, and Latino students specifically, with measures, tactics, and strategies that will encourage expansion and replication of effective policies and practices.

The need and challenge of representing Latinos in academia is made greater by the fact that the Latino population in this country is extremely heterogeneous. Distinct cultural traditions characterize the numerous diverse ethnic groups—

among them Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Cuban, and many more—all broadly categorized as having Hispanic origins. Educational experiences and socioeconomic levels vary greatly.

Yet, discernable trends emerge. In the process of gathering data for a joint study, *How Latino Students Pay for College*, *Excelencia in Education* and the Institute for Higher Education Policy found several general traits emerging that distinguish Latino college students from their counterparts. Latino students enrolled in higher education are:

- More likely the first in their families to attend college;
- More likely to live with their parents and commute to classes;
- More likely to enroll part-time and work off-campus;
- More likely to attend public two-year institutions; and
- Are more likely to need financial aid to do so.⁶

One-third of all Latino postsecondary students reside with their parents,⁷ a practice that adds familial demands and responsibilities to those of their education. “The strong commitment to work and family does not stop Latinos from enrolling, even part-time, but it may help explain why so few enroll full-time,” the Pew Hispanic Center observed.⁸ Approximately half of Latino undergraduates attend college on a part-time basis,⁹ trying to balance work and studies. Fry acknowledges this in his Pew Hispanic Center report. “No matter what postsecondary course of study a college student is pursuing . . . part-time college enrollment is associated with a greater risk of racking up college credits with no degree to show for the effort.”¹⁰

These trends represent the preferences and realities of a substantial proportion



of America's students. It is time for higher education systems to do more to respond effectively to these demands. By meeting the needs of Latino students, American colleges and universities would begin a process of adaptation that will help them better serve all students.

An area ripe for intervention is that of providing financial support to students. Financial obstacles can be daunting. Forty-two percent of Latinos headed to college in 2003–04 with expected family contributions toward their tuition totaling \$1,000 or less. Approximately 80 percent of Latinos applied for financial aid,

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with 63 percent of those applying receiving some assistance. But the average amount of aid awarded to Latinos was lower than that provided to other ethnic groups, a pattern that has existed for the past decade.¹¹ While the number of Latinos enrolled in college is increasing, the amount of scholarship dollars offered by the private sector and government is not keeping pace with the growth in demand for financial assistance.

Adding to the challenge, almost half of all Latino undergraduates are first-generation college students.¹² They navigate the academic world without the benefit of their parents' firsthand knowledge or guidance. Colleges and universities enrolling first-generation students must take extra steps to communicate academic options and possibilities.

The financial reward for earning a bachelor's degree is easy to grasp. In 2002, the average annual earnings of Americans 18 years and over whose highest educational attainment was high school were \$27,280. Those with an associate's degree netted only an additional \$3,766 annually. In contrast, a bachelor's degree brought \$51,194 per year.¹³ Yet, less than 10 percent of this country's Latinos 25 to 29 years of age hold a bachelor's degree, and, as we have seen, even fewer have attained advanced degrees.¹⁴ While America may have readily adopted our food, it has failed to build an educational bridge to fully integrate into the professional workforce those who brought that food here.

The majority of Latino students are first-generation college-goers; it is important to note that such students have a tendency to have more modest educational aspirations than their peers whose parents have gone to college.¹⁵ Perhaps this is one of the underlying reasons for the tendency of Latino students to elect to attend community colleges. More than half—58 percent—of Latino undergraduates enroll in public two-year institutions instead of proceeding directly to four-

year colleges and universities.¹⁶ In *Fragile Futures: Risk and Vulnerability Among Latino High Achievers*, Patricia Gándara identifies several root causes spurring even high-achieving Latino students to “shoot low”:

Low socioeconomic backgrounds making less expensive schools more attractive; a lack of familiarity with the benefits of more selective colleges; and “a proliferation of dropout programs designed to ensure high school graduation that aim simply to place students in college—any college.”¹⁷

A long-term study examining students of all ethnic groups who began their postsecondary education at public two-year institutions in 1995–96 with the

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intent to earn either an associate’s or a bachelor’s degree concluded that 69 percent failed to do so within six years.¹⁸ Community colleges play a vital role in American higher education and in society; nonetheless it is clear we must improve the transition from these starting-point institutions to baccalaureate-granting institutions. Promising work is underway to inform many community college students who “were not either aware of the opportunity or informed of the opportunity to apply to selective colleges.”¹⁹

With support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Excelencia in Education will focus on a tactical plan to meet the country’s human capital needs through a new campaign, Enhancing America’s Future by Accelerating Latino College Degree Completion. The campaign will be developed through high-level meetings with postsecondary policy leaders. The campaign leverages the convergence of Excelencia’s mission with the new emphasis on college degree attainment by:

- The Gates foundation’s goal is to double the number of young people who, by the time they are 26, earn a postsecondary degree or certificate with marketplace value.
- The Obama Administration aims to reform higher education and to re-establish the United States by 2020 among the top ranking nations for college degree attainment.
- The Lumina Foundation for Education’s objective is for the nation to increase the number of Americans with high-quality degrees and credentials from 39 to 60 percent by the year 2025.

RAISING THE BAR FOR HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTIONS

Rather than selecting colleges based on reputation, Latino students are drawn to schools within fifty miles of their homes.²⁰ This tendency to attend local schools has created college campuses with high concentrations of Latino students. Almost half of all Latino postsecondary students attend institutions in California and Texas and close to 75 percent attend schools in five states: California, Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois.²¹ In 2003–04, close to 50 percent of all Latino postsecondary students were enrolled in 236 Hispanic-Serving Institutions.²²

Beginning in the 1980s, a small group of educational leaders recognized this

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clustering was creating a set of institutions enrolling large numbers of Latino students. Those leaders sought to gain formal recognition for such institutions, to support improvements in the quality of the education they provided.

As defined by federal law in a 1998 amendment to the Higher Education Act, Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) are public or private nonprofit degree-granting colleges with enrollments of 25 percent or more Hispanic undergraduate full-time equivalent enrollment. In an attempt to lessen the disparity in academic achievement of Latino and white students, Title V of the Higher Education Act authorizes funding “to improve and strengthen the academic quality, institutional stability, management, and fiscal capabilities of eligible institutions.”²³

Although Hispanic-Serving Institutions represent only 6 percent of all degree-granting postsecondary schools throughout the country,²⁴ they enroll 50 percent of all Latino students attending postsecondary institutions. The concentration of Latino students in these schools makes them critical to efforts to bolster Latinos’ success in higher education.

That said, there is no federal mandate for these institutions to provide Latino students with an educational program leading to academic achievement, graduation, and workplace success. Most of these institutions did not choose to serve Hispanics as their primary mission. Instead, the college choices of Latino students seeking schools based on accessibility and financial considerations imposed these demographics on the institutions.

STRONG LEADERSHIP CAN SET PROGRESS IN MOTION

The emerging consensus of Excelencia’s constituents is serving Hispanics

must mean more than simply enrolling large numbers of Latino students. In order to be called “Hispanic-serving,” institutions should actively promote the success of Latino students and be effective in meeting the needs of students who come from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds. While the U.S. Department of Education’s Title V program provides important financial resources, it is a tool—not a solution. And like any tool, what matters is how it is used.

Institutional leadership—the president and administration—must set a tone that instills a sense of pride in the faculty and staff in the college and university’s status as Hispanic-serving. Here is how Diana Natalicio, president of the

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University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) describes how the internal view of its campus has evolved:

Over the past two decades, UTEP has engaged in major institutional transformation. A university that once offered its alumni bumper stickers that read “Harvard on the Border” woke up to the reality of its surroundings and began earnest efforts to serve as an authentic and responsible catalyst for the human development of an undereducated and economically under-performing region.

UTEP faculty and staff removed their blinders and began to address in their teaching and research the many challenges and opportunities of the region. What’s most interesting about this transformation has been that, in the process of serving this region and its population well, UTEP has achieved the national recognition to which its earlier pretensions aspired.²⁵

Hispanic-Serving Institutions have the opportunity to make this and the next generation of Latino students this country’s greatest resource. The Chairman of the Congressional Subcommittee on Higher Education, Life Long Learning and Competitiveness, Congressman Ruben Hinojosa said: “Hispanic-Serving Institutions are on the crest of a demographic wave in this nation. They are our laboratories for fostering Hispanic student success, and other colleges and universities will look to them for guidance and leadership.”²⁶

For too long efforts to boost the success of Latino students concentrated on the highly ranked institutions featured in U.S. News & World Report, such as the Ivy League and Public Flagships. “Rated less for what they accomplish with the students they let in than by how many students they keep out,”²⁷ these institutions no longer provide the means for accelerating Latino student success in higher education at the scale we need.

This country can ill afford to wait for the trickle-down effects of turning out a small portion of degree-holding Latinos from ivory towers. Patricia Gándara writes:

If the majority of Latinos, including many high-performing Latinos, are going to continue to attend HSIs, policymakers should pay more attention to these schools: to raising their academic standards, increasing the rigor of their offerings, and demanding accountability in terms of high-achievement outcomes for more of their students.²⁸

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We must focus on the institutions Latino students choose and identify innovative practices showing positive results by Latino students. Providing recognition and incentives, rather than imposing financial penalties based on formulas for the number of degrees conferred will catalyze Hispanic-Serving Institutions and other Latino-focused institutions to expand promising practices. Policymakers must support institutions that rely on data to examine student and institutional success and look carefully at racial and ethnic groups, those who are economically disadvantaged, those with disabilities, and those with limited English proficiency when allocating existing resources. Such institutions must be acknowledged and supported when they make progress in student achievement. In addition, a strong Latino presence in the administration and on the faculty provides strong role models for students. With the dearth of Latinos with graduate degrees, natural mentors are not abundant. Postsecondary institutions must take extra steps to ensure faculty and staff are reaching out to Latino students.

This is not rocket science, nor does it always require great expenditures of funds. For example, one discovery from an Excelencia project was a course in teaching faculty how to pronounce Hispanic names properly. Faculty at El Camino Community College reported that when they pronounced names correctly in calling upon students, the students instantly appeared more alert and responsive to the subject matter at hand. Students reported feeling more welcome and achievement levels for these students improved.

As I have noted, the most significant and long-lasting results come from deliberate action. For example, the Arizona's Maricopa County Community College District has found that partnerships can help get more high school students into the higher education pipeline. It launched the Achieving a College Education Programs in 1988 to assist at-risk, financially disadvantaged, or first-

generation college-bound students to complete high school and then make the transition to higher education. The district's ten colleges partner with their "feeder" high schools to reach high school sophomores and their parents to demystify the process of getting into college. Students take college classes during their final two years of high school. Successful students earn community college scholarships. Between 88 and 96 percent of participants graduate from high school, and 83 percent enroll in college, where they outperform the general student population.²⁹

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A PLAN FOR ACTION; A TIME TO ACT

Addressing the financial needs of Latino students in order to make college possible must be a priority at the state and federal levels. Financial aid for Latino students struggling to pay for their education should be increased. The maximum awards for Pell grants should be increased to align with rising costs in college tuition. Moreover, the federal government should establish "a significant entitlement-based loan forgiveness program for Latino students who study in areas of national need."³⁰ It is also reasonable to suggest that portions of college loans for economically disadvantaged students could be forgiven as an incentive for students to obtain postsecondary degrees. In addition, community colleges could be made tuition-free, a proposition already underway in Massachusetts.

To better accommodate the complicated schedules of those trying to work and/or raise families, we must make course offerings more flexible—on weekends or online. And all students would benefit from expanding on-campus support groups and one-on-one mentoring.

The right thing to do now would be to say—much like UT-Austin did when I was hired as a minority-student recruiter twenty-five years ago—Latinos are critical to our nation's future and we will not let you fail. The strategy of picking clear goals and taking deliberate action worked for us then and will work equally well today. By beginning this momentum anew, we would once again be at our very best, strengthened by the energy of millions of college-going Latinos who are eager to enrich America's future. 

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