The Crucial Role of Hispanic-Serving Institutions in the Education of Latino/a Youth

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This article offers an analysis of policy issues and recommendations regarding the specific mission of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) in the United States. Through anecdotes and a brief historical outline, I urge readers not to forget the rich historical activist legacy of early Latino leaders who worked to ensure the inclusion of Hispanics in American higher education. The urgent need to improve access to education among this historically underserved population includes the need to develop leadership in many fields besides education and free public higher education for everyone as a revised goal for HSI and non-HSI institutions.

Key words: leadership development, civil rights, access to education, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, Latino economic impact, college degree

As a longtime activist and advocate for the improvement of opportunities for Latinos and other minorities in our country, my agenda with regard to these and many more issues has always been open. As a professor, department chair, dean, provost, and president for 21 years, pushing to improve the state of higher education for minorities has been and remains a central concern of mine—one that on occasion, through the years, has not always been appreciated on and off campus, in and out of academe. But, first, background is needed. I believe that the most important looming demographic imperative facing our colleges and universities is the exploding growth of Latinos in America. This is something that is not unexpected, and many have noted and written about this imminent future for some time. It has been at the center of a great many back-and-forth academic and nonacademic discussions that many of us have engaged in for years.

In a personal sense—today, as I look back on those years and the various issues faced, I ask myself, “If I had to do it over again, would I have done things differently and taken a different tack?” I must tell you that my answer is yes—surely regarding tactics—regarding being smarter and more strategic about this or that decision or position taken on this or that point, indeed I would do it differently—better! But regarding the stands taken, the commitment to the principles involved, the push to effect needed changes—Hell no! In a civil rights agenda sense, I remain fully committed to our cause—to the need to level the playing field. And in that regard, I continue to insist that, although we have, as a growing demographic force, made significant

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progress, we certainly are not where we need to be regarding the equalization of opportunities for Latinos and other minorities in America.

To put things in context, let me begin with a couple of borrowed stories from my years in the central San Joaquin Valley of California, where I served as president for more than two decades. Our longtime head of admissions was interviewing a young Latino college freshman who wanted to major in agribusiness. He asked, “Why have you chosen this career?” To which the young Latino student replied, “I dream of making a million dollars in farming—asi como mi padre (just like my father).” Our administrator, with more than a dubious tone in his voice, asked, “Your father made a million dollars in farming around here?” “No,” answered the quick-on-the-trigger young frosh, “but he always dreamed of it.”

As we say in Spanish—“A lo que es soñar” (Ah, what it is to dream and dream big!). Yes, indeed, but as we all know, often too many of us never get to actualize those dreams. But what is important is that the majority of our Latino students do continue to fight and scramble to fulfill and realize their dreams. They don’t ever want to die with the music—the calling—still in them. They are part of the important next wave of our century’s leaders who are streaming into our colleges and universities today—they and their parents know and understand very well the positive difference it will make for them to graduate from college. This ever-growing number knows only too well what it takes to break the pattern in order to go on to bigger and better things in life.

Another example of that is my second story, not from the Central Valley—the story of Samuel from the Dominican Republic—al que su padre le llamaba a veces Samuel el sirve pa’ nada (the one who his father would on occasion call his good-for-nothing kid). His father, like the majority of the men in this pueblo, earned a tough living cutting sugar cane. He expected Samuel to follow in his footsteps as his own father before him had—and the sooner the better.

Samuel tried to reason with his dad—that he could do better by working en el pueblo where he could get a job and also earn extra money playing baseball for the local team. Samuel had discovered that he was really good at it. He had found that he could run and hit with the best of them—with men who had been playing their entire lives. He had great hands and feet of lightning. Samuel decided to follow his dream, and as you probably already guessed, he is the same Samuel who became not just the most successful in his family and his pueblo but one of the greatest home run hitters in the history of American Major League Baseball—and some corkscrew things notwithstanding, I’m confident that one day we will see Sammy Sosa named to the Hall of Fame. Eventually his father would weep with pride over the accomplishments of his son—the same aquel sirve pa’ nada. He would come to agree that the best thing that had ever happened to his son was that Samuel had decided to follow his dream.

Today, in a very real sense, we are discussing a different kind of dream—one much broader, more important, and more powerful, not just because it impacts so many Latinos but because how it is realized will literally shape the course of the entire southwestern part of our country and the nation as a whole in the years immediately ahead.

The many leaders within Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) universities should be well-informed by Robert Montemayor and Henry Mendoza’s (2004) insightful and penetrating read Right Before Our Eyes: Latinos Past, Present, and Future, which speaks to the critical importance and massive impact that the growing Latino presence is having on our country. Sol Trujillo (2004), in the book’s Foreword, situated Latinos/as with the knowledge that we have a huge and uniquely American opportunity to unlock and benefit people in all walks in American life, if only
we can tap into the powerful and growing potential power of the Latino population of America. The book goes on to underscore the fact that no one has yet found the best course to follow to unlock the full talents and creativity of this key segment of America’s population.

Without question, as so many of us can certainly verify from personal experience, our sons and daughters, and grandsons and granddaughters, and their friends and colleagues who make up that next wave together represent a truly exciting and positive future—a truly exciting and better America as we look to the future.

In my estimation, there is nothing more critical and key to making that happen than the preparation—the higher education preparation of Latinos in the decades immediately ahead. Nothing is more central to securing a brighter future for our country than increasing dramatically the number of Latinos we graduate from our colleges and universities over the next decade. Both HSI and non-HSI universities must never lose sight of what this future wave of Latino/a demographic reality represents for our world.

Using data available from the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU), let me show what is driving the setting of what is to come:

- In 2004, an estimated 40 million Hispanics spent nearly $200 billion on goods and services in this country. Today the estimate is that it will be well over $220 billion at the end of 2010.
- If this country’s Latinos were a nation, their gross domestic product would rank ninth in the world.
- By the end of 2009, Hispanic buying power was well over $1 trillion per year, which represented an astounding growth rate of well over 450% since 1990.
- Regarding the country’s labor force, it is projected that by 2020, 1 out of every 6 workers in the United States will be Hispanic. By 2050, this number will be 1 out of every 4. (Let’s also remember that it is workers who pay into and maintain our Social Security system.)
- Looking to the near-future implications of all this, let’s not forget the fact that in an era in which no group will represent a majority in America, Hispanics will make up close to one third of the entire U.S. population. (Author’s notes, recorded at the HACU Board of Directors meeting, Fall 2010)

What these statistical and demographic realities mean should be very clear to us. They define dramatically the central place and importance of Latinos in what lies ahead for our country in the next two decades and beyond.

But exactly what should we—those who care about such issues—concentrate our efforts on? My straightforward response to that question is that as never before, our nation needs to commit to the following:

1. Increasing substantially the number of Latinos enrolling in the nation’s community colleges, state universities, research universities, and private colleges and universities.
2. Ensuring that these institutions graduate Latino and other minority students at far better ratios in the next 5 years than they did in the past 5 years.
3. Ensuring that, especially in our community colleges and our public state and research universities, we provide the needed increase in student support services required to ensure increased graduation rates among low-income students at all of these institutions.
4. Because role models are so key in such efforts, ensuring that minority-serving institutions are provided with targeted federal support to enable them to recruit and hire faculty and administrators who can serve as solid role models for minority students.

5. As a top priority in that regard, ensuring that an increased level of targeted student financial aid support is provided for low-income Latino and other minority students each year in the next decade.

6. Finally, because their institutions are so key, continuing to provide special earmarked federal support to minority-serving institutions to ensure that these institutions grow to meet student demand in the next decade.

Coming originally from a low-income barrio in El Paso, Texas, and serving in a number of roles in various southwestern universities, I think it is very clear that we need to respond affirmatively and with precision to the rising wave of Latino students attending our institutions. California, for example, is home to one third of all Latinos in the nation, and the California institutions of higher education have been leading the way in serving the college needs of the nation’s largest ethnic population. Of the 23 California State University campuses, better than half are officially HSIs. In addition, most of those campuses, including the Chancellor’s Office, are official members of HACU, and all are active engaged members of HACU.

It is clear that the California higher education system has gotten the message regarding the growing importance of Latinos to California and to America and that we need to ensure that a larger percentage of Latinos attend and graduate from college.

We must recognize that Latino students are the cultural wealth of this country, as are all students, which makes their future a national issue. It is imperative that all institutions across the country focus their efforts and prioritize their resources to directly impact the Latino students moving through the higher education pipeline. Specifically, it is essential that the HSIs of America receive the type of targeted support that recognizes, in a national sense, how significant and important these students are to the future well-being of our country.

There are no easy answers to how we get states and their respective institutions to center their efforts on what seems to me an inevitable fact. But I am confident that most of our university and college leaders today do recognize that they must continue to give high priority and commit their resources to the significant numbers of Latinos and other low-income minorities in their institutions. I am hopeful that their involvement and support will make certain an even greater federal role in the support of HSIs across our country.

As I reflect on the importance of this cause, I am reassured by the progress we have made: by the significant increases we are seeing across the United States in the number of Latino students enrolling in and graduating from our colleges and universities and by the increased support, federal and state, being provided to HSIs across the nation. It is a most positive and important development that within colleges and universities across America there have been significant increases and improvements in the number of Latino/a professors and administrators hired. And although we must continue to push for and seek continued improvements in the overall landscape, it is important to note that we are making progress—we are seeing definite movement in the right direction.

To the readers of this *Journal of Latinos & Education* special issue on HSIs, I say thank you for your tenacity and determination and your coraje, your anger regarding the fact that things haven’t changed for the better more than they have. I urge you and all of us to continue in the
struggle and not to forget that, yes, although we have made progress, the trajectory of the events along the way does give us much to be optimistic about. And, as I reflect on that trajectory, I think in terms of three eras—first of the early days (the late 1950s and early 1960s), then of the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s; and finally the 1990s to the present—with each period representing a particularly important era in the Latino push for equality in the United States of America.

THE LATE 1950s AND EARLY 1960s

This era was a difficult time for minorities in general and specifically Latinos. The avenues for advancement and upward mobility were limited and restricted. The struggle at this stage was securing primarily symbolic gestures and recognition—at times looking for any recognition by the mainstream. We were often proud and pleased when a few of us were hired as teachers, hired as postal carriers, or singled out for recognition in the armed services. And we celebrated the first ever political appointees and politicians we elected in overwhelmingly Latino areas in many of our states.

The GI Bill provided the first meaningful human wave of talent, but the realization had not yet sunk in with many of us that we had just as much right to claim available college scholarships; to seek out choice jobs; or to aspire to be university professors, deans, and even vice presidents and presidents. At the time, the primary objective for Latinos was to identify and support our college degree holders. Our principal concern was to encourage our youth to go to college and our graduates to pursue advanced degrees. The few of us who had doctorates were much sought after, but the harsh reality was that role models were few and far between in academe.


This was the exciting, event-filled Chicano movement era—the at times turbulent period of sit-ins, student uprisings, and takeovers of offices of university presidents—a time of open demands for appointments. But we also saw efforts by academe to resist initially and then to respond. Change came slowly at first, and then the dam began to break with first-time appointments of department chairs, deans, vice presidents, and eventually even some Latino presidents.

It is significant that the concerted push was on to move the first big wave of Latino doctoral-level people quickly into positions. Often Latinos were appointed to administrative positions very early in their career tracks—we learned on the job, and quickly. And of course, when any of us would falter, much ado was made. But we began to see and experience real progress—real change in the number of brown faces in positions of real importance.

The most significant thing that sticks in my mind about this era is the memory of just how much of an impact these changes had on our Latino students, on Latino faculty, and on our community off campus. Although the appointment of a Latino to a department chairship or a deanship here and there may not seem like much today, as I reflect upon this era it was a most extraordinary occurrence, the impact was truly dramatic, and it was always touching. Latino students, in particular, recognized and felt the impact immediately, and were energized and quick to draw attention to these gains. Yes, our students were indeed energized, weren’t they? I for one recall very well those days and the many exuberant and hopeful faces. Exciting times, indeed,
that we must remind ourselves of the intensity of it all at the time and never forget how much was, and continues to be, at stake.

THE 1990s TO THE PRESENT DAY

Finally, regarding the 1990s and into the present day, in the national Latino story sense it is important to understand a larger story of advocacy in America regarding the emergence of many major Latino advocacy organizations—HACU, the National Council of La Raza, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Hispanic Scholarship Fund, and other organizations. The scope of change and the increased presence of Latinos at all levels is the most obvious change taking place in the Latino reality in this era. In academe, for example, a significant number of Latinos and Latinas have been appointed to president- and chancellor-level positions and also to significant federal and state government roles.

Yet our struggles continue. It is not enough to call it a level playing field by any means, but enough to acknowledge and recognize that change for the better is happening—that we are indeed reaching a critical enough mass to enable us to begin to drive the direction of future changes and shape that important emerging reality. To guarantee this there is the continuing need to keep pushing for more top-level appointments at all levels in academe and more broadly across the country to guarantee that the emerging needs of the Latino population are acknowledged and responded to.

Two things jump to the top for me as action priorities. One is the need to keep on track in our leadership-building efforts. It is obvious that we need to keep organizing multiple efforts and initiatives to identify and prepare the next wave of Latino and other ethnic minority leaders—not just in higher education, but across the key areas of public education; business; health and human services; the political arena; and, of course, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. So, yes indeed, academe plays a central role in that development, because higher educators can bring a perspective to top-level policy deliberations that will make a telling positive difference in shaping the course of national events. Our collective efforts must be, with courage and conviction, to push for the changes and for the improvements needed.

One final point, most problematic yet key to “people like us,” is the necessity and organic desire that this country, our country, must remain true to the core ideals and values of the civil rights movement. We can best ensure this by our actions and the stances we take as leaders on issues of equity and social justice faced by our nation today, that our actions pass muster in the best sense of our civil rights tradition.

Given the importance a college degree makes in the lives of all Americans, it needs to begin with that—it is time to commit to making certain that everyone who graduates from high school in America is guaranteed a free public college education. As information presented by the University of Washington (2011) reveals, a bachelor’s degree, over a lifetime, will garner $3.3 million compared to a high school graduate’s lifetime earnings of $1.7 million. Can anyone doubt that, in today’s world, a college degree is worth about what a high school diploma was just a few decades ago?

I believe that needs to be the new bugle call for America as we see HSIs continue to grow and prosper—guarantee everyone a free college education in the same way we proclaimed guaranteed free public schooling through high school for everyone more than a half century ago.
Every citizen and resident of America needs to be a college graduate in today’s, and especially tomorrow’s, economy. As a nation we need to commit to that new reality, particularly for our low-income minorities in this country—it is not enough to be a Hispanic-Serving Institution, it is imperative to be a Hispanic-graduating institution. Trumpeting that all can go to college if they work hard is not enough; rather, we need to flat guarantee that our future students will be nourished and nurtured in ways that will ensure that university diploma.

This reality will require a combined effort at the federal and state levels of our country—no question about that. And I am confident as well that the HSIs of America, along with major advocacy organizations such as HACU, the National Council of La Raza, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, and others, can and will continue to lead the push to assure us of that important targeted reality. But they will need the help, involvement, and support of higher education institutions (be they HSIs or not) from across our country to make it happen. And that is the challenge we all face—for this is not just a Latino higher education issue: This is truly a national imperative.

REFERENCES


