

HISPANICS, EDUCATION AND AMERICA'S™ FUTURE

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Washington, DC – I met recently with 19 Hispanic university students, most from the greater Washington, D.C., area. Spending several hours with them was uplifting. Why? Because our focus on the negatives often blinds us to the positives — the promise of our young adults.

The program I addressed was organized by CapitalWire PR, a new, Washington-based news service. Its first “Valor Fellowship” program took place on *Cinco de Mayo*, and provided information, career counseling and networking.

“Valor” was a smart choice for the name. In English, it means “courage”; but in Spanish, it means “courage or value.” So the program recognized both the courage of young Latinos to set lofty educational goals and the value of higher education for them and, down the road, for the country.

Educational Challenges for Hispanics

Working at Educational Testing Service (ETS) gives me access to much data about research in the areas of testing and public policy. Besides test development and research on learning, ETS conducts symposia and issues reports on the achievement gap — e.g., school finance, studies in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and math), and English Language Learners (ELLs — Hispanics comprise about 80 percent of the 5.2 million ELLs in the United States).

At the Valor program, therefore, I cited some troubling data:

Only 2.8 percent of full-time university faculty and administrators are Hispanic. Hispanic high school drop-out rates range from 50 to 70 percent. Latino college degree completion was 9 to 11 percent for the last three decades, vs. African Americans who rose from 11 percent in 1975 to 18 percent in 2006. More than 40 percent of Latina mothers have less than a high school education (compared to 12 percent of African American mothers). Latinas are twice as likely as non-Hispanic women to live in poverty (20 percent vs. 11 percent). When Latino families lack resources and their children attend impoverished schools, negative outcomes are inevitable for many. Immigrants lack the English-language skills and education necessary to compete for better-paying jobs.

Facing the Challenges

So what to do? Many organizations work hard to find resources and solutions. The Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) is developing a college access pilot program for Latinos based on best practices in secondary schools and in colleges. ETS is part of a task force that will propel that initiative.

The American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education, also with ETS's assistance, is promoting graduate studies for Latinos. It is creating an association of Hispanic university presidents and trustees to share successes and information, to learn from one another and address mutual concerns.

ETS is working with ASPIRA to channel Latinos into corporate internships, summer jobs and, ultimately, good jobs. We help the GEM Consortium provide graduate scholarships and internships to minorities in STEM fields. Dr. Juan Andrade, president, United States Hispanic Leadership Institute, also is the president of the GEM Consortium, and attended the Valor program.

ETS helps an organization in Dallas, "Parents Step Ahead," that promotes parental involvement in children's education. One parent, on completing their program, said he felt "changed inside." He is now better able to guide his children, understand school goals, help with homework, and discourage excessive television watching and risky behaviors.

Community colleges, more accessible and less costly than four-year colleges, provide new opportunities to Latinos for whom higher education might not otherwise be possible, enabling them to transfer to a four-year, baccalaureate-granting institution.

Graduate Studies

The Valor program revealed that the students (who ranged from sophomores to seniors) have résumés and are bilingual, and that most plan on enrolling in graduate school. They are aware of the GRE[®] (Graduate Record Examinations[®]) test, and most plan to take it before or soon after graduation.

Taking the GRE test when minds are sharp and knowledge is fresh can mean better scores. Since some students plan on pursuing careers in business, I noted that growing numbers of graduate business schools are accepting GRE scores for admission, thereby enlarging the pool of applicants and increasing diversity in gender and fields of study.

Hispanics and the Future

By 2040, one in five Americans will be Latino. A quality education means today's students will be "leaders by default." In a generation, today's student leaders will be leading in government, in the corporate world, in philanthropy and — let's hope — in science and education. And these leaders of today and tomorrow will open the doors of opportunity for others.

Improving educational opportunities for Latinos makes sense for that community — and for America — in terms of greater productivity, a stronger tax base, scientific advancement and increased global competitiveness.

Everything I saw in the Valor Fellows renews my optimism about the future. Let us hope that "valor" is valued more and more.

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