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Reaching Tomorrow's Hispanic Leaders

Sister Thérèse Higgins

High school-age Hispanics have a 50 percent drop-out rate. College-age Hispanic youth account for only 3.9 percent of the United States college population. A report of the Commission on Minority Participation in Education and American Life challenged college planners to do something about the neglect of young minority students. However, Regis College had already developed a four-week residential summer program to enable Hispanic ninth-graders to complete high school and prepare for college. The anticipated outcome of this College Awareness Program is that the dream of higher education and empowerment for two hundred gifted young Hispanics will be realized.

What does it mean to be a gifted, young, Hispanic girl living in any major metropolitan area of the United States, where 85 percent of all Hispanics live? It means, quite simply, that she will probably experience a three-way bypass before she is twenty: under the pressures of family survival and duty, she will be encouraged to bypass any potential for leadership for immediate lowly service and a minimum wage; as a member of a first-generation bilingual family, she will unknowingly bypass many opportunities for access to higher education and readily available financial aid; and within her particular ethnic culture, without early intervention, she will think it is normal to be bypassed in most areas of decision making or economic independence. For her a three-way bypass is not a second chance for a full life. It means, rather, that the young woman never really had a first chance.

A Look at the Numbers

A recap of some census reports and social surveys puts the problem in focus. According to the 1985 Current Population Survey, the U.S. annual growth rate for Hispanics was 6 percent, for Anglos, 0.6 percent, and for blacks, 1.8 percent. Hispanics are a youthful group in our society; half their population is under twenty-three. The Hispanic birthrate is high not only because of the large proportion of women of childbearing years, but because of the strong cultural approval of large families. The relatively easy immigration

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from nearby Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Central and South America contribute to the growth rate of the Hispanic population. These two influences on the rapid increase of the Hispanic population are likely to continue. Census Bureau statistics list 19 million Hispanics in the United States, up 30 percent since 1980. In 1988 Hispanics accounted for 7.9 percent of the country's population; by 2010 the number will be 11 percent.²

The growth of the Hispanic population has not been accompanied by economic or educational opportunity. According to a study prepared for the Executive Office of Economic Affairs of Massachusetts, Hispanics have largely been bypassed within the two areas that offer upward mobility and power, the worlds of education and of business. The study revealed that 60 percent of Hispanic children in Massachusetts live in families in which the head of the household did not complete high school; this compares with 20–25 percent for blacks and 12 percent for whites. The median income (adjusted for inflation), rose for whites and blacks by 13 percent and 15 percent; Hispanics suffered a drop in income of 40 percent.³

Another set of statistics brings the focus in a bit sharper. Only about 40 percent of Hispanic-Americans of eligible age graduate from high school.⁴ Data from the Higher Education General Information Survey confirms that Hispanics make up only 3.9 percent of the United States college population, despite their high percentage in the youth population. For every 100 Hispanic students, 55 graduate from high school, 23 go on to college, 7 earn bachelor's degrees, 4 enter graduate or professional schools, from which only 2 receive degrees.⁵

Studies also indicate that Hispanic students tend to drop out in the ninth or tenth grade, as compared to the eleventh or twelfth grade for their Anglo and black counterparts.⁶ The reasons hark back to the three-way bypassed Hispanic female. She comes from a segment of our society in which the realities of poverty make earning money a priority and family cultural patterns put schooling second or third, especially for girls. She faces a lack of role models of educational achievers, especially women, language difficulties, discrimination based on ethnicity, low self-image, and lack of know-how within the educational, economic, and political systems in which she is expected to act.

A Challenge for Colleges

In 1988, a report of the Commission on Minority Participation in Education and American Life became a best seller among college administrators. *One Third of a Nation* tells a poignant, well-documented story of sometimes benign, sometimes deliberate neglect.⁷ But the message to college planners was clear: these are the facts; do something! In short, the country's institutions of higher learning were challenged to support and strengthen efforts to increase minority recruitment, retention, and graduation.

Paul Gallagher summarizes the rationale for placing the responsibility on higher education. "First," he states, "because colleges and universities are the principal educators and shapers of our country's professionals, leaders and role models, and second, because the higher education community historically has functioned as a crucial goad to the nation's conscience. Put another way, higher education serves as an example both in identifying issues that must be addressed and in creating the means to address them."⁸

The motivation behind the challenge is twofold. For the nation at large, it is clearly self-interest. Given the demographics, the young Hispanic population will be a critical component for our economic development, for an enlightened, skilled, and competitive work

force, and for a healthy balance between the needs of the job market and the capability of the work force.

There is a second motivating factor for a college to accept seriously the responsibility to find a way for young, oppressed, and dreamless children to discover their own dream. It is, quite simply, social justice.

For many of us in higher education, this is the compelling call. It is more a moral imperative than an essential economic strategy: it is educating more for empowerment than power. Within this arena for social justice some educators have focused efforts on the minority within a minority — young women who have the potential to be Hispanic leaders of tomorrow if we reach them. If we do not reach them, at least one generation, perhaps two, of highly gifted, intelligent, first-generation Hispanic-American women will never have had a chance, and they will not even know it until someone succeeds, a generation or two hence, in reaching their children or their children's children. It could take that long.

Women Reaching Women: The Regis College Model

Within the diversity of institutions of higher education, the relatively small liberal arts colleges for women have been successful in producing proportionately more highly qualified women leaders than other types of institutions of higher education.⁹ The majority of church-affiliated colleges for women were, in fact, founded to educate women, often from an ethnic minority, who otherwise would never have attended college.¹⁰ Their success rate is reported in the Women's College Coalition Studies for 1985 and 1988.

It was a natural response, then, for Regis College to respond to the challenge of the Commission on Minority Participation in Education even before its report was published in 1988. This liberal arts college in the Catholic tradition, with a total enrollment of 1,150 students, has 800 full-time undergraduates. Regis has piloted a small, select program that over four years will have reached over two hundred young Hispanic leaders, three fourths of them women. The objectives, the format, and the results may be a useful model for similar programs in other settings.

The College Awareness Program

Regis began its College Awareness Program in January 1987, with a \$30,000 grant from the Massachusetts Board of Regents of Higher Education and matching funds from the institution. Under the direction of Dr. Leona McCaughey-Oreszak, chairman of the education department, the program addresses the problem of Hispanics and higher education by focusing on pre-high school youngsters. Basically, College Awareness, a drop-out intervention program for talented, at-risk, Hispanic thirteen-year-old girls and boys is designed to:

1. increase the number of Hispanic high school graduates from the Boston public schools by improving their basic knowledge of English, math, and study skills;
2. increase awareness of the importance of high school graduation and post-high school education among students and their parents;
3. increase awareness of college and career choices among Hispanic students;

4. increase individual self-esteem so that high school graduation and college attendance are perceived as realistic goals;
5. increase the number of Hispanics in the metropolitan Boston area who will matriculate in college.

The true test will come this year, when the first group that entered as ninth-graders will be of college age and, we hope, college bound. Meanwhile there are clear signs that the program has been a successful first step in reaching some of tomorrow's Hispanic leaders.

Working with principals and guidance staff in the Boston public schools, the director of College Awareness selects twenty-five to thirty bright, able Hispanic students who are about to enter high school. For one month these students spend their weekdays and nights on the Regis campus. There they experience a comprehensive program that moves from the basic skills in English (as a second language), writing, comprehension, and general study habits to actual "college awareness" — possible careers, possible colleges, how to apply, how to obtain financial aid. Interlaced through each experience is the consistent message of confidence in who they are and the type of leaders they are called to be.

Students stay in the Regis dormitories, where they are supervised by Hispanic college students who act as role models and mentors. Each evening a session in the residence halls emphasizes information on interpreting college catalogues, financial aid, types of colleges, and special opportunities and problems faced in college. Hispanic college students or college graduates share their stories of academic and personal success during the sessions.

As parents are an important motivating factor in successful high school completion and college application, their involvement is encouraged. Parents attend an orientation program before the summer session at which they meet staff members, tour the campus, learn of the program's goals and objectives, and are informed about rules and regulations.

A key component of the program is communication with each student during the high school years with a series of academic-year support activities, including weekend sessions at Regis designed to reinforce the elements of the summer program. Concurrent information sessions on the preparation for college are held for parents. In addition a member of the College Awareness Program staff follows the progress of the students by conferring with them, their parents, teachers, and guidance personnel. The purpose of this close individual follow-up is twofold. It gives the students a support person who will, if necessary, act as their advocate, and it provides the College Awareness Program director with information necessary for planning the details of the weekend sessions and revising subsequent summer-session components of the program.

Students from each year's program return for one week during the following years to receive additional help in preparation for SATs, financial aid applications, knowledge, and exposure to college faculty. They, in turn, become role models and mentors for succeeding entering groups.

Evaluating the Program

The effectiveness of the program is assessed by various means. Students' progress through their high school careers is followed by the College Awareness director. Records are maintained of high school grades, PSAT and SAT scores, comprehensive tests, skills

tests, and so forth, as the basis of data for longitudinal studies. Parent and student evaluations are used to judge the effectiveness of the program in meeting students' individual goals and needs and in determining future direction.

Since the program's inception in 1987, all but one of the ninety participants are still in high school, and some of them have earned academic honors, including

- an award in earth science at Brighton High School
- an award in English as a second language and one in civics at Charlestown High School
- awards in computer literacy, earth science, algebra, and for "freshman of the year" at Charlestown High School
- honor roll status at Boston Latin Academy
- a straight A student at Jamaica Plain High School

The participants' own evaluations of this program further attest to its personal and academic impact. On a rating scale from 5 (excellent) to 1 (poor), the members of the first group of participants rated their experience at 4.69; the second group's rating was 4.74.

Attendance of parents and families at orientation sessions has been excellent: only two of the ninety or so parents did not attend the 1988 summer session, and only two did not return completed evaluation forms. Parents expressed gratitude for the program and stated that they hoped it would continue. The most consistent response to their daughters' learning related to growth in self-confidence and a greater sense of responsibility.

Students' own evaluations also stressed their learning self-confidence and responsibility. Their own words tell it best:

- I learned how to be more responsible.
- I learned to trust myself and have confidence in myself and others.
- The College Awareness Program has helped me to know how to speak up when I know an answer and when I don't understand something. Also to picture myself as a person with a future, with a career.
- I think this program was very good because it showed me that Hispanics have an opportunity in life, too.

The following personal assessments over a period of one year demonstrate the changes that occur.

Eugenia

On July 5, 1987, at 9:15 A.M., she wrote, "I feel nervous, hot, and thirsty. Besides all these other feelings, I feel scared and alone. I want to lose fear of meeting new things and new people."

On July 31, 1987, she wrote, "I have accomplished many things at Regis. One of these things is to have confidence in myself and to not let anything get in the way of doing or becoming something in the future. The biggest accomplishment has been to believe in myself and other people."

In July 1988 Eugenia seemed to have made up her mind. She said, "I think the program is excellent because it has given me a much better perspective about what college life will be like."

The following assessment, before and after, tells a tale of leadership in the making.

Maria

On July 5, 1987, 10:45 A.M.: I hope to accomplish good study skills, make new friends, gain self-confidence, and stop feeling lonely.”

On July 31, 1987: “I have made new friends and most important I have opened up and come out of the shell I’ve been hiding in for so long. I have learned many new skills and I will take these skills with me through high school and college. The staff has helped me to become a better person, believe in myself, and to never say I can’t when I can if I just try.”

For Jammie and Sallie the mentoring was crucial.

Jammie

On July 5, 1988: “What I hope happens? I would like a lot of help in Study Skills and English Grammar because even though I was born in the state of Massachusetts, my English’s terrible.

“If you really want to know what I see out my broken window at home, I will tell you. Outside my bedroom window I see another building with fire escapes full of clothes that are hung out to dry, you also see the dumpsters maybe or sometimes you see groups of boys smoking pot, that’s about it.”

July 29, 1988: “What have I accomplished? First of all I have improved my English and my study skills. It is easy to leave the college, it’s the friends that I have made here is what I’m going to miss. Friends are hard to come by, so I cherish each one of them. I will be back.”

Sallie

July 29, 1988: “Some of the reasons why I returned to the College Awareness Program are the following. Margarita C. and Agnes Luna are both counselors in the program and students at Regis College. They are very good friends of mine, and I really missed them this whole school year.

“I am happy to know that other Hispanics are worried about Hispanics in college. I know that this program will open the doors for hundreds of Hispanic students going to college.”

Increased corporate, foundation, and private funding attest to another kind of evaluation. The Regents, the initial supporters of this effort, were joined by the Mabel Louise Riley Foundation, State Street Bank, the Boston Globe Company, and the Bank of New England.

A private philanthropist and some of his friends, impressed by the results of the first two years of the College Awareness Program, have underwritten a similar but separate four-year program with a Catholic Leadership component. In 1989, the two programs ran simultaneously for sixty new students, along with returning students from 1987 and 1988. As Regis continues down this less traveled academic road, these supportive believers have made all the difference.

This short story of the programs at one small college will become, we hope, the seeding ground of hundreds of life stories, published or not, of young people for whom “college awareness” proved a pivotal point. For young Hispanic leaders, economic and intellectual empowerment will come through education. By ninth grade this particular group must see college as an attainable experience, not a concept. To date it looks as if Eugenia, Maria, Jammie, Sallie, and their friends have averted a bypass and begun a healthy stride toward personal achievement and societal influence.

But what of the others? The Hispanic pipeline to higher education has been described as broken, leaking, and in dire need of repair. Academic preparation of Hispanics continues to lag behind that of whites and blacks. A Hispanic seventeen-year-old reads, on average, as well as a non-Hispanic child of thirteen. In addition, the Hispanic population in this country ranks first in every indicator of poverty: unemployment, low income, AFDC, woman head-of-household. Hispanics have been described locally as the "ignored group." Despite their growing numbers, they are only slowly gaining political and social clout. Those few Hispanic leaders who are emerging view education as the single most pressing need.¹¹

Our further dream is that this single, caring College Awareness Program, duplicated on three thousand campuses across the nation, will change the face of the earth for the oppressed, impoverished, and dreamless dropouts in our current city school systems. 🙏

Notes

1. Jane Forni, "Hispanics and the Neylan Colleges: The Potential and the Challenge," *Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education* 9, 2 (1989): 5.
2. Cheryl Fields, "The Hispanic Pipeline," *Change Magazine* 20, 3 (1988): 20.
3. Irene Sege, "Study Finds Massachusetts Poverty Rate Stalled," *Boston Globe*, July 17, 1989, 1, 12.
4. Fields, "Hispanic Pipeline," 20.
5. A. M. Cohen, "Hispanic Students and Transfers in the Community Colleges." Paper presented at the Association of Community and Junior Colleges, Phoenix, 1984.
6. Lori Orum, *The Education of Hispanics: Status and Implications* (Washington, D.C.: National Council of LaRaza, 1986).
7. *One Third of a Nation*, A Report of the Commission on Minority Participation in Education and American Life, May 1988 (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education with Education Commission of the United States, 1988).
8. Paul Gallagher, "Educating Toward the Future," *Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education* 9, 2 (1989): 3.
9. Alexander W. Astin, University of California at Los Angeles. Research quoted in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 1987.
10. Forni, "Hispanics and Neylan Colleges," 5.
11. Diego Ribadeneira, "Boom Bypassing Massachusetts Hispanics," *Boston Globe*, June 5, 1988, 40.

Women are calling for institutions to recognize their worth fully and to stop assuming that knowledge about men and men's lives necessarily speaks to women and their lives. They are calling for institutions to start systematically educating women for leadership in society. And they are calling for institutions to stop expecting them to give up their own strengths as women to become part of the male system.

— “The New Agenda of Women for Higher Education”