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Hispanic mothers' involvement with and expectations of their children, coupled with their position as role-models, have a lasting impact on their children's academic achievement. The successes of [mother-daughter] programs illuminate a potential for similar programs to reach other youth facing educational barriers, affording them the ideas that let them imagine and the tools that let them succeed.

# LIKE MOTHER, LIKE DAUGHTER: Intergenerational Programs for Hispanic Girls

María Luisa González, Joanna Glickler  
and Cynthia Risner-Schiller

Statistics describing the educational achievement of Hispanics are discouraging, to say the least. On average, Hispanics obtain a mere 7.1 years of schooling, a rate lower than that of either African-Americans or Anglos. The dropout rate among Hispanics, estimated at 35% to as high as 60% in some communities, is greater than that of both blacks and whites. In particular, Hispanic girls exhibit educational difficulties. Their dropout rate typically is 2% to 3% higher than that of Hispanic boys, and they attend college at a lower rate.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, Hispanic girls are perhaps some of the most at-risk of students. Demographic data show fewer Hispanic women complete four or more years of college than any other major ethnic population in the United States, and the college attendance rate for Hispanic women is lower than that of males of any ethnic group. Furthermore, girls of all ethnic backgrounds suffer a marked loss of self-esteem in early adolescence, a phenomenon that may compound their educational difficulties.<sup>2</sup>

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The ramifications of such educational discrepancies are far-reaching. Certainly one clear result is that minority representation—both male and female—in leadership positions in the public and private sector is vastly below the proportion of minorities comprising the population. Further, "Education, or the lack of it, is cited frequently as a major factor in the continuation of disparities between ethnic groups. Failure to acquire an education, whether at the high school or college level, leads to lowered self-esteem and the inability to obtain a high-paying job."<sup>3</sup>

## Identifying the culprits

Faced with such a dismal picture, one might well ask how this state of affairs came to be and what can be done about it. Several contributors to the situation have been identified. Research indicates that for dropouts, a pattern of school failure and alienation begins as early as the elementary grades, when disenchantment with school sets in. While many dropouts clearly understand the need for education, school simply has not been a satisfying experience for them. In many cases, dropouts view school as an alien environment they don't fit into, one incapable of understanding them.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps most troubling to educators is that several studies have traced negative attitudes toward education among young Hispanics to the school environment itself. Some researchers have found that low grades and disciplinary problems at school are more likely to push students to drop out than are family and economic factors. Others have noted certain school disciplinary sanctions send a message to potential dropouts that they are unwanted, particularly in situations in which student populations differ ethnically from the faculty and staff who serve them.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly, Hispanic girls are not immune to such messages, and their self-esteem and attitudes toward education undoubtedly are damaged by them. Other conditions that promote negative feelings among Hispanic girls about school are:

- a lack of adult Hispanic role models in the schools;
- a disproportionate level of referrals of Hispanics to special education classes;
- low expectations of Hispanics by school personnel;
- a lack of vocational or career counseling for Hispanic girls; and
- stereotypic portrayals of Hispanic women in the curriculum.<sup>6</sup>

But schools are not solely to blame for educational disillusionment among Hispanic youth; a number of socioeconomic factors are associated with the high Hispanic dropout rate as well. Dropouts tend to come from families of low socioeconomic status. Their homes often have weak educational support systems, as parents struggling for survival are less likely to monitor school and nonschool activities. Furthermore, there are fewer study aids at home, and opportunities for non-school-related learning are limited. Additionally, Hispanic mothers often have little formal education and have low educational expectations of their children.<sup>7</sup>

Jaime Escalante, the Los Angeles teacher whose success with Hispanic students was the subject of the movie, *Stand and Deliver*, said:

Children of the barrio have enormous obstacles to overcome to get an education. . . Most of them come from families with incomes below the poverty line. The majority of the parents have not been to college—frequently Mom and Dad have never been to high school—and they may or may not fully appreciate the long-term value of education.<sup>8</sup>

But Escalante pointed out that these barriers are not impassable. He said while some educators "maintain the racist idea that Hispanic students are not as smart as some others," Hispanic students, just like students of other ethnicities, rise to the level of expectation that surrounds them.<sup>9</sup>

### In search of solutions

What Escalante suggested is that when adults increase their educational expectations of Hispanic children, the children's performance rises to meet those expectations. It follows that an important consideration is the influence of Hispanic mothers over their children. Research suggests Hispanic mothers have a greater influence over their children than do Anglo mothers. Hispanic mothers' involvement with and expectations of their children, coupled with their position as role-models, have a lasting impact on their children's academic achievement.<sup>10</sup>

This mother-child connection is pivotal in programs established by several universities to try to reduce the dropout rate among Hispanic girls. Arizona State University, the University of Texas-El Paso, and New Mexico State University are among institutions to have developed programs that pair Hispanic mothers with their daughters, not only in an effort to reduce the dropout rate, but to increase the likelihood the girls will attend college.

### What follows is a closer look at these three programs.

#### *Arizona State University's Mother/Daughter Program*

A decade ago, Dr. Jo Anne O'Donnell began the Mother/Daughter Program at ASU in Tempe, the first program of its kind in the nation. O'Donnell, who continues to direct the Mother/Daughter Program, said she began the program in 1984 when she realized many students, minority and otherwise, were coming to universities largely unprepared because they didn't know what preparation for college was. College became what O'Donnell termed a "revolving door," particularly for minority students whose underrepresentation in higher education was severe.

The Mother/Daughter Program began with 25 teams of Hispanic mothers and their eighth-grade daughters from four middle schools in the Phoenix Elementary School District. In its 10 years of existence, the program has seen 739 mother-daughter teams through its eighth-grade component, with about 60 new teams currently enrolled. Today, the program has an annual budget of approximately \$130,000 in state money, as well as some in-kind corporate support and private moneys from fund-raising efforts. The program's budget covers workshops for the girls and their mothers, banquets, mountain retreats, awards, a stay in the dorms and a newsletter, as well as staff salaries, research and student tracking. The program employs 15 mostly part-time staff—including counselors, peer advisers and liaisons in the public schools—and has no volunteer support.

Because of the size of the Phoenix metropolitan area, the program enrolls two groups a year. Teams from the East Valley communities of Mesa, Gilbert, Chandler, Scottsdale and Tempe begin the program in the fall, and teams from Phoenix start in the spring.

The program's objective is to excite Hispanic mothers and their daughters about the prospect of the girls attending college. Specific objectives are to:

- familiarize at least 50 mother-daughter teams per semester with higher education. Emphasis is placed on scholastic achievement, campus life, career exploration and self-esteem.
- enlarge Hispanic parental commitment to higher education by pairing mothers and daughters in "teams."
- build the capacity of secondary schools to counsel Hispanic girls effectively in matters related to college and career.
- enable Hispanic girls to make choices about their futures by familiarizing them with academic fields and by boosting their academic qualifications.

To be eligible for the ASU program, the eighth-graders must have no immediate family member with a four-year degree. Girls who demonstrate academic promise through

grades, class ranking and scores on standardized tests are recommended by their math, science or English teachers. The girls must write a page-long essay on their interest in the program, and they and their mothers are interviewed by staff members.

The program targets the girls at the eighth-grade level but maintains contact with them through high school and into college. Eighth-graders and their mothers spend between 80 and 100 hours over four months becoming familiar with the university, faculty, staff and students. Activities concentrate on goal-setting, building self-esteem, learning about academic fields and exploring career options. The culmination of the four-month program is a week spent by the girls in residence halls for a first-hand glimpse of campus life.

When the girls reach high school, the program provides them with continued guidance and support in the hopes they will remain on the path to college. Advisers in the program offer assistance on personal and academic problems. The girls continue to be part of program activities, such as workshops to strengthen writing and communication skills. In the past, some participants have been assigned an ASU student mentor to help with course work and advise on personal matters.

When the young women reach the college level, a support group is there for them that fosters information-sharing and problem-solving. Staff members assist students in identifying scholarships, learning financial aid procedures and finding campus work opportunities. Students are requested to sign up for tutoring and join a student organization.

*The program's successes.* In the program's 10th year, 56 students have attended ASU; three have graduated. About 10 young women from the program attend other universities, and numerous others are enrolled in community colleges. The retention rate of the girls who start college at ASU is 74%. Furthermore, O'Donnell said close to a third of the mothers who have been through the program have themselves pursued some sort of schooling, and "many of them aspire to college." One mother is a now college graduate.

Speaking on the impact of the ASU program, O'Donnell said she has seen a change in family dynamics among those involved. "There's some ripple effect—sometimes other family members look at education differently. They see a way out of the barrio, they see a way to another life."

#### *The University of Texas-El Paso's Mother-Daughter Program*

The Mother-Daughter Program at UTEP, modeled in part after ASU's program, has existed for eight years. It began in the fall of 1986, serving 33 mother-daughter teams from three El Paso-area school districts. Most volunteer help at that time came from the Young Women's Christian Association. In 1994, the program works with 17 schools in five school districts, with most volunteer time coming from the American Association of University Women. Dr. Josefina V. Tinajero, director of the program, said about 180 mother-daughter teams begin the program each September. She said since the program's inception, more than 1,000 mother-daughter teams have completed the sixth-grade component, with the program's first group of girls now freshmen and sophomores in college.

The program, which has two paid part-time staff members, is funded strictly by private moneys; the budget can range from \$50,000 annually to \$150,000. Primary funding is through grants from the Freedom Forum, the Meadows and Kellogg foundations, and the Rotary Club of El Paso. Tinajero said during years when funding is limited, "We still do the activities somehow. We really don't cut the program—we just look to see who can help us. We have lots of volunteers."

The UTEP program targets girls entering the sixth grade who are nominated by teachers or principals because their grades and standardized test scores indicate academic

promise. Like the ASU program, UTEP's aims to stimulate enthusiasm among Hispanic mothers and their daughters about the possibility of the girls going to college. Special attention is given to providing the girls with the necessary skills to enter college life and the professional world and to helping mothers become supporting role models.

Specific objectives are to:

- encourage Hispanic girls to complete their high school education and to raise their expectations of attending college;
- orient 150 Hispanic mother–daughter teams each year to higher education and professional careers;
- prepare Hispanic girls for higher education by providing academic and life skills training;
- increase Hispanic parental commitment to higher education by involving mothers in the educational process; and
- assist mothers in becoming more effective role models.

To meet these goals, monthly sessions center around academic, career, community and personal development. The sessions are held locally, in schools and at the university, with transportation provided. Other activities include university tours for the girls and their mothers; a career day featuring Hispanic professional women the girls and their mothers can meet; workshops on computers, study skills, note-taking and time management; various cultural events; luncheons and banquets; and a campus summer camp.

In addition, the UTEP program matches the girls with a "Big Sister," a female UTEP student who serves as a role model. To make these matches, the university admissions office identifies young Hispanic women with the potential to positively influence the lives of the younger participants. Tinajero said although Big Sisters needn't necessarily be Hispanic, it is not difficult at UTEP, whose enrollment is 60% Hispanic, to find the girls role models who share their ethnicity. Each Big Sister works with approximately 10 girls, establishing a rapport with them and their mothers and encouraging them to attend program activities.

*The program's successes.* The UTEP Mother–Daughter Program is only beginning to see measurable successes, Tinajero said, because the first and second groups have just reached college age. One measure, though, is that 32 of the 33 girls from the program's very first class have graduated from high school, and 26 have gone on to college, where they are freshmen and sophomores. Most attend UTEP, but one earned a full scholarship to Columbia University. Tinajero said when the program's original group was compared with a control group—girls who would have been enrolled had the program had room—the original group had higher grade-point averages, took more honors classes and had lower pregnancy rates. Furthermore, Tinajero said she sees her program's completers involved in many school and public service activities.

The program has been successful for mothers as well. Tinajero said originally the program's only goal for mothers was to teach them how to be good parents and role models. But Tinajero said she began to see mothers developing their own interests in education: "The mothers were hungry for information for themselves." Now the program has a segment called Mothers' Initiative, whose goal is "helping the mothers to explore their own aspirations instead of just, 'How do I help my daughter?'" Today, four mothers from the program have bachelor's degrees, and one is pursuing a master's degree.

#### *New Mexico State University's Generaciones*

Generaciones, the mother–daughter program at NMSU in Las Cruces, began in 1990 with 20 teams of mothers and daughters, according to Dr. Louis Sarabia, the program's director. Sarabia called Generaciones, which enrolled 60 mother–daughter teams in the spring of 1994, a "shoestring operation" that gets by on \$4,000 a year from the budget of his office,

Chicano Programs. The money pays for transportation and meals, as well as for informational and inspirational materials such as brochures, leaflets, stickers and magazines for the girls and their mothers when they visit the university. "Every time they come on campus, we give them something," Sarabia said.

Sarabia and two other Chicano Programs staff members organize the program, but much of the Generaciones work comes from volunteer time put in by Big Sisters. Sarabia said he uses announcements on campus bulletin boards and in student publications to recruit the female volunteers, university students who act as role models to the girls. Sarabia said although it is important for Hispanic girls to have Hispanic role models, women of any ethnicity are encouraged to become Big Sisters. Several Hispanic student organizations chartered at the university also volunteer time to Generaciones as part of their community service activities.

According to the program's literature, Generaciones' overriding goal is "to reverse Hispanic dropout rates and increase the number of Hispanic women attending college." To do this, the program targets girls who fit at least three of the United States Department of Education's at-risk criteria, specifically:

- those who come from single-parent families;
- those whose family income is less than \$15,000 annually;
- those who are home alone for three or more hours a day;
- those whose parent or parents have no high school diploma;
- those with a sibling who has dropped out of school; and
- those characterized as limited-English-proficient.

Sarabia said public school officials are asked to identify fifth-grade girls meeting these criteria. Once students are identified, Generaciones staff and Big Sisters meet with the girls and their mothers at their schools, where they discuss the importance of education and of a parent's role in it.

The Generaciones literature lists some expected outcomes of the program. For the girls, the program hopes to:

- increase their awareness of the need for higher education;
- develop their academic skills;
- acquaint them with successful role models;
- increase their awareness of identity, self-esteem and pride in their Hispanic heritage; and
- develop their self-motivation.

For the mothers, the program expects to:

- increase their awareness of careers for their daughters;
- increase their awareness of the need for their daughters to be college-educated;
- acquaint them with successful young women who can serve as role models to their daughters;
- develop their self-esteem, confidence and assertiveness to allow them to be effective guides and role models to their daughters, and;
- increase their knowledge of self-improvement resources.

One important Generaciones activity is bringing the girls to the university for tours, lunches and demonstrations. Big Sisters and other volunteers, some of whom are engineering students, have in past tours shown the girls the power of computers to do impressive tasks in just seconds. Sarabia said the girls expressed awe during one computer demonstration when the volunteer student explained that she had written the computer program herself.

On the lighter side, Generaciones also has sponsored a trip to a local beauty college, where the girls learned about skin and hair care and ways to build self-esteem through appearance. And Big Sisters often spend some of their free time with the girls, taking them to the mall or the movies or out for lunch. Sarabia said one Big Sister organized a birthday cookout for her young friend.

The program's successes. Sarabia said because the program at NMSU is so new, impact is difficult to gauge. He measures success, however, from the largely anecdotal information he hears. Parents sometimes contact him, grateful that their girls have become more interested in school. He said he occasionally sees girls with their Big Sisters around town. And five mothers since the program began have themselves returned to school to earn a General Education Diploma.

### The future

The mother-daughter programs at ASU, UTEP and NMSU could serve as models to others searching for solutions to the educational difficulties of Hispanic girls, particularly in places along the U.S. border with Mexico. Certainly, as border commerce is heightened as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement, it will become increasingly important for all residents of border communities to be academically prepared to go to work as leaders in the new industries, instead of being replaced by people "imported" from elsewhere.

But the usefulness of mother-daughter programs certainly is not restricted to the border region. These programs can make all the difference in any community in which Hispanics are predominant yet for whatever reasons do not succeed academically and move into positions of leadership.

Moreover, it is reasonable to suggest that teaming up parents with their children to promote academic success will yield positive outcomes for members of any ethnic group, not just Hispanics. One university in Chicago has already embraced this idea, recently instituting a father-son program for black youths.

These mother-daughter programs have offered a viable solution to the academic difficulties of one group. It is programs like these that bolster hope that Hispanics and other minorities will eventually adequately represent their numbers in positions of leadership; indeed, "this is the moment when we most need the contribution of all members of society to maintain our competitive edge against other nations. We can not afford to squander the talents and creativity of large segments of the population."<sup>11</sup> The successes of these mother-daughter programs illuminate a potential for similar programs to reach other youth facing educational barriers, affording them the ideas that let them imagine and the tools that let them succeed.

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