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Latinas in higher education : no longer the invisible minority

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Abstract

This research paper will explore the issues underlying the under-representation of Latinas in higher education. The emphasis will be placed on Chicana females because Chicanos comprise 60 percent of the Latino population, and much of the existing research is focused on this group. The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, barriers to the participation of Latinas in higher education will be explored. Second, factors contributing to the success of high-achieving Latinas will be discussed. Finally, implications for higher education programming and policies will be examined as they affect Chicanas in particular, and Latinas in general. Suggestions for ways in which university administrators, faculty, and student affairs professionals can promote the achievement of Latina students will be provided.

LATINAS IN HIGHER EDUCATION:

NO LONGER THE INVISIBLE MINORITY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership,

Counseling, and Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts
Master of Arts in Education

by

Sheila Adele Rodriguez

May 1997

This Research Paper by: Sheila Adele Rodriguez

Entitled: Latinas in Higher Education: No Longer the Invisible Minority

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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4-24-97

Date Approved

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4.24.97

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According to the 1990 Census, Latinos comprise nine percent of the total

population of the United States. The United State government defines Latinos

(Hispanic) as persons of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central

American or other Spanish ancestry or descent. Between 1980 and 1990, the

Latino population growth rate of 53% was five times greater than the overall

population growth rate of 10% (O'Brien, 1993). However, in spite of the

tremendous growth in numbers, Latinos continue to be under represented in higher

education. In 1991, Latinos comprised only 4.6 percent of the total enrollment at

four year institutions, compared to 81.2 percent of Whites and 9.1 of African

Americans (NCES, 1995).

Nieves-Squires (1991) reports that in 1987, 8.6 percent of all Latinos over

age 25 were college graduates, as compared to 20.6 percent of the same age

cohort among non-Latinos. Within the Latino population, Chicanos (Mexican

Americans) are the least educated. In addition, even though Latina women in

general outnumber Latino men in enrollment and graduation rates, Chicana females

have the lowest degree completion rate of all Latino and non-Latino groups.

Research on the attrition rates for specific Latino groups is difficult to obtain

because they are often lumped together under the umbrella "Hispanic" label.

However, Chicano men have been reported as having graduation rates twice as

high as Chicana women (Chacon, Cohen, & Strover, 1986).

This research paper will explore the issues underlying the under-representation of Latinas in higher education. The emphasis will be placed on Chicana females because Chicanos comprise 60 percent of the Latino population, and much of the existing research is focused on this group. The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, barriers to the participation of Latinas in higher education will be explored. Second, factors contributing to the success of high-achieving Latinas will be discussed. Finally, implications for higher education programming and policies will be examined as they affect Chicanas in particular, and Latinas in general. Suggestions for ways in which university administrators, faculty, and student affairs professionals can promote the achievement of Latina students will be provided.

Barriers to Participation in Higher Education

The major barriers to the participation of Latina women in higher education fall under two categories: those which exist prior to entering college and those which are confronted upon matriculation. The former category involves factors associated with low socioeconomic status and the effects of cultural stereotyping. The latter category involves under preparation, institutional marginalization and the continuing stress caused by lack of financial resources.

<u>Socioeconomic Status</u>

In 1991, the median family income for Latino families was $23,000 per

year, compared to $37,000 per year for White families (Santos, Jr. & Rigual, 1994). Twenty-seven percent of Latino families live below the poverty level as compared to 10% of non-Latinos. These significant disparities in socioeconomic status have a negative affect on the educational attainment of Latinos. In addition, Latinos are highly urbanized, with nearly two-thirds of the population living in three states combined and 90% living in metropolitan areas (Santos, Jr. & Rigual, 1994).

These demographics give rise to one of the first obstacles faced by Latino students in the educational system: segregation of school-age Latinos. Chapa and Valencia (1993) report that Latinos are the most segregated ethnic/racial group in the nation and maintain that there is a clear relationship between school segregation and low college matriculation rates. Attending segregated and/or poorly financed schools can lead to low achievement, high drop out rates and inadequate college preparation.

Latino children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often enter school with "cultural capital" which is incongruent with the institutional setting (Cuadraz, 1996). "Cultural capital" encompasses implicit and internalized beliefs and values, including attitudes and perceptions towards education. The "cultural capital" of Latino youth is often different from that which the school system (and the White majority) promotes. Although working class Latino children may possess

intellectual ability (scholastic cultural capital), they receive mixed messages from the educational system which values their scholastic abilities while devaluing their cultural knowledge (Cuadraz, 1996). In essence, the school system promotes the social and academic mobility of those who possess the "appropriate" cultural capital, thus reinforcing and perpetuating social inequality.

Cultural Stereotyping

This system has been allow to flourish in part because of the myths and stereotypes regarding the Latino culture. In the 1950s and 1960s, social scientists promoted a "cultural deficit" model, focusing on cultural disadvantages, to explain the lack of Latino participation in higher education (Escobedo, 1980). Mexican Americans were stereotyped by social scientists as being undisciplined, fatalistic, irrational, and passive. These stereotypes were particularly damaging to Mexican American females, who were portrayed as submissive and docile, with no ambitions other than producing children (Andrade, 1982). This "blame the victim" model failed to examine the environmental circumstances which limit educational opportunities. Vasquez (1982) advocates a philosophy of "cultural democracy" which maintains that "identification with one's ethnic group is, in fact, a necessary ingredient of academic success" (p. 152).

Stress Factors: Financial, Academic, and Social

Upon entering college Latinas encounter a wide range of educational,

social, and financial challenges. Minority students who are most likely to persist in college are those who have taken high school college preparation courses, come from well-educated middle class families, and are traditional-aged students (Astin, 1982). In addition, they are more likely to be attending four-year institutions, living on campus, receiving financial aid in the form of grants or scholarships, and not employed off-campus. Latinas seldom fit this profile. They are overwhelmingly tracked into vocational courses in the public schools (Del Castillo, Frederickson, McKenna, & Ortiz, 1988). The majority of Latinos who seek further education wind up at community colleges which lower their chances of obtaining a baccalaureate degree. Those who enroll in four-year institutions often find they are under prepared for college courses. Latino college students, the majority of whom are concentrated in community colleges, are also older, on average, than Anglo students (Chacon, Cohen, & Strover, 1986).

Research has shown that Chicana women experience significantly more stress in college than Anglo women, Anglo men, and Chicano men (Munoz, 1986; Chacon, Cohen, & Strover, 1986). The main sources of stress for Chicanas involve financial, academic, familial, and social factors. Financial concerns are the primary source of stress for Chicanas. These concerns include: debt incurred by loans, lack of money for bills and personal expenses, hours spent on outside employment, and uncertainty of receiving financial aid. Interestingly, Anglo students show higher

levels of stress than Chicanos in one area: lack of parental contribution for financial support (Munoz, 1986). This makes sense because most Chicanos have no expectations of parental financial support in the first place and therefore would not experience stress over it.

Research has also demonstrated that the college academic experience, in general, is more stressful for Chicana females than for Chicano males, Anglo females and Anglo males (Munoz, 1986). The major academic concern of Chicanas is not being as well-prepared as their Anglo counterparts. Specifically, they report stress over applying and being accepted into college or graduate school, writing skills, taking the appropriate courses, taking tests, seeking academic assistance, meeting teacher expectations, and approaching staff and faculty members for assistance. For Latina college students, there appears to be an overall feeling of insecurity regarding their academic experience. This insecurity is often exacerbated by low expectations and antagonistic attitudes of educators and others within the college environment (Escobedo, 1980; Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

Other sources of stress for Latinas revolve around family and personal concerns. Research is mixed regarding the effect of gender on program progress. Latina women, like women in general, spend many more hours doing unpaid domestic labor than their male counterparts. The number of hours spent on domestic labor has a strong, negative impact on program progress (Chacon,

Cohen, & Strover, 1986). Thus, gender indirectly impacts program progress through its connections to hours spent on domestic labor. Latinas may also experience stress resulting from family obligations, educational aspirations which conflict with parent expectations, and sex role conflict. These sources of stress are particularly strong with first generation Latina college students (Vasquez, 1982).

Institutional Marginalization

Perhaps the most elusive, yet pervasive barrier to participation and persistence in college for Latina women is the experience of institutional marginalization. Although Latinas are a diverse group, they share commonalities based on historical influences, language, and the experience of oppression (Melendez & Petrovich, 1988). These commonalities, which are manifested through factors such as socioeconomic status, bilingualism, educational level of parents, ethnic self-identification, and biculturalism differ from the majority White student population. Those very characteristics which bind Latinas as a group are devalued by the educational institution. As a result, Latinas often feel peripheral or separate from the mainstream university environment.

The ways in which Latinas experience institutional marginalization are numerous. As members of a racial/ethnic minority, they encounter stereotyping and racism both in the classroom and in social settings. If they come from a working class background, they must overcome hurdles which are taken for granted by

middle class non-Latino students. Finally, as women they encounter sex-role conflicts as they enter an academic world which has been traditionally White, male-dominated. These race, class, and gender-based barriers result in experiences of "multiple marginality" (Cuadraz, 1996).

Latinas have expressed feelings of personal devaluation and racial oppression which emerge from conflict between their values and those of the majority culture. For example, Capello (1994) found that the Latino concept of "respeto" (respect), in which an individual is valued for her own self worth regardless of her achieved role, clashed with the Anglo value of status and competition. Vasquez (1982) points to a common problem for Chicana female students:

> Overt as well as covert, subtle patterns of patterns of prejudice and discrimination often result in negative internalized messages about one's general worth as a woman, as a member of an ethnic minority group, and, in most cases, as a member of the low economic group in this country. (P.159)

Other areas in which Latinas experience discord within the academic setting include: attitudes towards authority figures, expressing disagreement, dealing with conflict, expectations of friendship, intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation, cooperation vs. competition, struggles with independence, and verbal and

nonverbal patterns (Melendez & Petrovich, 1988). In essence, many of the behaviors and communications styles exhibited by Latinas are not valued in a university setting. This leads to feelings of alienation and isolation which, when combined with the stress of financial and academic concerns, produce formidable obstacles which Latinas must overcome if they are to succeed in higher education.

High-Achieving Latinas

Much of the existing research on Latina college students has been focused on low-achievers or non-persisters (Gandara, 1982). In order to gain insights on how to best promote college success for this group it is crucial to examine high achievers. What are the major factors contributing to the success of high achieving Latinas? What strategies do they use to overcome barriers in higher education?

Factors Contributing to Success

Several factors contribute to the educational achievement of Latina women. These factors center on the student's background and include: the mother's role in the home and her support of the educational goals of her daughter; type of parenting received; type of schooling (integrated vs. segregated); marital status/children; and sex-typed roles (Del Castillo, Frederickson, McKenna, & Ortiz, 1988). In addition, biculturalism has been shown to have a strong, positive relationship to academic achievement (Gomez & Fassinger, 1994). Finally, role models play a pivotal role in inspiring Latina women to pursue higher

education (Cuadraz, 1996). Thus, the profile of the successful Latina college student begins to emerge.

Foremost among the contributing factors of success for Latinas is the role the mother plays in encouraging and supporting her daughter's educational goals. A mother's positive influence has been found to mediate the negative affects of low socioeconomic status on Latina college achievement (Vasquez, 1982). The mother's role in the home also positively influences achievement. In contrast to the social science stereotype of the homebound Mexican mother, many work outside the home, exercise decision-making power within the family, and foster independence in their daughters.

High-achieving Latinas also tend to come from homes where the parenting style is non-authoritarian with an emphasis on education and self-reliance or reliance on the immediate family (Gandara, 1982). This is also contrary to social science stereotypes which contend that Latino parents are strict authoritarians who do not value education and suppress their daughters.

Latinas who attend integrated schools in middle class school districts benefit from having teachers who hold high expectations for their students. They are then able to measure their success against those of other high achievers. Being able to compete successfully in this environment gives Latinas the confidence to continue their education (Gandara, 1982). Being unmarried and without children

are also factors which are positively related to persistence in higher education. In addition, those women who do not conform to traditional sex-role behavior, such as domestic work, are more likely to succeed in their pursuit of higher education.

Research on the affect of acculturation on college achievement has been conflicting, however it appears that the maintenance of a bicultural or multicultural identity is an advantage for Latina women (Gomez & Fassinger, 1994; Buriel & Saenz, 1980). Gomez and Fassinger (1994) found, in a sample of 244 undergraduate Latinas attending a four-year public university, that the more bicultural an individual, the wider her range of achieving styles. Biculturalism allows students to retain their Latino values while incorporating Anglo-American values which facilitate college success. However, biculturalism is often related to family income. Latino families with greater financial resources may provide greater bicultural opportunities for their daughters, thereby encouraging them to participate in both cultures.

Coping Strategies

The strategies utilized by Latina students to overcome barriers and succeed in college revolve around what Attinasi (1996) describes as "getting in" behaviors. These are strategies used to negotiate the large dimensions - physical, social, and academic - of a university environment. The "getting in" behaviors fall into two categories: "getting to know" and "scaling down."

Programs such as special orientation and registration, summer bridge programs, tutoring, learning labs, and mentoring are methods used by minority and first generation students to help them to "get to know" and understand the university system (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). In order to get better acquainted with the campus, high-achieving Latinas develop mentor-like relationships with upper class students who can serve as guides or interpreters of the physical, social, and cognitive domains of the environment. They also participate in peer knowledge sharing, in which new students explore the domains together. Support groups are often used to reduce the overwhelming complexity of the university.

"Scaling down" is a process in which the student is able to narrow down the dimensions of the campus to those components with which she needs to be familiar, thereby reducing the amount of geography (physical, social, and cognitive) to be navigated. The student develops a cognitive "map" of the university and is able to place herself within each geographical domain. Methods of "scaling down" include finding places to study and meet friends, establishing relationships with instructors and advisors, developing support networks with peers, and becoming familiar with the department of their major.

"Getting to know" and "scaling down" are efforts which emanate from, and are controlled by, the student to facilitate her own success. However, efforts by the university administration, faculty, and staff are necessary to ensure that

Latina women are not only recruited and retained, but made to feel welcome and valued in the university setting. Student affairs directors and chief student affairs officers must seize the opportunity to affect change by serving as facilitators and advocators for cultural diversity.

Efforts to Promote Latina Students' Success

Higher education has approached the dilemma of minority participation in two stages. During the 1960s and 1970s, the problem was defined as an issue of access. Emphasis was placed on outreach and the recruitment of minority students. In the 1970s, as it became apparent that recruitment alone would not increase graduation rates, the emphasis shifted to retention (Santos, Jr. & Rigual, 1994). Programs such as learning labs and tutorial services were established to help retain minority students, however, they continued to drop-out in large numbers. As the twenty-first century approaches, it is imperative to combine recruitment and retention efforts with additional strategies focusing on achievement.

In order to promote the achievement of Latina college students, efforts must be concentrated in the following areas: financial aid, academic support systems, social/cultural support systems, and campus environment. The university must demonstrate a commitment to Latina students by sincerely valuing their contributions, while making an honest effort to improve the services and campus climate for these women.

Financial Aid

It is essential that institutions of higher education provide adequate and reasonable financial aid packages to Latinas if they are to persist in the attainment of a degree. This means tailoring financial aid packages to include grants and scholarships, with a minimum number of loans. This will enable Latina women to reduce or eliminate hours of outside employment and spend more time on academic studies. It also helps reduce the stress Latinas experience because of financial concerns. Providing attractive financial aid packages will require a commitment on the part of the university to search for new sources of grants and scholarships.

Academic Support Systems

Latinas can benefit from individual guidance and assistance in adjusting to the university academic environment. For those students who are experiencing academic difficulties, it is especially critical to intervene early. At the same time, academic advisors need to be aware of the commitments (family, work, personal) of Latina students and be willing to help devise a timely but flexible plan for program progress.

Student affairs professionals must recognize the economic and social barriers which interfere with academic objectives and which may cause students to take longer to graduate. They can assist Latinas in exploring extrinsic and intrinsic

achievement motives. Programs such as peer study groups, faculty-student

mentoring and tutoring services can be also be helpful. Advising staff must ensure

Latinas are aware and have access to these programs and that they are responsive

to their needs.

Social/Cultural Support Systems

The alienation and isolation which many Latina college students experience

can be alleviated through participation in ethnically oriented support networks.

Cultural centers provide an opportunity for Latinas to interact socially and

academically with each other. Latina support groups provide students with the

opportunity to share survival strategies, learn more about their own culture,

discuss experiences of marginality, and redefine sex roles (Capello, 1994).

Chicana students demonstrate a strong "other" value orientation upon

entering college (Villalpando, 1996). These values are affected by their peer group

in college. Research has shown that the student's peer group is the most significant

influence on growth and development during college (Astin, 1993). Providing

activities and programs which allow Chicanas to interact with each other will

further develop their "other" oriented values. Student affairs professionals can

promote these values by providing opportunities for volunteer, multicultural, and

diversity-related activities.

Latina achievement can also be promoted through the encouragement and

support of role models. Universities must demonstrate a commitment to the hiring and promotion of Latina professionals, whom students can look up to and emulate. At the same time the university should not "dump" all Latino students on the *one* Latina faculty member of a department. This is unfair and adds to the work load of that faculty member with little recognition by the administration. When Latina faculty are asked to serve as role models/mentors, the relationship should be mutually beneficial. The faculty members time and effort with Latina students should be recognized and rewarded in the form of incentives such as release time or research funds.

Campus Environment

The final strategy to be discussed in this paper to foster Latina college student success is promoting a campus climate in which diversity is welcomed and valued. This involves a continuing effort to recognize, encourage, and celebrate the unique contributions of Latina students to the campus environment.

Promoting a multicultural campus environment begins with upper administrators and their attitudes and policies regarding recruitment, admission, and hiring practices. Increasing the number of Latino students, staff, and faculty will have a positive impact on the university as a whole by providing a wider variety of educational, cultural, and social interactions for the campus community. It is imperative that Latino administrators are hired in decision-making positions

which are not limited to minority issues.

Faculty must be sensitized to the needs and concerns of Latina students. They must recognize the role they play in making the students feel comfortable in the classroom. They should make an effort to engage Latina women in class discussions and concentrate on the quality of their comments rather than on linguistic delivery. At the same time, they should not assume that all Latina students enter college with the same educational background and preparation. It is helpful to recognize that Latina students may be quiet in the classroom because they are unsure of themselves and feel they are not as prepared to succeed as their White classmates. The simple act of pronouncing a Spanish name correctly can go a long way in making Latinas feel more comfortable in class.

Student affairs professionals who facilitate programming to promote campus diversity should continue their efforts year round. It is important to provide social activities which are multicultural, entertaining, and learning-centered to both minority and majority students. By planning activities that appeal to the overall student body, student affairs professionals can encourage students to cross racial lines and interact with each other.

Conclusion

It is projected that by the year 2000 the Latino population will reach 30.6 million. By the year 2020, Latinos will surpass African Americans in number,

making them the largest minority group in the United States (O'Brien, 1993).

Although Latinos have made impressive gains in college enrollment and

completion in the past 20 years, the pattern is still one of under representation in

proportion to their population growth. Some factors contributing to this problem

include socioeconomic status, inadequate college preparation, cultural

stereotyping, and institutional marginalization.

As the twenty-first century approaches, the challenge for institutions of

higher education will be to prepare for the arrival of larger numbers of Latino

students by examining the university environment and making the necessary

changes to promote success. Until then, Latina women will continue to meet

resistance and contradictions as they negotiate their way through higher education

and multiple marginalities. They will succeed despite the barriers, while hoping that

those who come after will find less obstacles to overcome .

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