

Interview with Antonio R. Flores

JOSÉ ANTONIO GURPEGUI

Antonio R. Flores is the third president and chief executive officer of the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU). Prior to his position at HACU, he served as director of programs and services for the Michigan Higher Education Assistance Authority and the Michigan Higher Education Student Loan Authority. In 2009, Flores was featured by Univision Network in an *Orgullo Hispano* capsule, honoring notable and influential Hispanics/Hispanic-Americans. The Educational Policy Institute honored Flores with a Lifetime Achievement Award. He received the Education Award from the Hispanic Organization for Public Employees in San Antonio, Texas. For the second year, he was listed among the *Top Influential Leaders in the U.S. and Latino Community* by *Latino Leaders Magazine*.

José Antonio Gurpegui: The acronym HACU stands for Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities. Why did you choose “Hispanic” instead of “Latino”, which seems to be a “popular” term used at universities?

Antonio R. Flores: Hispanic is the federal term defined in official policy documents that first recognized our national community as a "protected class" for purposes of governmental efforts to afford equality of opportunity to people of Hispanic descent or origin in employment, education, government contracting, and other areas of public life. The first such document was an executive order issued by then President Nixon in the 1970s that yielded a circular by the Office of Management and Budget with the

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corresponding definitions for Hispanic, African American, American Indian, and Asian American as protected classes.

Actually, Latino is the preferred term in California and other western states but not so in other regions of the country. In New Mexico, for example, Hispanic is the only term accepted by most people. In Florida and northeastern states, Hispanic is widely used but most people that identify first with their national origin, (e.g., Cuban, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Venezuelan, Colombian, etc.). This is also true of Texas and Illinois (Mexican), and even of metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles, Houston, Chicago, New York (Mexican, Salvadoran, Peruvian, Nicaraguan, etc.). Thus there is not a single term that is universally accepted by most Hispanics/Latinos and these terms are used interchangeably.

JAG: Why is an association like HACU necessary?

ARF: The persistent and major educational gaps afflicting Hispanics across the nation require the advocacy and programmatic leadership of a strong and committed association like HACU. By advocating before the U.S. Congress and state legislatures in key states, HACU has been able to amend important laws that now provide greater financial support for the colleges and universities that enroll the overwhelming majority of the 2.3 million of Hispanic higher education students in the country. Consequently, these institutions are better equipped to recruit and graduate increasingly larger numbers of Hispanics. The association also promotes the development and institutionalization of innovative and effective programs to increase Hispanic success in higher education. As long as Hispanics suffer educational inequities HACU is necessary.

JAG: How do you explain HACU's constant growth?

ARF: HACU's growth and development is the result of the rapid Hispanic demographic growth, which in turn has increased the number of Hispanic-Serving Institutions, colleges and universities with enrollments that include 25% or more Hispanics that comprise the main membership category of HACU. Also, HACU's recognized professional acumen and success in advocating for its members and Hispanic higher education accounts for much of its growth over the years.

JAG: Why is HACU incorporating universities outside the USA?

ARF: HACU's commitment to international education is a natural extension of its national strategy and core constituency. The Hispanic population in the U.S. is by definition international and the idea of a university education is global, universal. Therefore, HACU has embraced international education like no other U.S. - based association of its kind with a focus on the Western Hemisphere and the Hispanic world. Not only does HACU include an international track in its annual national conference, but it also organizes a biennial international conference. The 9th HACU International Conference is set for February 23-25, 2011 in San Juan, Puerto Rico. (In 2007, it was held with great success at the Universidad de Alcalá.)

JAG: HACU's agenda mostly centers on students. What happens with professors? The percentage of Hispanic professors is lower than that of students.

ARF: Actually, HACU's primary focus is on institutional capacity building for greater Hispanic student success. This implies efforts to enhance the faculty's own capacity to better serve their diverse student cohorts; we have been operating a fellowship program for faculty and staff to improve their ability to secure external funding support for their research and teaching, as well as for student support. Concerning the dearth of Hispanic professors, HACU has been able to amend the Higher Education Act to fund new graduate education opportunities for Hispanics, which is the foundation for a greater pool of prospective academics; the benefits of these efforts are mid- and long-term, however.

JAG: How would you define the work of HACU's President— social, academic, political? Why?

ARF: The role of HACU's president is first and foremost political but also has very important public relations and academic dimensions. It is primarily political because a great deal of time is dedicated to policy and legislative issues with the U.S. Congress and officials in the federal government, as well as with some state legislatures—albeit to a much lesser degree. The public relations part includes extensive media interviews, speeches and other types of presentations at conferences and other public forums, and participation in a number of boards of national coalitions and organizations. The academic side involves lectures and speeches at colleges and universities on diverse issues and topics, including: education policy, language, culture, college/university leadership and governance, etc.

JAG: Have you considered becoming a politician?

ARF: No, although I have been approached in various occasions about the possibility. I believe I can be a more effective change agent by working in a nonpartisan manner from the outside than otherwise.

JAG: Why do the majority of university professors with a Hispanic background tend to work in Humanities and Social Studies departments instead of those with a more scientific character?

ARF: The U.S. context is a prolific incubator of social scientists and academic humanists for historically oppressed communities such as Hispanics. There seems to be greater interest in those fields of study as a means of self-discovery and understanding of the social and human factors that have contributed to their disadvantaged condition. As more Hispanics emerge on college campuses with fewer disadvantages this trend is likely to be disrupted in the years ahead. The renewed national push for greater Hispanic representation in science and engineering programs will also help in this regard.

JAG: Emulating the “maxim” “*El trabajo os hará libres*”, what will free Hispanics in the US, knowledge or lobbies?

ARF: Both are important. Knowledge is power and lobbying based on knowledge is superpower. But the former precedes the latter. We need highly educated leaders in all sectors of society that can also lend support to advocacy efforts to change legislation for the common good.

JAG: Why does entering a university seem to be, in social terms, more difficult for a Hispanic than for an Anglo?

ARF: Primarily for socioeconomic reasons. Hispanic parents have lower educational attainment, lower incomes, and greater unfamiliarity with the educational system or even with the language than their Anglo counterparts. Their children usually attend lower quality schools that lack the highly trained teachers and superb facilities of those largely attended by Anglo students. All of these inequities translate into barriers for Hispanics to attend and succeed in higher education.

JAG: What is your opinion of associations somehow radical like MECHA? Why do you think it is so popular among Hispanic students?

ARF: The sense of alienation and injustice that Hispanic youth experience motivates them to join organizations that represent a counterpoint to their earlier experiences and a support system that is culturally friendly. MECHA is one such organization for many Hispanic youth.

JAG: How have Hispanic university students changed in these past years?

ARF: Students are becoming increasingly engaged in public and community service but also more driven in their quest for inclusion in the business world and corporate careers. In other words, there is greater diversity of purpose reflecting their increased awareness of their key role in the future of the country as a prosperous and more just nation.

JAG: Did you observe any changes between the Republican and Democrat administrations in regards to education for Hispanics while you have been President of HACU?

ARF: The differences are marginal at best. What has been most helpful to us is the growing presence and power of Hispanic members of Congress from both parties who have led the way for Hispanic-Serving Institutions to be included and supported in important federal legislation. Because the number of Hispanic Democrats in Congress has been much greater than that of Hispanic Republicans, the former have been able to promote more changes when their party has been in control of Congress. Fortunately, education is usually viewed as a bipartisan issue.

JAG: The majority of Hispanics in the US are Mexican. Which has been the most significant Latinamerican arrival recently?

ARF: The Central American immigrant population has been growing rather fast, but also the Dominicans and South Americans in New York.

JAG: What do you think about the difference of opinions between Hispanic groups in the US? Is there a need for a greater unity to bring a greater political force for the Hispanics?

ARF: Hispanics are already a key political force nationally and locally. Because presidential elections are based on a fixed number of electoral votes that each state represents on the basis of population, Hispanics can affect the outcome of presidential elections by being the deciding demographic within each key state. The states where this can happen include a significant majority of the electoral votes needed to elect the president. Obviously this is also the case of statewide and local elections. Hispanics are generally united by issues of language, culture, education, immigration, and economic opportunity; we need to capitalize on these issues for even greater unity.

JAG: There seems to exist a recent anti-Hispanic wave in the US. From which groups does that wave come from and what will be the effects?

ARF: The anti-Hispanic political action and rhetoric of recent years has emerged from fringe groups with far-right ideology, like the Tea Party. Their ideology is grounded in the teachings of academics like the late Samuel Huntington that view Hispanics as a threat to the Anglo Saxon culture and language. These distorted ideas find fertile ground in a weak economy with a high unemployment rate, such as the one we have been experiencing.

JAG: When do you think that a true Migration reform that can deal with the situation of Hispanics in an integral way will be carried out? Will it be done gradually?

ARF: I'm afraid comprehensive immigration reform (CIR) is unlikely in the short term, but some elements of the package may be possible even yet this year. The DREAM Act seems the most viable one, followed by the agricultural jobs bill. In that sense, it is going to be a gradual approach going from the more palatable to the most challenging parts over a number of years. The most difficult one, the path for legalization of the assumed 11 or 12 million undocumented immigrants in the country, might not happen until the economy recovers and the unemployment rate goes down 4 or more percentage points (it is now at 9.6%).

JAG: How do you see the role of Hispanics in the US 20 or 25 years from now?

ARF: This year, for the first time in history, the K-12 enrollment of schools in California was 50.4% Hispanic. Texas and other major states will soon follow suit. By 2049 or sooner, Hispanics in K-12 schools will surpass the Anglo student population when they

are projected to account for nearly 40% of the U.S. total, compared to 38% of Anglos. Between now and then, Hispanic political and economic power will continue to grow rapidly, but the pace and quality of such growth will depend largely on their higher educational success, which brings us back to HACU. Twenty five years ago HACU didn't even exist, it was just an idea; in 20 to 25 years from now, HACU is likely to become the most important and largest association of its kind in the U.S., and Hispanics should be leading this nation to unsuspected heights of prosperity with liberty and justice for all.

JAG: Muchas gracias. Esperamos verle en España pronto con un nuevo congreso de HACU.