

**Working Text**  
**Independence and Education**  
**Latinos and Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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Last August I was asked by our local Latino newspaper, *La Prensa*,<sup>1</sup> to write a short editorial on education for a special issue commemorating September 16. As I wrote this piece, I also thought about this conference and its significance. Writing this essay also gave me reason to pause and consider my twenty plus years in education.

One of the things I shared with *La Prensa* was that as a Latina, I regard the celebration of September 16 as a reminder to pay homage to our history as Latinos, which always gives me reason to stop and think about where we have come as a people within the borders of the United States. Being an educator, I generally assess our growth in terms of educational attainment. I am always mindful of the rich heritage we have in education. Yet many would have us believe that we are recent arrivals to higher education. We need only look at the Aztec and Mayan pyramids to know that our ancestors were learned people. And because too often course content does not include our rich history, we do not learn, for instance, that when Hernando Cortez came to the shores of Mexico, an elaborate higher education system already existed. Further, Mexico opened its first university in 1533, more than 100 years before Harvard was established in 1636. However, Spanish rule subordinated indigenous people and relegated them to the bottom of society, and the opportunity for learning was all but eliminated.

Sadly, for Latino people educational attainment and achievement remains low. According to the 1997-98 ACE report, "Minorities and Education", Latino high school completion rates between whites and Latinos remains wide at nearly 25 percentage points (82.3 percent for white students and 57.5 for Latinos). Also, only ten percent of Latinos ages 25 to 29 had four or more years of college in 1996, while for whites it was 28.1 percent. Although the percentage for Latinos reflects an increase, the increase is not proportional to our population growth.

And this brings me to the Latinos 2000 Conference. In considering Latinos and learning in 21st century, a number of questions and issues come to mind. I would like to present a set of questions/issues from which to have a discussion.

As a Latina and an educator, I remain concerned that while we are the fastest growing population in the United States (by 2025 Latinos will be largest minority population), we continue to have some of the highest dropout rates at all levels, from middle school to high school and college. As educators, as parents and community members we need to be asking, what are the factors that create this trend? How can we better prepare our children both academically and socially, to succeed in post-secondary institutions? How can we address issues at the K-12 levels? I also remain concerned that we continue to be underrepresented as faculty and staff in higher education.

For sometime now there has been much discussion about the concept of a seamless education. And while it is widely recognized that a seamless education has profound and positive impact on educational attainment, of late nothing new has come out of these discussions. We need to consider what we mean by a seamless education for Latinos specifically. We must address issues holistically. Poverty, racism and other social issues such as teenage pregnancy are realities that impact all educational institutions. How do we as educators take social responsibility? What role does higher education have in addressing these issues and concerns?

Clearly, as we move into the next millennium, as Latinos we need to reaffirm our commitment to education. Therefore, now is an opportune time to reevaluate programs that were developed in the 1960s in order that we may better meet the needs of today's students and create a future to which they can and will contribute greatly.

For instance, in institutions of higher education the effect and success of "minority affairs" programs can be seen in the implementation of such initiatives as year-round orientation programs, pre-college programs, smaller first-year classes, programs that include parents, and changes in the way advising and counseling for both academics and financial aid are delivered. Each of these initiatives can be directly tied to programs that were part of student services that came out of minority affairs programs. The development of Ethnic Studies programs and departments, the current trend toward community building, diversity in the curriculum and interdisciplinary collaborations have also been a result, at the very least in part, of the development and implementation of Multicultural programming. Thus, programs that were designed to improve the climate for students of color have had positive impact, not only for students of color, but for all students. These programs and initiatives have positively affected entire systems, which illustrates how diversity creates a more positive atmosphere for all. In addition to being an administrator during the past twenty years I have also been very involved with Chicano/Latino Studies. And from teaching my courses I have learned a great deal. Not only are these classes important for Latino students in terms of self esteem etc., students from a variety of

backgrounds have made it very clear that these kinds of courses are very important to their development both personally and professionally. Students often tell us that these are the kinds of courses they need in order to do well in the workplace and in the larger world. Thus, student perception and their valuing of Multicultural classes, is moving ethnic studies courses from the margins of higher education to the center.

What students are saying is further supported by the work of Dr. Sylvia Hurtado whose study out of the University of Michigan indicates that students who take Multicultural courses are much better prepared and do better in college than those who do not take these kinds of classes. Therefore, it is imperative, as Dr. Hurtado's work illustrates, that we continue to find ways to evaluate the impact courses such as those taught in Chicano and Latino Studies departments and programs, have had on the larger life of post-secondary institutions.

It must also be noted that the role we, as Latinos, have had in creating change is not simply about the presence of programs or resources. It is not only about an increase in the number of Latino students on college campuses. It is about systemic change. Therefore, as we have discussions on what is needed to be done, I propose that we also acknowledge the impact we have had and the contributions we have made to education. In essence the work we have done has in fact facilitated/created systemic change because at the core of diversity issues is the challenge to move away from the propensity of organizing knowledge around a single center. In this sense, diversity displaces a single, partial, and largely uncontested center with multiple, expansive centers. Systemic change is not about component parts. These "parts" provide a structure, or vehicle from which mentality can be changed, from which policy is changed, from which we can begin to make systemic change. And this is the impact we, as people of color, have had on education. Because of our presence, structures of knowledge, patterns of relationships and organizing principles of institutional life are being re-evaluated. And we need to ask how can we participate more fully in these discussions?

The Latinos 2000 conference will bring individuals from diverse backgrounds and perspective to participate in discussions. These discussions will provide each of us with an opportunity to look at education in new and dynamic contexts. We need new paradigms. We need to determine what we can use from older models in order to build new models. And from our discussions we must identify strategies which can be applied in practical ways, so we can continue developing tools and processes which assist us in negotiating boundaries of difference in making our educational system a more accessible and hospitable for all people.

I will end by saying that education is our legacy; it is part of who we are today, and reclaiming this legacy will make visible and tangible the possibilities

of our lives. As we reclaim our history, our long legacy of a love for learning, we reclaim our lives and a whole new world is made accessible. I believe this conference will be a key aspect of this important and rich reclamation project as we make the future one of choice and possibility for our young people today and for the generations to come.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Editor's note:* This article was written when Nancy Barceló held the positions of Associate Vice President for Multicultural and Academic Affairs and Chair of Chicano Studies at the University of Minnesota.

## Works Cited

American Council on Education, Office of Minority Concerns. *Minorities in Higher Education: Sixteenth Annual Status Report, 1997-98*. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, Office of Minority Concerns, 1998.