

Connecticut State University System

Advancing Latino Education Advances America

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A report issued by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation included an unsettling prediction by David T. Ellwood, Dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government: "...during the past several decades, on average new workers had higher levels of educational attainment than the older workers they replaced.

Over the next 20 years that trend will reverse: against the backdrop of a shrinking skilled labor pool, younger workers with lower levels of education will replace older, well-trained workers."

In an era of unprecedented technological advances, unparalleled global competition, and an extraordinary push to heighten levels of education throughout industrial and developing nations alike, it would seem American education is simply not keeping pace.

We can, however, accelerate our efforts. To do so, we must consider this nation's changing demographics, and the special challenges and opportunities before us. No ethnic group is growing at a faster rate than the Hispanic population, and no group is further behind the educational curve.

Data compiled by the *National Center for Higher Education Management Systems* (NCHEMS) and *Jobs for the Future* found that 42 percent of whites ages 25-64 have an associate degree or higher, compared with 26 percent of African Americans and 18 percent of Latinos. It cited data from the *Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development* which ranks the United States tenth among industrialized nations in the percentage of 25-34 year

olds with an associate degree or higher, one of the only nations where older adults are more educated than younger adults.

The Gates Foundation report points out that "globalization has altered the mix of jobs available at the low end of the U.S. labor market, reducing the ability of 16- to 26-year-olds with only a high school diploma to land higher-paying jobs and become financially self-sufficient.

Also, labor market demands for employees with higher levels of education have forced many youths to delay entry into the workforce or to juggle work, school and family responsibilities while holding down a full-time (and often low-wage) job." On top of that, the report notes, "youth from lower-income families often face these systemic barriers on their own."

Nowhere is that more clear than among Latino youth, and demographic trends nationwide and in Connecticut underscore the need to confront this challenge. In 2006, the highly regarded report *New England 2020* predicted that by 2020, nearly half of the 25-29 year olds in Connecticut will be minorities. By that same year, more than a quarter of Connecticut's working-age population will be composed of minority populations.

Speaking to *Inside Higher Ed*, University of California's Patricia Gándara and University of Washington's Frances Contreras, both professors of education and co-authors of "The Latino Education Crisis" pointed out that "growing up in a primarily Spanish-speaking environment does *not* in itself affect college going. Many Spanish speaking students from solid middle

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class homes go to college and succeed. Their families are able to prepare them well for school and as a result they do well. However, if the family does not have sufficient resources and the schools that their children attend are impoverished ... the consequences are negative.”

Often, older family members do not have a college degree, and are unfamiliar with the admissions process or financial aid regulations and procedures, both often exacerbated by a language barrier. To promote enrollment by Latino students, Contreras and Gándara recommend:

- Recruit in schools and community colleges where these students attend
- Reach out to the middle schools where these students are forming their post-secondary plans

Work with high schools to create a seamless program that reaches across high school to college, and support these students not only as they transition to higher education, but also while they are progressing through college.

At the Connecticut State University System, which includes Central, Eastern, Southern and Western Connecticut State universities, concerted efforts consistent with that approach are bringing results.


The gap in the six-year graduation rate between white students and Latino students has been reduced by more than 10 percentage points, dropping from 17 percent for 1998 graduates to 6 percent for 2009 graduates. New partnerships

and programs aimed squarely at community colleges, high schools and middle schools are underway and gaining traction.

Reflecting on the background of recently confirmed U.S. Supreme Court Associate Justice Sonia Sotomayor, syndicated columnist E.J. Dionne Jr. recalled that “we once did reasonably well in opening educational opportunities to people from modest backgrounds such as hers.”

Today, too many academically well-qualified students, including Latino students, choose not to pursue higher education, often because they view it as being out of reach. Affordability is a key hurdle, but it is not the only obstacle.

If America’s education preeminence is to be sustained in the decades to come, we cannot afford to permit these students to shortchange their futures. The imperative to intensify our collective efforts has never been clearer.

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