Educating Mexicanos and Latinos

by Bruce Vandal

The education of Mexicano and Latino youth is becoming a significant issue in American education. Concern about their education stems from an increase in the numbers of Mexicano and Latino students of school age. Unfortunately, growth in the school age population has been accompanied by a rise in high school dropouts, seriously affecting the number of Mexicano and Latino students that move on into higher education. Mexicano and Latino students tend to slip out of the educational system early, rarely returning to earn a college degree.

One of the problems leading Mexicano and Latino students to drop out is their lack of academic preparation for higher education. The needs assessment for the University of St. Thomas’ Hispanic Pre-College Project found that, in general, Mexicano and Latino students are in need of stronger basic skills, better study skills, and exposure to more rigorous academic courses. The report also found that Mexicano and Latino students often experience low self-esteem and alienation because of the lack of attention to their unique cultural needs and the insensitive stereotypes that students, teachers, and staff apply to them.

Participation in Summer Programs

One strategy for opening the educational pipeline for any student is a pre-college experience such as a summer enrichment program. Research has found that specific “getting ready” experiences help students make the transition from high school to college. Louis Attinasi, from the University of Houston, in his research on the educational experiences of Mexican American students found that pre-college experiences help define what college may be like, introduce students to mentors who encourage their participation in higher education, and create the expectation that students will go on to post-secondary education.

Unfortunately, most Mexicano and Latino students in Minnesota are not exposed to these unique learning experiences. The Minnesota Minority Education Partnership’s database of students attending summer enrichment programs revealed that Mexicano and Latino students are far and away the least likely to participate in the summer programs. Information collected from sixth through twelfth graders who enrolled in summer programs in the years 1990 through 1992 indicates that of the 2,230 students that have participated in summer programs only 86, or less than 4 percent, described their ethnicity as Mexicano or Latino (Figure 1).

Community Discussions

The Minnesota Minority Education Partnership responded to the problem of low Mexicano and Latino participation in summer programs by sponsoring a series of roundtable discussions with members of the Mexicano and Latino community and summer program educators. The discussions

Figure 1. Ethnicity of Youth Attending Summer Enrichment Programs, 1990-1992

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Specified</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican/Latino</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Minnesota Minority Education Partnership.

Photos on pages 1, 3, 5, 11, and 15 by Nancy Conroy.
Photo on page 9 by Emily Figueroa.
Photo on page 10 courtesy of the Hispanic Pre-College Project, University of St. Thomas.
set out to identify the barriers to Mexicano and Latino participation and strategies for breaking down those barriers. The result of these discussions was the identification of issues that focused on the different roles that individuals play in the process of recruiting students for summer programs.

Valuing Mexican and Latino Identity

Identifying and valuing the unique cultural heritage of students is a critical problem among programs, as many have traditionally enrolled majority white students. Even programs that seek to recruit “students of color” run the risk of excluding students who do not identify with that term. Abner Arauzo, coordinator of minority student affairs at Moorhead State University, states that, “if you identify students of color for recruitment, that is exactly what you will get, but it will not be all students of color.” According to Arauzo, many Mexican and Latino students do not consider themselves students of color and therefore will not respond to recruitment strategies that are color-based. Evelyn Bertoll-Kocher, an evaluation specialist for the Minneapolis Public Schools, believes that the typical student of color recruited by programs is African American and female. Arauzo states that recruitment efforts should value the unique background of students and recruitment materials should identify each ethnic group by name. Ramona A. de Rosales, director of the Hispanic Pre-College Project at the University of St. Thomas, which includes Academia del Pueblo, a program for kindergarten through sixth grade Mexicano and Latino students, feels that many programs may be sensitive to students of color, but not sensitive to Mexicano and Latino students. Rosales’ statement is supported by evidence showing that programs which value cultural background, develop self-esteem in Hispanic youth. Efforts to recruit and educate Mexican and Latino students must be attentive to their unique cultural needs during the recruitment process and when the student enrolls in a program.

In addition to distinguishing Mexicanos and Latinos from other ethnic populations, educators must consider the differences within the Mexicano and Latino community. Luis Ortega, vice-principal at Minneapolis Southwest High School and director of La Escuelita (a summer program for Mexicanos and Latino students run by CLUES—Chicanos Latinos Unidos En Servicios) contends that the term “Hispanic” is too broad. He believes that efforts to attract Mexicanos and Latino students must identify the needs of English speaking versus Spanish speaking students, and first generation students versus second and third generation students. Once again research has shown that the experiences and aspirations of students differ depending on their specific cultural background. Studies have found that Mexicanos differ from Latinos in their educational experiences, that first generation students have different problems than second or third generation students, and that English speaking Mexicanos and Latinos have greater access to programs than non-fluent students.

Family Values and Parental Roles

The family’s role in the life of a student is of particular importance when examining educational achievement in the Mexican and Latino community. Students look to their families for guidance and support. Parents, in turn, place high expectations on their children. Unfortunately, Mexicanos and Latino parents have a difficult time navigating the educational system. The Minnesota State Board of Education’s Hispanic Learner Task Force found several barriers preventing parental involvement in the education of their children. First, the report stated that language differences hinder communication between parents and educators. Luis Ortega, is frustrated with the fact that the language barrier continues to be a problem in the education of Mexicanos and Latinos. Elsa Vega Perez, executive director for the Hispanic Education Program, agrees with Ortega and adds that materials presented in Spanish not only address language difference, they show a sensitivity to the Hispanic culture. Perez states that a brochure in Spanish tells the parent that a program is sincere in its efforts to Include Mexicanos and Latinos students.

A second concern of the Hispanic Learner Task Force is parental knowledge of the educational system. Because Mexicanos and Latino families are often first or second generation residents of the United States, they may be less knowledgeable than other parents. As a result, parents may be unaware of how to become more involved in their children’s education. Ramona A. de Rosales explains that the average Mexicanos or Latino parents has not graduated from high school and consequently has not been exposed to the unique educational opportunities that are available. Mexicanos or Latino parents are, therefore, less likely than other parents to seek out such educational opportunities for their children.

Related to the lack of knowledge about programs is the perception that summer programs are for talented and gifted or low income students. Even parents that consider themselves well informed about summer programs have difficulty understanding whether programs are directed at their child’s ability level. Mexicanos and Latinos arrive at the conclusion that a program is selective when they encounter program titles using terms such as “excellence” and “leadership” or when application procedures ask for teacher recommendations and school transcripts. Randy Hernandez, an admissions counselor for the University of Minnesota’s General College, believes that the only way to remove this confusion about summer programs is to have personal contact with students and parents. If Mexicanos and Latino parents are unfamiliar with the system it should become the responsibility of summer programs to reach out to them.

The third concern of the Hispanic Learner Task Force is that many families lack the resources for participation in their children’s education. Financial and family responsibilities make it difficult for parents to attend school functions. Despite these difficulties, programs such as Academia del Pueblo have been successful at gaining the participation of parents. According to Patricia Santos, the parent coordinator for Parents as Partners, a coordinated program with Academia del Pueblo, making parental involvement a part of the program ensures a greater effort to reach parents. Academia del Pueblo is able to gain the involvement of parents in meetings throughout the year by providing food, child care, and other services that might otherwise prevent them from attending. The key, according to Santos, is constant contact with parents that reminds them of their obligation to the program.

Family Issues

Another issue affecting student participation in summer programs may be the nature of the Mexicanos and Latino family. Mexicanos and Latino students that move on to college often experience difficulty in breaking away from family. If the values of the family are not consistent with college attendance, any attempt to move students into unique educational opportunities related to future college enrollment may be resisted. This is reflected in parental concerns about the environment their children will be exposed to during summer programs. Anxiety about safety and cultural awareness are both issues that parents mention when discussing summer programs. Liz Gurrola-Dorado, director of the College of St. Catherine’s program Un Primer Paso, believes that questions of security, particularly for programs where the child is attending a program away from the neighborhood, are a major concern of parents. In addition to safety, community leaders such as Narciso Aleman express the need to integrate the cultural heritage of Mexicanos and Latino students into programming. Aleman believes that parents would be much more interested in sending their students to summer programs if an effort were made to recognize their cultural heritage and to foster pride in their background.

Working with the Schools

Discussions with community members and summer program directors reveal frustration in efforts to work with school counselors. The Hispanic Learner Task Force found that parents are not made to feel welcome by many educators. The task force explained that cultural and language barriers inhibit effective communication. This perception is
Many Mexicano and Latino students do not consider themselves students of color.

Community Connections
An interesting issue to consider is the existence of social networks within the Mexicano and Latino community. Research has found that in Mexican American families, social networks are the primary means of disseminating and informing parents of educational options for their children. A study conducted by Concha Delgado-Gaitán, of the University of California-Davis, found that social networks created through church groups, extended family, or community organizations provide a non-threatening environment in which parents feel comfortable asking about the educational system their children attend. This view is echoed in discussions with Mexicano and Latino community leaders. The ability to reach out to families via church groups or community-based organizations is critical in gaining the trust of Mexicano and Latino parents and community leaders. Miguel Cordova, of Carleton College, believes that efforts to reach students and parents require a year-round commitment. Efforts in the community will not be successful if the only time program coordinators are available is when they are recruiting.

Connecting with the community is especially important for Mexicanos and Latinos in greater Minnesota. The cities of Worthington, Willmar, and Moorhead, for example, have a rapidly growing Mexicano and Latino population. Mexican and Latino families new to these cities are the least likely to have community networks to inform them about summer programs. Abner Arauzo, of Moorhead State University, says that little connection has been made between the resources in the Twin Cities metropolitan area and Mexicano and Latino populations in greater Minnesota. By not including students from these non-metropolitan areas, efforts to integrate Mexicano and Latino students into programs exclude the students that have the most to gain from such opportunities.

Cooperation
Connecting with the Mexicano and Latino communities throughout the state requires a tremendous amount of resources from summer programs. Developing partnerships that will maximize resources is one solution. Organizations like the Minnesota Minority Education Partnership can play a crucial role in gathering and disseminating information about program opportunities, but the programs themselves must take the initiative in sharing people and information when recruiting Mexicano and Latino students. One valuable means of reaching the Mexicano and Latino community would be to sponsor community meetings where representatives from various summer programs can present information about what they have to offer. Another effort could be as simple as visiting student homes and making families aware of the opportunities for all their children.

Unfortunately, according to Ramona A. de Rosales, they become overloaded with work. Programs such as Upward Bound realize that counselors are often too busy to satisfy the specific requests of all the programs that approach them, therefore they look to teachers, coaches, and other educators to identify students for their program. Aloida Zaragosa, director of Upward Bound at the University of Minnesota, defends counselors when she states that programs must make an effort to address the concerns of educators. If one program takes an ongoing interest in the student and another involves the student in a two-week program and does not follow up with the student, then most likely the former program will gain greater support from the counselor than the latter. Zaragosa states that competition for programs does exist and that it is the responsibility of the program to create an attractive program for students and educators.

Many counselors have been outstanding advocates for Mexicano and Latino students. Echoed by summer program directors and community members. They feel that counselors are not informed about and do not recruit students for summer programs. Counselors will often recruit the same students over and over for summer programs and are not receptive to requests for a wider range of students. The students identified by counselors are often those that have benefited from other educational opportunities, are seen as gifted, and are fluent in English. According to Evelyn Belton-Kocher there is a group of students that are invisible to counselors. These students are not high achievers or poor performers, they are just getting by and receiving little recognition. These students are rarely targeted for programs and may be the population that is most at risk.
Increasing the participation of Mexican and Latino students in summer programs and the education system generally will require a commitment by programs, community leaders, and families. Programs must understand that participation of Mexicanos and Latinos, or any ethnic group, requires a sensitivity to the unique aspects of their community and a belief that the inclusion of all students will benefit the educational quality and success of the programs.

Recommendations
The roundtable discussions sponsored by the Minnesota Minority Education Partnership resulted in a number of suggestions for how to break down the barriers that are preventing Mexican and Latino youth from participating in summer enrichment programs. The suggestions are for program directors of the various summer enrichment programs and for people working in the schools. They also include the possibility of cooperation among summer programs.

Summer programs would do well to develop recruitment strategies aimed specifically at Mexicanos and Latinos. It is unrealistic to expect this group to respond to recruitment drives for students of color or for programs emphasizing excellence or leadership. In fact, strategies are needed for English speaking and for non-English speaking Mexicanos and Latinos and for first generation Mexicanos and Latinos and second and third generation students. Brochures printed in Spanish as well as English will help. Programs that include students' parents will increase the appeal. Relaxing application requirements—such as test scores, teacher recommendations, and school transcripts—will also help. Programs should try and maintain a presence in Mexican and Latino communities and with their families year around. They should try to establish ties with community leaders who will become long-term contacts and advocates for the program. And they would do well to hire Mexican and Latino people as program coordinators.

Suggestions for cooperation among programs include establishing regional working groups that can coordinate recruitment efforts in specific areas of the state. Working together, the programs may be able to do much more than if they each work separately. In addition the Minnesota Minority Education Partnership could coordinate a statewide recruitment working group that might meet quarterly to discuss recruitment efforts. Representatives from the regional working groups would coalesce at these meetings to share their problems and their successes.

People working in the schools can help the entire effort if they will identify educators, other than counselors, that work closely with Mexican and Latino students and involve them in recruiting students into summer programs. Discussing the summer programs with Mexicanos and Latino parents during parent-teacher conferences will also make a difference.

It should be noted that many of the issues raised in considering the situation of Mexicanos and Latino students, could apply just as easily to any marginalized group of students. It is important to understand that true diversity in our institutions must involve a concerted effort to include all groups in our educational programs. Developing an appreciation for the Mexicanos and Latinos and a sensitivity to their unique characteristics is critical if educators wish to reach their youth. Patricia Santos summed up one of the roundtable sessions by stating the need to expand our web and gain the commitment of people of all backgrounds.

Bruce Vandal is a doctoral candidate in the University of Minnesota's College of Education, where he is studying administration and educational policy. During the academic year 1992-93, he worked, with support from CURA, as a graduate research assistant with the Minnesota Minority Education Partnership. This report represents part of the research he conducted for the partnership. Vandal continues as a research assistant for MMEP this coming academic year. The Minnesota Minority Education Partnership is a nonprofit membership organization that works closely with students; the communities of color; and representatives from education, business, government, and nonprofits to develop programs that help students of color succeed academically.