Hispanic Students: Adjusting Dreams to Reality

by Dario Menanteau-Horta

The Hispanic population is one of the largest minority groups in the state and is growing at a very fast rate. The 1990 Census showed that there are almost 54,000 Hispanics in Minnesota, a large jump over the 32,000 counted here in 1980. The Spanish Speaking Affairs Council says the number is consistently higher than that reflected in the census, and estimates today’s population at 70,000. This number continues to grow as Hispanics migrate from Texas, Mexico, and Central and South America. In addition, there is a significant influx during the summer months, when up to 18,000 agricultural migrant workers move into the state each year.

The Hispanic community in Minnesota is a young population. Their median age is twenty-two years, about a decade younger than the median for non-Hispanics. And according to the 1990 Census, 44 percent of Minnesota Hispanics are eighteen or younger. There are about 16,000 school age children, ages five through eighteen. Hispanics in Minnesota face problems similar to those faced by Hispanics in the rest of the country, including relatively low median family incomes, high unemployment levels, and lower levels of educational achievement than other groups in the state. Between 1985 and 1990, the median family income for Hispanics in Minnesota increased only 6.9 percent, compared to 12.3 percent for the non-Hispanic population. As of 1990, Hispanic unemployment was 10.4 percent, compared to 5.2 percent for non-Hispanics. In 1987, the dropout rate for Hispanic students in grades seven through twelve in Minnesota was 9.3 percent, compared to 3.1 percent for non-Hispanic students. The same year, only a little more than 70 percent of Hispanics graduated from high school, compared to more than 90 percent of non-Hispanics.

Despite the relatively large high school drop out rate, the Hispanic population as a whole tends to value education and to see it as a key to social and economic mobility. While the older generation is underrepresented in high paying occupations, they impress upon their children the importance of education as a way to advance, as a vehicle for obtaining a career with high rewards. This can be heard in the Hispanic community from both parents and from the community’s leaders. For instance, a father who came here from Central America five years ago told this author, “The Hispanic must give serious consideration to the education of their children if they want to participate in the benefits of all Americans.” Similarly, a Mexican-American mother said, “Our older generations did not have the opportunity to become educated, but our family is doing the best to provide a good education to our children.” The large high school drop out rate of Hispanics is especially disturbing in light of this kind of sentiment, and it behooves us to get a clearer understanding of the variety of factors that influence Hispanics’ educational realities.

Unfortunately, very little social science research exists on the Hispanic population in Minnesota, or in the nation, for that matter. The Hispanic leadership has expressed a desire for more information on how the educational system serves Hispanic youth, and particularly how families, given their emphasis on the value of education, influence the aspirations of Hispanic youth. A previous study conducted in the Center for Rural Sociology at the University of Minnesota indicates that there is a positive relationship between the socioeconomic status of families and the educational and occupational hopes and plans of their children. In other words, the structure of opportunity—the presence or the lack of opportunities—influences the choices students make. However, this research was conducted with graduating high school seniors in the state as a whole, and Hispanic youth were not well represented in the study. As a result, this exploratory study was initiated to examine how the family situation of Hispanic students and various elements of Hispanic social structure influence the student’s hopes, dreams, and plans.

A fourteen-page questionnaire was mailed to 300 Hispanic students across the state, including graduating high school seniors, vocational technical students, and students at the University of Minnesota. Although the resulting study sample was small—there were 126 responses and often only about 70 responses on any given question—the study does give some preliminary information about how family situations and social factors may influence...
a group of students who have thus far been successful in their education."

Influence of Opportunities on Expectations

The results of this exploratory study suggest that, as for the population as a whole, the choices of Hispanics too are influenced by the structure of opportunity. Unfortunately, it appears that the structure of opportunity ultimately discourages the occupational expectations of Hispanic youth.

The exploratory study appears to confirm that education is seen as an important tool for advancement by the Hispanic community in general. The students in this study who occupied a moderate to low socioeconomic status were just about as likely to hold high expectations for their future careers as were those who occupied a medium to high socioeconomic status.** I suspect this is a reflection of the value that Hispanic parents place on education regardless of their socioeconomic status. The parents appear to be sending a strong message to their children that if they want to improve their situations, they must be more educated. Interestingly, this seems to be especially marked if the student’s mother was born in a country outside of the United States.

Although there was no major difference by socioeconomic level, the results nevertheless suggest that the structure of opportunity influences the expectations of Hispanic students. In this exploratory sample, the higher the parents’ level of education, the more apt the student was to hold high expectations. Interestingly, the relationship between the mother’s level of education and the student’s expectations was more marked than was the relationship with the father’s level of education.***

There was also a positive relationship between the students’ individual success and their expectations. Students who were successfully holding a steady, part-time job were more apt to hold high occupational expectations than students who held no job or only a temporary job. This, again, I believe, reflects a way in which the structure of opportunity influences expectations and presumably choices. If the student was experiencing success, his or her expectations were apt to be higher.

While we see in this sample that the structure of opportunity was influencing these Hispanic young people to hold high expectations, that structure of opportunity appears ultimately to be working against them. Indeed, this may be the most important and certainly the most discouraging trend suggested by the exploratory study. Not only were the occupational expectations of this group of Hispanic students markedly lower than their ideal jobs (termed aspirations in this study), but the students who were further along in the educational system, those who were in college or vocational technical schools, were significantly less apt to hold high expectations than those who were just graduating from high school.

Sadly, the majority of the students said that they wish to hold jobs which they do not expect to hold. For instance, almost half of the students who answered the fourteen-page questionnaire said that if they faced no constraints, they would choose a professional career. However, only a quarter said that they expect to become professionals. Similarly, almost 25 percent said they would like to hold a managerial job, while only about 14 percent said that they expect to do so.* Among non-Hispanic students, the differential between the ideal job and the expected job is much smaller.

Moreover, significantly more high school students in this sample held high expecta-

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* Each of the 126 students who responded answered different combinations of questions. Hence, we were able to amass about seventy responses to any particular question, but the groups responding to each question were made up of different combinations of students.

** This is based on the responses of sixty-nine students.

*** There was not a clear relationship between the occupational level of parents and the students’ expectations, but this may well be a result of the way in which the data were organized in the analysis. Housekeepers were included in the same occupational category as small business, agri-cultural, and manual laborers. It may be that some of these housekeepers were mothers who were educated for professional, technical, or managerial roles, but were temporarily serving as housekeepers.

*Most of the students who made up the difference in the numbers between the category of ideal job and the category of expected job said they were undecided about the job they expected to hold.
tions for their future occupations than did college or vocational and technical students. Of the twenty-four high school students who answered the pertinent portion of the questionnaire, 62.5 percent held high expectations for their future jobs. A much lower proportion—only 36.9 percent—of the thirty-six college students answering this portion held high expectations. Vocational and technical students were in between. Not quite half of the eleven students who answered this part of the questionnaire held high expectations for their future.

Again, while the sample in this study was very small, it suggests that as students progress through the educational system, they taper down their job expectations. It is quite possible that students witness the glass ceilings which constrain so many people of color. In other words, as their picture of society becomes more realistic, their expectations also become more realistic. This is given credence by 1990 census income figures, which show that Hispanics earn less money than non-Hispanics, even when their level of educational achievement is equal.

The situation is serious and threatening for Minnesota's growing population of Hispanics, with its large proportion of young people. While the older generation of Hispanics has clearly been underrepresented in higher paying occupations, their hope is that their young people can move ahead in this society by achieving an education. If Hispanics have been traditionally underrepresented in the higher socioeconomic strata, many would argue that this is because they have not received the opportunities of higher education.

However, the results of this exploratory study suggest that education may not always be the key to mobility for Hispanics. If confronting the reality of an occupational ceiling is the reason that Hispanic college students are less apt to hold high expectations than Hispanic high school students, then education alone is not enough. While education is essential for Hispanics, as for any group that wants to move ahead, social constraints—discrimination—often seem to keep the key from opening the doors it should open. I believe these results suggest that before Hispanics can move out of poverty in this country, society must open spaces for the educated Hispanic population, so they can assume the higher paying jobs and responsibilities for which they are equipped.

**Sociopsychological Characteristics**

This exploratory study also looked at the sociopsychological characteristics of these Hispanic students. The study found the 126 quite successful students to mostly hold adequate self esteem (80 percent) and to possess an internal locus of control (60 percent) regardless of their gender, socioeconomic status, level of education, or country of origin. Interestingly, this group of students appears to have maintained self esteem and internal locus of control at the higher educational levels even when they were not as apt to hold high expectations.

The study examined the extent of acculturation in the students by measuring their friendship and language preferences. Females showed more equality in their social preferences between Americans and Hispanics. More male students tended to prefer American friends than did modest and low class students. This is not surprising, given some studies which suggest that females tend to be more sociable than males, and that in American society, as in other societies, people are more accepted and liked if they are in a higher socioeconomic level. As would be expected, Hispanics born in the United States were more apt to prefer using English than those born in another country.

Finally, the study found that, as with the non-Hispanic population, males held more traditional family values than did females. Males put more emphasis on loyalty to their parents and relatives and on listening to parental advice. About half of the Hispanic males and a third of the females held traditional family values. Again, this was true regardless of socioeconomic status or level of education. One might expect these numbers to be higher, given the traditional emphasis which Hispanic culture places on families. However, Mexicans did tend to have stronger family values than Hispanics born in the United States, and perhaps this also reflects some acculturation of the Hispanic youth.

**Further Research Suggestions**

Research on the Hispanic population in Minnesota is in its beginning stages, and there are many questions yet to be answered. These include: the relationship of sociopsychological characteristics to both success and expectations in the educational system, and a better understanding of how the structure of opportunity influences the dreams and plans of Hispanic students. Research is urgently needed to determine the extent to which occupational barriers and other social factors influence Hispanics to lower their expectations as well as the extent to which university-level schools discourage Hispanics. Already some research suggests that inhospitable environments in institutions of higher education result in attrition for people of color.

In addition, it would be useful to study how aspirations and expectations change for students between elementary and secondary school. If students hold high expectations when they are in the early parts of the educational system, it is important to ensure that the structure of opportunity does not dash the hopes of these young students as they progress through the system. It is my observation that Hispanic parents are very trusting of the educational system—perhaps too trusting. They seem to believe that if they install a value for education in their children, the schools will do the rest. They do not realize that they must actively monitor this system.
a system which is often foreign to them. Hispanic parents may need to be offered participatory education in the educational system while their children are being taught skills. Clearly there are many areas in which opportunities for Hispanics need to be opened, both in education and in the occupations for which they are being trained. If Hispanic students and their families are coming into the system with high hopes, then we must find ways to help the educational system and the wider society keep its promises to them.

Computer Simulation in Probation and Parole Management

by W. David Kelton, Sarah Allen-Welter, Rebecca D. Goodman, Marcy Podkopacz, Aarti Shanker, and Dinesh Wadhwani

In 1993, Hennepin County (which includes the city of Minneapolis and many of its suburbs) contained 24 percent of Minnesota's population, but 51 percent of the state's reported violent crimes and 35 percent of the state's reported property crimes. Public concern over crime and the manner in which the criminal justice system deals with convicted offenders is widespread. This concern is heightened whenever a convicted offender on probation or parole is arrested for a new offense.

Hennepin County's Department of Community Corrections, through its Division of Adult Corrections, supervises adult offenders placed on probation by the courts as well as offenders paroled from prison. In recent years it has had to supervise increasing numbers of offenders. Typically, 4,000 adult offenders are under direct one-on-one supervision. This number is approximately double what it was in 1988. The number of probation officers and parole agents, however, remains the same, exactly sixty-six. The increased volume along with changes in the philosophy of punishment forced the department's management to reevaluate standards regarding which offenders should be directly supervised and for how long. The current practice of directly supervising all types of offenders similarly for their entire term is no longer workable.

In a joint venture, University experts in computer simulation worked with Hennepin County's Department of Community Corrections to predict how changes in current practice would affect the system of supervision. Would the caseloads for probation officers and parole agents become overburdened if new contact standards were implemented? Would conflicts in contact schedules be created? Either of these outcomes could severely strain a system that simply cannot be allowed to falter, even for a short while. A trial implementation seemed too risky, but through computer simulation the effects of a variety of changes could be explored without jeopardizing the system already in operation.

The Management Dilemma

Past philosophical notions of sentences shaped to each offender's particular circumstances or needs have come into conflict with a new criminological idea, the philosophy of just deserts. Under this philosophy, individual differences in socialization and behavior are largely ignored. Offenders convicted of the same offense who have the same prior criminal record receive similar sentences. Offenders who are deemed most serious (based on their offense and criminal history) are supervised more intensively. Provided no new offenses are committed, an offender's supervision can decline over time.

Because of these philosophic changes and the increasing numbers of offenders, probation and parole management in Hennepin County formulated new contact standards for the supervision of offenders. The proposed standards incorporated two key elements. First, only the most serious offenders would be supervised for a full twenty-four-month period. Sex offenders, for example, are categorized among the most serious offenders. This contrasts sharply with current practice, where all types of offenders are supervised for periods that may exceed twenty-four months.

Second, the intensity of supervision would be more frequent at the beginning of the twenty-four-month period (for example, every week) and would decline over time (for example, to once a month) provided the offender had no new convictions. The contact standards might be tighter for person offenders, such as those with sexual assaults. This also differs greatly from current practice, where officers have nearly complete discretion over how often they meet with offenders on their caseload.

In order to maintain caseload integrity, management decided that officers' caseloads should not exceed seventy-five cases at any point in time. A computer simulation offered a way of telling how these proposed contact standards would affect caseloads and the system's performance. In addition, management was interested in exploring a number of other questions that might be more easily studied through a computer simulation. How many and what type of offenders could be directly supervised by hiring additional officers? What kind of reduction in the number and type of offenders could be handled if the inflow of serious offenders were to accelerate rapidly? How would altering the length of appointments