“On Hispanic Education - Progress and Stagnation: 25 Years Of Hispanic Achievement”

by Patricia Gándara

There is an urgent need to understand and address the gap in Hispanic male achievement.

A 25th anniversary is a good time to take stock of where we have been and what kind of progress we have made in equalizing opportunity. A little more than 25 years ago, I published an article entitled "Passing Through the Eye of the Needle” in the Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences. It dealt with two topics that were rare in the academic discourse at the time: (1) Hispanic women, specifically Chicanas, (2) who were also high achievers.

Around the mid-1970s academics were beginning to discover the tremendous achievement gaps between Hispanics and Whites, but studies almost all dealt with Hispanics as a group. Not much attention was being paid to females in the group. Since women were just starting to find their collective voice in the 1970s and making their case for equality in education and the workplace, this is perhaps not shocking. But, it took a while for the general public and for policymakers to pay attention to the differences that existed not only between men and women, but between White women and those of color. In 1982, this discourse was still a novelty.

At the same time, virtually all of the literature on Hispanics and education dealt with the problems, impediments and barriers to achievement. In a sense this was natural and warranted because it was important to call attention to the gross inequities in educational opportunity and to try to provide both explanations and solutions for the phenomenon. However, the literature rather quickly became a litany of horrors that seemed almost without solution short of a revolution. I thought it might make sense to change the discourse from liabilities to assets and look at what “went right” when some members of a marginalized group were able to buck the trends and succeed. Hence, the study of Chicanas from very low-income, low educational backgrounds (the average mother had a fourth grade education) who had excelled in school and completed a doctoral degree from a very selective university. What accounted for this extraordinary success? And what could we learn from them to help other young Chicanas?

Twenty-five years ago, Hispanics were about 7.5 percent of the total population, and the average education level for Hispanics of Mexican origin (about two-thirds of the Hispanic population) was ninth grade; for Whites it was almost a year beyond 12th grade. The year that “Passing Through the Eye of the Needle” was published, Latinas under 24 years of age had just overtaken Latinos with respect to high school graduation. Latinas were just beginning to complete bachelor’s degrees at a slightly higher rate than Hispanic males as
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