Experts View the Hispanic Presidency in Academia

by Angel B. Pérez

Valuing diversity means understanding that everyone does not experience the world in the same way and that the richness of these different and differing experiences improve the quality of life for all. Valuing diversity means getting over the issues of race and gender, and focusing on the best interests of the institution and the community when selecting a college president.”

George B. Vaughan and Iris Weisman, The Community College Presidency at the Millennium.

The fastest growing underrepresented population in this country is the Hispanic community, accounting for approximately 15 percent of the country's population. Although Hispanics are still inadequately underrepresented in institutions of higher education, there have been many strides over the past 10 years in enrolling these students in college.

Now that more minority students are joining the ranks of colleges and universities, higher education is faced with another challenge: how do institutions attract college and university administrators that reflect the ethnic diversity of American society?

Demography

According to the American Council on Education (ACE), Hispanics represent 3.7 percent of college presidents in the United States. This percentage includes the institutions found on the island of Puerto Rico. The majority of Hispanic presidencies are held at public two-year colleges (47.6 percent) and comprehensive institutions (34.9 percent) combined.

There are 145 or so Hispanic presidents, of whom 82 serve public institutions and 63 serve private colleges. If you subtract the 52 posts held by presidents of institutions on the island of Puerto Rico, you are left with 93 Hispanic presidencies on the mainland.

The common trend found in these statistics is that the higher the degree granted at the institution, the less representation there is from Hispanic leaders.

According to Dr. Rubén Martínez of the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU), this pattern parallels that of Hispanic student enrollments. Hispanics represent about 18 percent of the college-age population but they account for just 95 percent of all students at the nation’s higher education institutions. In addition, they account for just 66 percent of enrollments at four-year colleges.

Although the population is growing, Hispanics continue to be the least educated major racial group, and Hispanic college presidents are also the least represented in higher education. In the past decade the federal government has designated 240 colleges as Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs). In order for institutions to qualify for this label, 25 percent of their population must be of Hispanic descent. According to HACU, 49 percent of the current Hispanic student population attends HSIs. Despite the mission and traditions of these institutions, only one-third are led by Hispanic presidents.

The average age of the president is 56.7 years; and average time in his or her position, approximately 4.8 years. Contrary to college presidency trends, only about half (51.2 percent) of the current Hispanic college presidents held a full-time faculty position before accepting the presidency. In the year 2002, the average Hispanic president managed a mid-sized university of 5,000 to 10,000 students (30 percent) while the second largest trend was presidents who managed large institutions of 10,000 students or more (23.4 percent). Surprisingly, approximately 70 percent of Hispanic presidents do not speak more than one language. They either speak Spanish (largely the presidents on Puerto Rico) or English, but only 16.7 percent speak both languages.

Historical Context

In 1979, Dr. Tomás Rivera became the first Hispanic to serve as the CEO of a university system. He had been promoted from vice president of administration at the University of Texas-San Antonio to VP for academic affairs at the University of Texas-El Paso. In just 10 months, he was recruited by the University of California-Riverside to serve as chancellor. Rivera was chancellor for five years, until his untimely death.

In the history of the University of California, Rivera was the first and only Hispanic to serve as chancellor until 2002, when a Latina was appointed to the post. Many Hispanics in higher education merit Rivera with paving the way for other Hispanic faculty and administrators in the profession.

Historically, Hispanics entered academia in the 1960s. Two factors that have attributed to their underrepresentation in executive-level administrative positions are access to education and exposure to the world of academia. According to Martínez, the study of Hispanics in higher education is a field that has not been explored since there has not been a long history of access, and few have taken the traditional path to the presidency. In an interview, Dr. Ricardo Fernández, president of Lehman College, City University of New York (CUNY), said: “When I obtained my Ph.D. from the University of Milwaukee in 1970, the number of Hispanics that shared my triumph were relatively few. In order to gain the presidential posts, Hispanics needed to climb the academic ladder and build a career that was going to provide exposure to academic leadership. Although trends are changing, we have few Hispanic presidents because few are qualified; once again, this trend is slowly changing.”

In an effort to recruit college administrators that reflect the communities they serve, various organizations have set up training programs, professional development opportunities and mentorship for current and future Hispanic leaders. The Office of Minority Affairs in Higher Education, American Council on Education, provides training programs for underrepresented leaders, and offers a yearly conference for presidents of color. HACU supports presidents at HSIs and is beginning to provide training initiatives such as the Kellogg Foundation Leadership Program, which identifies Hispanic leaders and positions them to serve as future executives in higher education. Individual colleges have also created programs to attract administrative leaders, such as the administrative fellows program at Harvard University.

Dr. Thomas Gonzales, retired
president of Front Range Community College in Colorado, is a founding member of the National Hispanic Community College Council (an affiliate council of the American Association of Community Colleges). This organization actively promotes professional development to help Hispanics attain higher-level positions in the field. His particular program is funded and supported by the Ford Foundation in an effort to train and develop future community college presidents.

Several programs are intent on leveling the playing field, but critics say that they are few and far between, contributing to the issue of access. According to ACE, most presidents reported few leadership activities targeted at developing minority leaders. In the 2002 report The American College President, only 42 percent of college presidents reported that their institutions offered training and development for minority faculty and staff.

Challenges

In addition to lack of qualifications and leadership training, higher education leaders cite several other factors as contributing to the small percentage of Hispanic presidents in higher education. According to Fernández, the small number of Hispanics that enter the profession are pulled in so many different directions that this pressure in itself makes it difficult to focus on just one goal. In a recent interview, Fernández stated, "When I was climbing the academic ladder, I was usually the only Hispanic in my department and one of the few in my community (in Wisconsin). I recall the time when the local school board absolutely insisted that I serve as a representative, when I knew that I had to focus my energies elsewhere. It's an interesting dichotomy: when you are one in a few, you have to be careful not to become a failure of your own success."

Society's perception of Hispanic Americans is a "silent factor" that most institutions do not address when choosing a college president. There are still negative perceptions of Hispanic persons. Dr. Roberto Haro, noted researcher, San Francisco State University conducted studies of presidential searches between 1985 and 1989 that included Hispanic candidates. Studies found that Hispanics were required to hold a doctorate from an institution with a higher academic reputation than that of White candidates. According to one study, Hispanics "are held to a much higher level of preparation and achievement than are either White males or White females. ... This research helps to explain why Hispanics are not found in substantial numbers at the most selective institutions, for there are processes in place that work to maintain and reproduce White privilege."

Leonard Valverde, executive director, Hispanic Border Leadership Institute, and author of Leaders of Color in Higher Education, concurs: "Much of the distorted views held today by White Americans about ethnic and racial minorities is the source of the adversity that people of color face on a daily basis in society. In higher education the mind-set of inferiority is especially acute and intense because of distorted history."

In addition to historical assumptions about Hispanic Americans, many presidential candidates face the challenge of conveying to the selection committee that they can service an entire community, not just the Hispanic community. Both Valverde and Martínez claim that Hispanic leaders are naturally drawn to work on issues of social justice. Often, search committees worry about the decisions that presidents will make, if they will favor certain populations over others on campus, or if they will push a personal or campus-related agenda that is too liberal or radical. Hispanic leaders are pigeonholed into categories, leading them to face the challenge of the perception that they cannot relate to a "majority" community. Martínez labels this concept the "minority lens," defined as a limitation by members of the dominant group, who tend to assume that ethnic minorities cannot get beyond particular interests to provide leadership for Americans or for any major segment of humanity.

Once a Hispanic president reaches office, there are unique and shared challenges to be faced. In his account of his first year at Lehman College, Fernández stated, "The entire community had very high expectations of me. I was the first Latino president of a four-year institution in the state of New York. People wanted me to make changes overnight, and most students and other constituencies do not understand that change does not happen that quickly." For a president such as Fernández, whose student body is predominantly Hispanic, there is a further challenge: convincing Latino students that you are the president for all students, not just Hispanic students. "Latino students had very high demands, but they had to realize that I was the president and had very high demands from all student groups and, in the beginning, I was viewed as a 'sell-out'; it just takes a while to acclimate to a new environment."

Most presidents also face the challenge of understanding and adjusting to the culture of the institution. They need to learn who the influential people are on the campus. And if presidents don't understand tradition and history, they will not be viewed in a positive light by the community. Fernández states: "You just can't arrive on a campus and slash and burn. You need to learn the culture, understand it and keep people that can give you a sense of institutional history."

Some Hispanic presidents who arrive on a campus and don't maintain the status quo are viewed as radicals, and these leaders often don't last a long time in office. Valverde believes that Hispanics are viewed as agents of change and often the challenge of arriving at an institution is that your change is uninvited and can sometimes be viewed as threatening.

Unfortunately, data show that most college presidents, whatever their color or ethnicity, do not remain in office for long periods. This is true of Hispanic college presidents as well. As stated earlier, the average Hispanic president has held the post for 4.8 years. The average for all presidents is 6.6 years. Fernández claims that the nature of institutions of higher education has changed, and the job is not as appealing as it may have been for professionals of the past. Higher expectations accompanied by decreasing budgets and state appropriations make the job difficult.

Fundraising has become a major factor in the job, and this was not the case years ago, particularly for state and federally funded institutions. "It's the nature of the beast," states Fernández, "and if you don't know how to navigate the system, your journey will not end on a pleasant note. Learning to be political is crucial to the success of any college presidency."

Higher education will begin to see more Hispanic presidents, but the few training and leadership programs across the country alone are too small to rely on for a significant increase in the pool of administrative talent. The challenge of the future is to prepare a critical mass of diverse leaders to mold higher education into the next century. Our colleges are in a position of disadvantage if they don't begin to mold, shape, promote and mentor those talented individuals that will decide how this country defines, understands and leads higher education in the very near future.

Our country's educational system is so diverse that higher education leaders claim we haven't exactly learned how to respond to it, but the time for action is now; because the student populations that colleges and universities are servicing is changing; these individuals are here, now.