Hispanics and Health Professions

by Gustavo A. Mellander

Back in the 1980s, there was a lot of hullabaloo about the Decade of the Hispanics. *Time* magazine had a cover story extolling the new era. Other media forces piped up to trumpet that a new day was dawning. Opportunities would flourish, and Hispanics would finally arrive: educationally, politically and financially.

The joyful prognostications were based on sheer population growth. That, of course, is hardly a reason “to arrive.” It can actually be a deterrent. Quality of education for any group early on is far more important.

Well, the decade came and went, and Hispanics had many successes, but they hardly had their “decade.”

Today, midway through the fateful year of 2012, Hispanics are the largest minority group in America’s schools – more than one in five students overall. They face monumental challenges.

What are some of them? Hispanic students are more likely to attend our lowest-performing schools, more likely to populate the largest classes, and more likely to drop out at higher rates.

Fewer than half participate in early childhood education programs. Many muddle along in their elementary years, but only about half graduate on time from high school. Of the few who make it to college, many often find themselves underprepared for its rigors. Many drop out their very first year.

They are caught in a national trend. In just a single generation, America has fallen from first to ninth in college completion rates for all students. It is not just a Hispanic situation; it is an American problem. It has to be addressed and solved because if we allow the trend to continue, it won’t just be one community that falls behind — all will fall behind.

Is college that important? Absolutely. An example: Unemployment rates for Americans who never went to college are almost double what they are for those who attended. When most new jobs being created require some higher education, when other countries are out-educating us today to out-produce those who attended. When most new jobs being created require some higher education, when other countries are out-educating us today to out-produce those who attended. When most new jobs being created require some higher education, when other countries are out-educating us today to out-produce those who attended. When most new jobs being created require some higher education, when other countries are out-educating us today to out-produce those who attended.

Making sure that America offers everybody, regardless of race, a world-class education is more than a moral obligation. It is an economic imperative if we are to succeed in the 21st century and beyond.

Improving educational outcomes for the Hispanic community is critical. As President Obama has stated, every student should “receive a complete and competitive education from cradle to career.”

His administration launched the “Race to the Top” program to encourage states to transform their schools from the bottom up for all children. It is similar to and builds upon initiatives launched by presidents Johnson, Clinton and the two Bushes.

They all succeeded in part and failed in part. Or maybe they really didn’t fail; the problems simply kept shifting, kept growing. Further, some entrenched, fundamental issues can’t be fully resolved in a few years.

Presently, 48 states and D.C. have agreed to raise standards, improve curricula, and turn around struggling schools. Steps are underway to recruit and train more outstanding teachers, including bilingual teachers.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan challenged the states to identify and turn around the nation’s 5,000 worst schools, many of which are the ones that produce the most Hispanic dropouts.

Educating our children — all of them — so they can graduate ready for college, ready for a career, is essential.

Many are saying these improvements are not possible, that the reforms won’t work, that problems in our education system are too entrenched. I know change is hard. Change takes time. Fixing what is broken in our education system will not be easy. We won’t see results overnight. It may take years, even decades, for all these changes to be implemented.

But that’s no reason not to get started. That’s no reason not to strive for these changes. That’s a reason for us, in fact, to start making them right now.

Both political parties should unite and support an identical education agenda.

Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Education for Hispanics

Let’s focus on a single segment that must be revitalized if America is to regain its worldwide competitiveness. We return to education.

It was boldly addressed by President George H. W. Bush and supported by both parties in Congress. Referred to as STEM education, it is a key element for the United States to regain its leadership role. As President Obama said, we must “craft the industries of tomorrow and the jobs they will create, we must continue to invest in educating the scientists, technologists and engineers who will develop these breakthroughs.”

Twenty-first-century jobs require more advanced skills and knowledge than ever before; a high school degree is not enough. Georgetown University predicts that 62 percent of jobs in 2030 will require education beyond high school.

Obama has continued White House support for the so-called “hard sciences.” Professions in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) are critical and must be nurtured. Many wonderful opportunities lie ahead for those who major in those fields. Enriched higher education funding and student aid has been approved by both the Bush and the Obama administrations to support those goals.

The opportunities are there. The 10 highest-paying college majors and...
fastest-growing occupations are STEM-related. Unfortunately, Hispanics significantly trail other groups when it comes to STEM majors and graduates. More must be encouraged to pursue those specialties.

It will not be easy to recapture our worldwide leadership role. Today the United States languishes in the middle of the achievement bundle in mathematics and science education and careers worldwide. Our students finish 21st among the 30 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in science literacy.

An ambitious plan to recruit and train 100,000 new STEM teachers by 2020 has been launched. The goal is to ensure that all students have qualified STEM-trained teachers in the classroom.

Research and development are not frills but essential elements for any turnaround scenario. More than $1 billion for Hispanic-Serving Institutions for STEM-focused initiatives over the next 10 years has been planned. The National Science Foundation will fund innovative efforts to “design, develop, implement and test new teacher-training programs.”

To bring undergraduates from historically underrepresented groups such as Hispanics into STEM fields, there is a plan to double funding to $26 million for overarching, comprehensive science and technology workforce programs.

These programs will be developed in conjunction with a government-wide effort to improve the impact of federal investments in math and science education by ensuring that all programs supporting K-12 and undergraduate education adhere to consistent standards of effectiveness.

All these funds have not been approved and reductions are always possible, but bipartisan leadership is clear. Washington has developed a road map.

I suggest that Hispanic professionals in education and elsewhere support STEM education as a worthy goal, one that will facilitate significant careers for Hispanics.

Health Professions

Quality STEM education beginning in grade school will also serve as a portal for Hispanic youngsters to prepare for health professions. It is easier to come to those disciplines early in life than later on.

Most Hispanics attend local community colleges. The schools are low-cost and invariably student-friendly. They are more flexible in accommodating to student realities. Students find they can work full or part time while studying. They provide the only real opportunity for many Hispanics to receive an excellent education. Some transfer to four-year colleges after they graduate.

There many notice less diversity among the student body and faculty. That is one of the reasons many Hispanics choose to study at Hispanic-Serving Institutions. Those institutions have student bodies that are at least 25 percent Hispanic. Their commitment to Hispanic students is well known. But Hispanics have succeeded in all types of institutions.

It is pleasant to report that since 1990 the percentage of Hispanic students going directly to college from high school has increased by nearly 70 percent, even though financial support is a challenge for most young Hispanics.

The biggest reason why Hispanics don’t go to college is financial. Yet there is more assistance available now than ever before. Public, private and institutional resources exist. A plethora of federal, state and private companies and organizations sponsor supportive programs. Several very prestigious — and expensive — universities identify superior students with excellent study habits and fully fund their college years. It is yet another indication why it is important to help and encourage more Hispanics to bloom early.

Hispanic students interested in nursing should explore Hispanic Nurses Association grants and scholarships, the March of Dimes Scholarship program, the Scholarship for Disadvantaged Students program.

I always encourage Hispanics to aim for the top, in this case to train as medical doctors. Nursing is a wonderful profession; being a medical doctor is as well — however, the pay is better.

The Department of Health and Human Services Bureau of Health Professions provides generous support to students and institutions that provide degree programs targeting minorities seeking health care professions.

The Scholarship Fund Institute, in conjunction with the Hispanic Scholarship Fund, maintains an updated list of grants. It specifically addresses issues related to an undereducated group. It includes grants for students to return to college, for those in mid-college career, and for those students completing two-year degrees as an incentive to continue on to a four-year program.

Corporate support exists as well. Corporations such as Xerox and AT&T recognize the benefits of supporting the advanced education of minority students. Their support of students provides them a resource pool of highly educated candidates.

Hispanic-Serving Colleges and Universities

In 2002, the federal government, under President Bush, disbursed $15 million to Hispanic-Serving Institutions for a variety of start-up programs. Later, Democrats and Republicans in Congress approved another $70 million to support existing grant programs. Hispanic-Serving Institutions are concentrated in California, Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico, New York and New Jersey.

One of them, the National Hispanic University in California, offers the Silicon Valley Scholarship. It is an example of support targeting Hispanic students pursuing a particular career path. In this instance, Hispanics enrolled in engineering or computer science programs with a GPA of at least 2.5 are eligible.

The Jose Marti Challenge Grant is offered by Florida’s Department of Education. It is awarded to financially underprivileged Latino students to pursue a four-year undergraduate degree. Applications are due before high school graduation, and the student must be academically superior.

Bottom Line

According to the U.S. Department of Education, the more obstacles, both financial and social, that an undergraduate-level student faces, the less likely he or she is to ever earn a four-year college degree.

To alleviate the financial obstacle, Hispanic students are eligible for a large number of grants targeted to their specific needs. Specific assistance is available for those in STEM programs, too.

I encourage students and those who want to help them to contact the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute (CHCI): www.chci.org/scholarships.

CHCI is committed. It provides financial assistance to increase graduation rates among Latino students. Scholarships are given to students who have a history of performing public service-oriented activities in their communities and who demonstrate a desire to continue their civic engagement in the future.

There is no GPA or academic major requirement. Students with excellent leadership potential are encouraged to apply.

It’s not easy, but many paths exist for ambitious Hispanic students. Those of us who have been down those paths should advise them of the many opportunities and help them along.

Dr. Mellander was a university dean for 15 years and a college president for 20.