Hispanic Student Development in Higher Education

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Abstract

This article references the unique developmental needs of Hispanic students. Some common dynamics of their ethnic identity are elaborated and presented for analysis. These dynamics are examined in light of relevant developmental strategies that recognize and even leverage them. Additionally, a Hispanic Student Development Plan is presented based on J.S. Phinney’s model of Ethnic Identity Development to facilitate the design of a higher education development plan. This plan can be used to strategically attract, retain, and help Hispanic students succeed.

Keywords: Hispanic, student development, learning optimization

Broad assumptions made about Hispanic student development are always fraught with peril. The diversity of Hispanic students in the United States, combined with the transitory nature of some immigrants across borders and between states, can make understanding their development needs a challenge. Students in these varied populations frequently are first-generation college students who have not been subject to longitudinal studies. This article seeks to provide a guide to educational leaders as they incorporate these students into their institutions and the wider ambient culture. First, it highlights some of the unique developmental needs of Hispanic students and their corresponding sources and dispositions. Considered are ethnic identity markers, familial ties, dominant culture interfacing, and the interplay between cultural dissonance and language. Then, offered as a model to address some of these facets, a Hispanic
Student Development Plan is highlighted that draws heavily on J.S. Phinney’s model of Ethnic Identity Development (Phinney, 1990). Through this model, an attempt is made to reconcile Phinney’s stages of ethnic development with some of the Hispanic developmental needs (Phinney, 1989). Although frequently the needs of these Hispanic students closely mirror those of the general population, an attempt is made to delineate their ethnic uniqueness so it can be better served. Through this strategic address, educational leaders can evince some of the ethnic-specific challenges and opportunities that their students possess. Recognizing these differences has never been more important than in today’s rapidly changing demographic environment.

**Hispanic Developmental Uniqueness**

**Ethnic Identity**

A consideration when examining the developmental needs of Hispanics is bound in their current ethnic identity state. Primarily referenced is the research by Torres (2003) where various factors determine the influences imparted on the individual by the surrounding group and vice versa. Torres’ research identifies how the environment in which a student is reared has a great impact on their ethnic self view and how he or she relates to the dominant culture. The dominant culture, when overwhelmingly strong, can cause the native family’s message of cultural parity (or superiority) to be muted. Per tenets of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), if the student belongs to a subordinated group and cannot assimilate a parity relationship with the dominant group, frequently self-denigration ensues. This can cause the individual to think of themselves as subordinate and only worthy of respect in relation to dominant culture and body trait adoption (Menon & Harter, 2012). Taken to extremes, the student can find it difficult to adopt leadership traits because the reference point is always the dominant culture and its leadership mores and styles. In this environment, the student can feel that what they bring to leadership roles is insufficient and other groups’ management styles must be adopted.

Further complicating identity, Ferdman and Gallego’s (2001) concept of Hispanic orientation recognizes that students can liquidly flow between Hispanic-identified and White-identified personas. This is true not only in the United States, but also within Latin American countries. The problem for students and other individuals is that egocentrically, that is not who they really are. The complexity of who they are spans far beyond the barriers of what is “Hispanic” and what is not. Allocentrically, they may identify greatly with societally chosen in-groups, but ultimately they are unique human beings. This unique humanness is not an attribute students should escape from, nor want to. Developmental plans that ignore this human factor in favor of a holistic Hispanic worldview risk a myopic failure.

**Familial Ties and In-Group Perception**

In Hispanic communities, family influence and generational status can greatly influence the student’s self view. Due to historical and cultural reasons, these communities are frequently bound together closely and can have stronger communal characteristics than other surrounding cultures (Lichter & Johnson, 2009). This dynamic can cause students to feel as if they represent more than just themselves. The hopes and dreams of an entire family can be invested in a
departing family member. A desire to keep close to that member can sometimes thwart a student’s ability to attend college far from home. Because of the disparate treatment of males and females, this can be particularly pronounced in the family’s treatment of daughters. Family influence can impart strong forces on individual students even when geographically separated. When others from the out-group make developmental suggestions, a reflexive rejection can take place before a full understanding is communicated. This desire to stay close to family is grounded in generations of tradition that can both thwart and enable student development.

**Adoption Level of Dominant Culture**

The level of dominant culture adoption is usually tied closely to the amount of time in the United States (Garcia & Tierney, 2011). Hispanics who are second or third generation immigrants are usually less oriented to their native culture and begin adopting, and transforming, their new in-group. Inversely, individuals who are first generation frequently have accents and carry with them more native cultural norms. This disparity can sometimes make dominant culture uncomfortable and impart an overwhelming conforming influence on newer immigrants. Unsurprisingly, this environmental influence can be undesired and infuse a countermarching force in the opposite direction. Even within Hispanic communities, these forces can bind and rent various internal affiliations.

Another dimension, seldom seen by dominant culture, is the internal struggle between the student’s integration of “Indio-ness” versus wider adoption of North American culture. In this context, “Indio-ness” is the degree to which a student adheres to the practices and mores of native populations from their country of origin. With the wider genetic and cultural amalgamation of native people in Latin America, many relevant cultural beliefs can remain strong. Having religious, dietary, and cultural components, they represent varying amounts of influence across different immigrant groups and regions. This dynamic, combined with the other dimensions of dominant culture assimilation can greatly influence the Hispanic student experience.

**Cultural Dissonance and Language**

Hispanic students must appear to be completely comfortable with different ethnic settings, whether dominant or subordinate. Concurrently, they have to juggle this against who they egocentrically feel they are, independent of race or ethnicity. Aggregate the fact that Hispanics can look very “white”, “brown”, and “black”, and more identity confusion ensues. Frequently, no greater dissonance occurs than when a Hispanic speaks Spanish in a mixed social setting. In these instances students frequently report that close non-Spanish speaking friends can experience great dissonance. Quizzical expressions resulting from in-group/out-group confusion can generate great psychological despair.

Likewise, within Hispanic groups, language tends to be a great dividing line between those who are perceived to embrace their ethnic identity and those who have drifted away. Consequently, outsized importance can be assigned to bilingual skills. While other ethnic groups can be unilingual and be perfectly accepted for who they are, Hispanic students do not always experience that freedom. Bilingual abilities can sometimes be required to confer a form of ethnic “wholeness” that facilitates a bicultural reality. Those who have adopted English as their sole
language frequently receive different treatment from bilingual Hispanics and risk being socially ostracized. This double standard stubbornly exists, and unlike European emigrants who have chiefly abandoned their native tongue, Hispanics continue to divide on this artificial demarcation line.

**Hispanic Student Development Plan**

Having recognized some of the issues facing Hispanic students, an elaboration is presented of the key components of a successful Hispanic Student Development Plan (HSDP). Not intended to be exhaustive, it nonetheless presents some of the major components required for success. These components are sourced and architected on J.S. Phinney’s model of Ethnic Identity Development (Phinney, 1990). Although prolific in his writings on the subject, primary focus will be on his relevant research in 1989 and 1990. This analysis, combined with unique Hispanic needs and characteristics, best serves the educational leader who is devising developmental schemas.

A HSDP needs to focus on identifying where on Phinney’s developmental continuum students are and harness the culturally-specific elements to enhance success (Phinney, 1989). Recognizing where the student is on Phinney’s model is crucial to help the student resolve their own psychological feelings about ethnicity and their perceived role in dominant culture. This, of course, recognizes that dominant culture is not always a monolithic “other” that hedonistically governs but increasingly an amalgamation of different cultures melded together. The culturally-specific elements that will be employed are defined as:

- Early Outreach
- Strong Family Ties
- Shared Community Experience
- Commitment to Hard Work
- Bicultural Realities
- Financial Need

These are the elements that will be used to enhance student development and identify markers that speak to the sub-group’s unique needs.

Before the culturally-specific elements are considered, the HSDP will first allow for examination of where individuals are in regards to Phinney’s model (Phinney, 1990). For individuals who are at stage 1 of the model (Unexamined Ethnic Identity), educational opportunities will be made available to allow for examination of intergroup dynamics and the student’s inherent role. No undue pressure will be employed to coerce self examination but instead a natural process will be allowed to develop. For those in stage 2 (Ethnic Identity Search), various organizations will help facilitate the student’s curiosity about their heritage continuum and their potential place within it. Feeling of perceived inadequacy will be combated
with education and awareness of how the dominant culture(s) is not the sole arbiter of social placement or value assignment. Through this understanding, students will discover their inherent value within the subgroup and the general population as a whole (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005). For those students in stage 3 (Ethnic Identity Achievement), primary focus will be placed on how these students can be utilized as mentors for incoming Hispanic students. Since students frequently assign more value to the opinion of peers, this leveraging is crucial to program success. This discipleship also carries within it the keys to long-term dissemination of positive sub-group values and ethos.

The next dimension of the HSDP focuses on culturally-specific elements and their employment to achieve higher student success. Taken individually, they have specific development strategies that complement and enhance one another. They are as follows.

**Early Outreach**

Since many Hispanic communities are placing their first college students in higher education, it is important that the HSDP have an upstream component to reach them early. This can take the form of going into Hispanic communities to host early registration and even enrollment for potentially promising students. It is important that events host potential students as well as their parents in order to respect familial attachments and concomitant emotions. The dual nature of the college decision is empowered when both are present. Additionally it is important, where possible, to invest in bringing promising students and their parents onto campus for weekend events where the reality of a campus environment can be newly experienced. For many, these events are the first time they see themselves as true potential college students. In this context, the welcoming nature of a university campus can greatly enhance recruitment.

**Strong Family Ties**

As previously mentioned, family is an important component of Hispanic life. The students can frequently feel as if they represent their entire families and not just themselves. This can influence the HSDP towards voluntary academic disclosure on the part of the student with parents/guardians to enhance the existing bonds with family. This joint progress report, hosted by the university, is not to berate the student for goals not met but to communicate the progress made thus far and reiterate, if required, the various support systems on campus to help the student achieve. Particularly for female Hispanics, this mechanism can be quite helpful since parents can be very protective of their daughters and find it difficult to “abandon them to strangers.” For male Hispanics, it is likewise beneficial because families fear they will misuse their newfound freedom away from home and get into trouble. This interaction with school, student, and family lowers this anxiety and can set the table for success.

**Shared Community Experience**

Community is very important to most Hispanic populations. The desire to be part of a collective with shared values and backgrounds guides the thoughts and actions of many students in the sub-group. On campus, the shared community experience can take many forms.
Volunteering in the community, Hispanic or otherwise, creates opportunities for students to see the value of their contributions on and off campus. Contained to campus activities, robust Hispanic student organizations can heighten the feeling of togetherness that many find desirable to connect with others in their perceived in-group. Of utmost value, these connections can create bonds that students are hesitant to break through poor performance or recessive behavior.

**Commitment to Hard Work**

In the Hispanic community, frequently, the perception of hard work is analogous to self worth. If someone is healthy and unwilling to work, they are castigated and devalued as an individual. Sometimes this belief pattern can hurt students who are perceived to be going on “vacation” to some far off institution where they’ll sit around and not “do real work.” The HSDP can combat this by exposing the families back home to the products of their student’s efforts which achieve two complementary goals. First the family sees the volume of work the student is creating in papers, tests taken, etc. Perhaps just as importantly, the student realizes that their family is seeing the hard work they are doing and proving themselves worthy of their appreciation for a job well done. Frequently the value of this appreciation far exceeds the actual grade earned.

**Bicultural Realities**

Unlike many immigrant groups, Hispanics frequently have their native countries nearby. Additionally, these countries exert a gravitational cultural force on the United States that makes their foods, music, language, and culture readily accessible. This presents both an opportunity and a quandary. The opportunity is that Hispanic students have ready access to cultural aspects of their life that can provide an ad-hoc immersive experience. The quandary is that to indulge in these opportunities is to enjoy something that other immigrant groups may resent. Being geographically, culturally, and time removed from their native immigrant culture, some of these nativist groups may resent Hispanics as “not being American enough.” This can fuel backlash against non-English language use and perceived transgression of cultural mores that should be followed to earn an “American” designation.

To counter this mindset, the approach should be two-fold. First, Hispanic students must be educated as to the ludicrousness of these thoughts. If an individual partakes of any culture’s food, language, music, or dress, it does not make them “less American.” If anything, it makes them more American in the increasingly polycultural reality of modern national life. The other area of ignorance that needs to be addressed is in other student populations which may harbor ill-placed nativist sentiments. Through cultural awareness events, these students need to be exposed to how similar all students are and how Hispanics partaking in immigrant traditions do not pose a societal threat. When nativists are persuaded to attend these events, they frequently see how others have influenced American culture, and vice versa. This can also lead to a better understanding of the wives, husbands, in-laws, and friends that Hispanics increasingly represent.
Financial Need

In some instances, being excessively proud, many Hispanic families do not easily accept financial help. Not having a historical grounding in higher education, even sourcing areas of help can be difficult. Coming from a background where independence is prized for its ability to exhibit a person’s character, loans and scholarships are frequently unexplored. If someone approaches them about seeking monetary help, some may take this as an accusation that the parent, frequently the father, cannot provide for his family. This belief system has to be dealt with expertly since in many Hispanic communities pride is held above all other individual attributes. Educating families on how many students of differing backgrounds avail themselves of help is a starting point. Also, highlighting the scaffolding effect that first-generation students can achieve by graduating and helping successive siblings communicates the importance of seeking financial help early. Through these efforts, families can be educated as to the financial realities of many students and how they are not alone, but part of a collective that may need financial help to attend college.

Conclusion

These are only some of the relevant characteristics that Hispanic students may have. Presenting an exhaustive list would entail much more detail and background. However, in terms of a preliminary HSDP, the use of Phinney’s model of ethnic identity development in conjunction with the suggested treatment of these identified cultural strategies is a good starting point (Phinney, 1990). Increasingly, the success of Hispanic students in an ever-diverse population is essential to success on the world stage for the United States. By 2020, Hispanics will represent the largest minority group (Day, 1996). Failure to bring out the best in these students will hamstring the economic, political, and cultural future of the United States. This potential societal impairment can be avoided by the use of well-designed policies and the application of relevant education across and within cultural groups.

When considering the use of Phinney’s model, it is important to note that Hispanic diversity is extending in three different dimensions. First, the number of diverse contacts is geometrically increasing within and across the United States. This is obviously having an anti-homogeneous effect on those seeking to preserve traditions and common ways. The second dimension is that the time frame for these contacts is extending longitudinally across time. This time effect is creating new relationships between people that are deepening and extending beyond conventional business/academic contacts. The last diversity dimension is that as Hispanics enter the United States, and United States’ citizens increasingly visit Latin American countries, these groups crosspollinate each other’s native culture. This effect serves to further extend diversity’s reach. That “crosspollination” is ripe for study in regards to student development and the assumptions we make about cultural changes and attitudinal shifts. Only through time will universities learn what effects these may have on Hispanic student development, here and abroad.
References


