Lifting as they climb

Psychology faculty and graduate students in two programs provide role models to boost Latino enrollment.

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When Javier Rosado enrolled at the University of South Florida, he felt an advanced degree in psychology was out of reach. Paying for four years of college seemed like a challenge enough, says Rosado, and though both of his parents had attended college in Rosado's native Puerto Rico, he did not know anyone with a PhD.

But with encouragement from professors who took an active interest in his professional advancement and helped him find scholarships, Rosado began to see graduate school—and a career as a counseling psychologist—as a possibility. "A support network is really important, especially for Latino students," says Rosado. "Many of us come from tight-knit families, and when we go away to college we leave that support."

Unfortunately, many Latino students do not find the academic support system that Rosado did, says Carlos Zalaquett, PhD, an assistant professor in psychological and social foundations at the University of South Florida (USF), who studies the barriers Latinos face in higher education.

"Often [Hispanic student's] parents—especially recent immigrants—do not have a clue about how to manage the United States education system," Zalaquett notes. "Applying for scholarships, knowing what's available—sometimes the most mundane procedural things keep these students from graduating school."

This may be part of the reason fewer than 7 percent of graduate school students and only about 1 percent of psychology practitioners are Latino, while Latinos make up about 14 percent of the U.S. population, says Zalaquett, noting that this fast-growing minority population could nearly double by 2050 (see page 58). The numbers mean that few Latino psychologists will be able to provide mental health care to the country's rapidly increasing Latino population, he says.

Academic psychology also suffers from Hispanic under-representation, says Bertha Holliday, PhD, director of APA's Office of Ethnic Minority Affairs. In fact, just 1.4 percent of full professors are Latino, according to Zalaquett.

"The composition of psychologists in this country should reflect that of the nation so we can adequately tap into the nation's scientific brain power," says Holliday, who runs a program that aims to increase ethnic-minority representation in biomedical psychology (see box).

With this in mind, some psychologists and psychology students have created programs that provide role models, with the aim of increasing Latino representation in graduate psychology. Program developers hope that showcasing exemplary students will encourage Hispanic undergraduates to strive for advanced degrees by illustrating that, in Zalaquett's words: "Si podemos educarnos y estudiar—we can educate ourselves and succeed."

Learning what's possible

One such program, called EnVision Yourself, brings college students to the Teachers College (TC) of Columbia University for a day of conversation with successful Latino graduate students and professors, and provides practical instruction from university staff about applying for admission and financial aid. Program co-founder Roseanne Ilies came up with the idea for EnVision Yourself in 2003 while working on her master's degree in developmental psychology.

"Despite our location in Harlem, Teachers College does not admit a lot of students of color," she says, noting that only 7 percent of TC students identify as Hispanic.
Diversifying biomedical psychology

A PA's Office of Ethnic Minority Affairs, in partnership with the National Institute of General Medical Sciences, runs a program that seeks to increase ethnic minority—including Latino—representation in biomedical psychology research areas in terms of science and drug abuse. The program brings together major research institutions with predominantly ethnic minority two- and four-year colleges to provide students the opportunity to participate in psychological research. As a measure of its success, the program, now in its seventh year, has encouraged 55 ethnic minority students to complete doctoral programs, said Martha Holliday, PhD, director of PA's Office of Ethnic Minority Affairs. For more information, visit www.epa.org/pi/ceusal/programradio.html or see the December Monitor.

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Role model express

Research by USF's Zalazuet estimates likely launch. Role models and mentors often provide the crucial energy that propels Latino students into graduate school. Knowing that someone else has cleared higher education's hurdles and academic hurdles can encourage potential students as well as show them how to do it, he says.

"Studies by [Albert] Bandura, [Erik] Erikson, Margaret Meade all indicate that role models play a special role in the development of a person's identity," says Zalazuet. "They are 'how you find out who you are and what you should be doing,' he says.

Zalazuet adds to that observation by collecting and analyzing the stories of successful Latino college and graduate school students. From his current sample of 100 stories, Zalazuet is finding that almost all of the students attribute their success to the presence of an encouraging person—a role model—in their lives.

Given this finding, Zalazuet aims to increase the number of Hispanic students in higher education by making role models accessible to them. His means? A Web site, known as the National Successful Latino/a Students Project—developed in collaboration with Miguel Gallardo, Psy.D. of the University of California, Irvine, Counseling Center—is located at www.coroos.usf.edu/zalazuetproject.html.

On this Web page, Zalazuet publishes the stories of successful Latino students—stories like that of Javier Rosado, currently in his second year at Florida State University counseling and school psychology doctoral program. Zalazuet hopes that teachers and professors will share the success stories with their students and that perhaps students will tell their friends.

And as the ranks of Latino professors grow, they may encourage even more Latino students to join psychology graduate school programs, Rosado says.

"One of the reasons I decided to go as high as I did, in terms of wanting a PhD, is to serve as an example to other people," Rosado says. "We must lift as we climb."