

Lifting as they climb

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

BY SADIE F. DINGFELDER
Monitor staff

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 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."

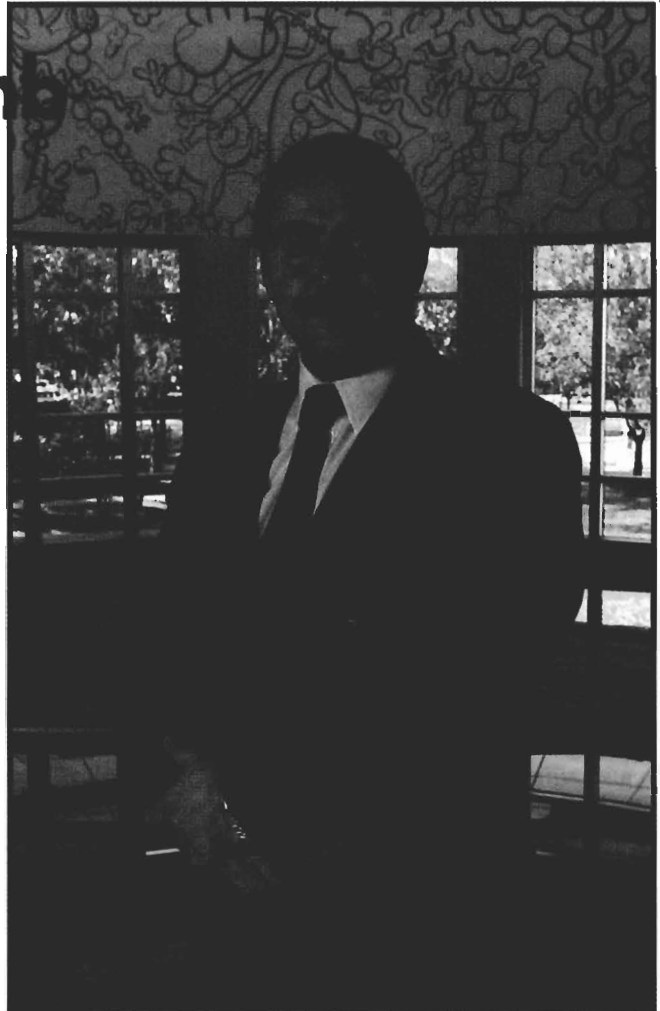
Unfortunately, many Latino students do not find the academic support system that Rosado did, says Carlos Zalaquett, PhD, an assistant professor in psychological and social foundations at the University of South Florida (USF), who studies the barriers Latinos face in higher education.

"Often [Hispanic students'] 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 graduate 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 underrepresentation, 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.)



JIM STEWART/SILVER IMAGE

Dr. Carlos Zalaquett created a Web site showcasing the stories of successful Latino college and graduate school students.

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 triunfar—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 Illes 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.

"I thought: Maybe we need to show Latino students that this can be a place for them."

To begin, Illes and program co-founder Isabel Martinez, a doctoral student in education and sociology, polled their fellow Hispanic graduate students on what would have encouraged them to attend TC. They found that their Latino peers wished they had been given the opportunity to talk with current TC students about their experiences as graduate students. They also said they'd have liked practical guidance from graduate students on such issues as financial aid.

With this in mind, Martinez and Illes settled on a daylong workshop that set aside time for potential graduate students to interact with current ones. And a panel discussion with TC students about how and why they chose to pursue an advanced degree proved to be the day's most popular session, Illes says.

"They had a thousand questions for us: Can I do this and work too? Do you like your experience here? How is graduate school different from undergraduate?" says Illes, who now works with African-American and Latino adolescents.

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Carlos Zalaquett

University of South Florida

Though they received positive comments from the participating students, EnVision organizers do not know how many graduate school applicants April's inaugural workshop garnered. However, a new group of student leaders is planning EnVision Yourself 2005, and they hope to keep in contact with participants, answering their follow-up questions and encouraging them throughout the application process.

By providing supportive role models, Illes hopes that EnVision Yourself can start a snowball effect, increasing Latino enrollment in graduate school each year.

"The more Latinos we have in graduate school—the bigger the community—the more at-home we will feel here," Illes says.

Diversifying biomedical psychology

APA'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 such psychology research areas as stress 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 join doctoral programs, says Bertha Holliday, PhD, director of APA's Office of Ethnic Minority Affairs. For more information, visit www.apa.org/pi/oema/programs/nigms.html or see the December *Monitor*.

—S. DINGFELDER

Role model express

Research by USF's Zalaquett confirms Illes's hunch: 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 financial 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 Zalaquett. "They are how you find out who you are and what you should be doing," he says.

Zalaquett 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, Zalaquett is finding that almost all of the students attribute their success to the presence of an encouraging person—often a professor—in their lives.

Given this finding, Zalaquett aims to increase the number of Hispanic students in higher education by making Latino 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, PsyD, of the University of California, Irvine, Counseling Center—is located at www.coedu.usf.edu/zalaquett/s/m.html.

On this Web page, Zalaquett publishes the stories of successful Latino students—stories like that of Javier Rosado, currently in his second year at Florida State's counseling and school psychology doctoral program. Zalaquett 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 earning a PhD, is to serve as an example to other people," Rosado says. "We must lift as we climb." Ψ