The Challenge of Latino Education: A Personal Story

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Thank you for inviting me to speak here today. This conference addresses so many issues that are important to me both personally and professionally, and I am pleased to be here to address you this morning.

These are changing times for our nation and our state and that has provided a tremendous challenge for our educational system. Not the least of these challenges is how to educate the increasing number of Latino students in our population, most of whom are speakers of English as a Second Language. It would be easy for the schools in Indiana to become overwhelmed just by the sheer numbers. Over the last decade, the population of English as a Second
Language students in Indiana has quadrupled. That is very likely to continue at a brisk pace. Just last month, the Indiana Business Research Center at IU released a study indicating the Latino population in the state will add more than 284,000 in the next twenty years, moving the share of Latinos as a part of Indiana’s population from 4.5 percent to 8 percent. Nationally, the latest Census projections indicate that, driven largely by immigration and higher birth rates among Hispanics, minorities will outnumber white Americans of European descent by the year 2042. That’s eight years earlier than originally predicted.

And as I was driving here this morning I heard a report on NPR about a Pew Charitable Trusts study indicating that 50.5 percent of the population growth in the U.S. since 2000 was fueled by Hispanics, whose population grew by 29 percent compared to 4% for the general population.

I am proud to say the IU School of Education is taking on these issues in a very straightforward manner. In just four years, we have prepared more than 200 Indiana teachers in the Bloomington campus Interdisciplinary Collaborative Program, a program leading to certification as an ESL teacher. A 1.5 million dollar grant is funding another ESL training program in the Indianapolis Public Schools, led by faculty based on our IUPUI campus here in Indianapolis. And Professor
Bradley Levinson, who will be leading a session on cultural competency for working with Latinos later in your conference, headed a study released last year examining how Indiana cities are responding to the influx of Latino immigrants. These are just a few examples of the many ways in which our School of Education faculty is involved in addressing the problems of language instruction and equity for Latino students.

And there are other issues impacting Latino communities about which I’m sure you share my concern. As you may have noticed in your conference program, I co-founded an organization called “BACCHUS,” which today is the largest national collegiate organization focused on preventing alcohol abuse and other high-risk behaviors on campus. You are probably aware that Latino youth are at particular risk for many of the problems afflicting poor and minority populations in the United States. The National Institute on Drug Abuse reports Latino young people are more likely to drink and to get drunk at an earlier age than non-Latino white or African-American youth. According to a recent report by the Urban Justice Center’s Human Rights Project, enduring disparities exists between people of color, including Latinos, and white residents in alcohol and drug-related arrests, health care, employment, homelessness and education
among others. So it is not simply a language barrier; it is a set of knowledge, cultural and social barriers that you must help these students overcome. It will take getting to know their potential, which may mean getting to know their story.

This morning, I want to tell you a little about my personal story. It’s important to you because it could also be the story of many of the students you now see every day.

College seemed incredibly far from my grasp when my family and I arrived in this country as Cuban refugees in the early 1960s. I was one of many in the large Latino student population that had moved into the Miami-Dade County Public Schools System in South Florida. The overwhelmed schools weren’t particularly friendly or supportive of kids who were different. There was a great deal of cultural insensitivity and resentment about the new arrivals in those days. The teachers struggled because they didn’t understand children with cultural and language differences. Efforts to teach English and help Latino students adjust to the school system were done by trial-and-error with students like me, not with any well thought-out, evidenced-based strategy for addressing the special needs of what was even then a rapidly growing minority population.
First the schools put us into immersion programs, the sink or swim type of approach to educational acculturation and language acquisition. When that didn’t work they put us into pull-out, transitional programs where we were supposed to learn English and then seamlessly move into regular classrooms. The last method they tried with us was bi-lingual programs where all the Spanish-speaking students would be in separate, special classes taught mostly in Spanish. That is where I had an experience that transformed my early education.

School administrators envisioned a classroom where Hispanic students would learn subject matter in their native language while at the same time learning about the expectations for student behavior in American classrooms. But they didn’t realize that when you put a group of Latino students together, in addition to the language differences, they bring a combination of learning styles and behaviors that do not conform neatly to American educational norms. The result is a very different climate than what you would typically find in a traditional, middle class American classroom. We were the class the administrators thought of as “the troublemakers.”

So one day, the vice-principal came to set us straight. He was a rather stern-looking, militaristic type of person. He had a crew cut, wore khaki pants,
platted shirt, and in general displayed a style of behavior we weren’t used to. He stood in front of the class and banged his fist on the desk while pointing at the students. Of course, I had no idea what he was saying because I didn’t speak any English. But I could tell by the sound of his voice and the way he acted that he was quite serious. I turned to one of my classmates who spoke better English than I and said – José, que dice ese hombre? Or José, what’s that man saying?

At that point the principal rushed up to me, grabbed me by my arm, pulled me out of my seat and walked me to the front of the class. While still holding my arm, he went on to tell the class “See, this is what I mean, you don’t respect authority. You’re going to have to learn that when an adult is speaking you need to be quiet. You have to respect authority; after all, this is America and you better start behaving like Americans.”

I didn’t understand anything that was happening, but the principal took me down to the office and summarily suspended me from school. He was making an example out of me.

When my parents heard I had been suspended they were very upset. They didn’t know what I had done because they didn’t speak English and couldn’t communicate with school officials. Plus, even if they did, they wouldn’t have
known what questions to ask. They assumed I must have misbehaved terribly to earn a suspension and were deeply disappointed. From their perspective, I was letting them down. After all, they had sacrificed everything that was dear to them - including their home country - so that my younger sister and I could have a chance for a better life. And though they are not educated people – my father was an auto mechanic and may mother, in the Cuban tradition of the day, was a stay-home housewife – they knew education was the key to their childrens’ success.

So in addition to the school suspension I was severely punished at home. I learned a very important lesson that day - I learned to keep my mouth shut! From that day on, I never participated in class activities, never raised my hand to ask a question, never initiated class discussion or in any other way engaged the learning process. I didn’t make trouble. I wasn’t a truant. I just sat in class and quietly let time go by. Pretty soon, the system forgot about me. I became invisible.

Teachers then steered me into vocational education, with the intention being that I could at least learn a skill and get a job after high school. Vocational education in those days was not what it is today—then there was no technology,
cutting-edge preparation for new industries, or any other serious attempt at workforce development. For some reason, the teachers figured I should be a carpenter. I had no interest in carpentry (and my wife reminds me from time to time that I still can’t hammer a nail straight). So I enrolled in a co-op program where I went to school half-day, and then worked part-time at a job in a clothing boutique. I figured I was set. After graduation, I would work there full-time, and live happily ever after.

But then the unthinkable happened—although not so unthinkable these days. An economic recession hit the country right after the school year ended. The store closed. I felt both shock and despair. I wasn’t prepared to do much of anything and I had no idea what I would do with my life.

That summer, a friend of mine then studying at the University of Puerto Rico mentioned a word I literally didn’t understand: college. He explained that college is a place of ideas. I could learn about math and the arts, about science and the great thinkers that have shaped human history. He told me I would come in contact with people from places I’d never heard of and grow to appreciate diverse perspectives on questions of faith, values, race, and other issues inherent in the human condition. I still didn’t fully understand all he was saying, but it
sounded good to me. It certainly sounded more promising than my other options—I had no skill for meaningful employment, the Viet Nam war was raging, and I had nowhere else to turn.

Fortunately, Miami-Dade Community College with its open-door policy offered classes for any student with a high school diploma or a GED. And we were so poor in those days that I immediately qualified for federal financial aid. I had to take remedial education classes to start, but in those classes I started to appreciate the importance of effective oral and written communication, as well as the ability to think critically and solve problems. I was starting to understand college now that I was in college. All of the sudden, I was learning about the great existential philosophies of Soren Kierkegaard and Albert Camus. I was reading the great books by Cervantes and Dostoyevsky. I was debating the meaning of the “I Have a Dream” speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, learning about the theory of relativity and analyzing the mysteries of natural selection. My worldview was being completely transformed through education and I simply could not get enough of it!

With that exposure, I knew I wanted to be a lifelong learner. I didn’t imagine where it would lead. I did know that education had awakened in me a
desire for knowledge, the depth of which I had never known. After Miami Dade, I transferred to the University of Florida in Gainesville, where I earned bachelor’s, master’s, and doctorate degrees. The university invited me to stay on as a member of the faculty. I earned tenure as a full professor, later chaired the department from which I graduated, became associate dean of the College of Education, and then finally dean, before leaving to take on the position I currently hold as University Dean of Education at Indiana University. I don’t say this to brag about my accomplishments. Rather, I want you to understand that the fact I had been tracked into vocational education in high school had nothing to do with my actual academic ability. Once offered a chance at education with dignity and respect, I excelled.

Education has taken me on a tremendous journey from the humblest of beginnings. I mentioned how I was one of a large wave of Latino students arriving in South Florida in the early 60s. As is typical of many Cuban refugee families even today, my family and I arrived in this country with nothing but the clothes we wore and a few personal items. In Florida, out of necessity my mother went to work in the leather factories of Hialeah, while my father borrowed some money to buy a car and some tools so he could earn a living by fixing cars of
friends and acquaintances. But my parents had a vision of a better life for my sister and me, one I couldn’t begin to foresee.

Fortunately, my parents are still around, and last month, they got to see me receive an honor at the place where my love for education blossomed. I was honored to be inducted into the Miami-Dade College Hall of Fame. I joined a remarkable list of people who started there, many with a similar story of starting from scratch after leaving Cuba. Among them are the Havana-born actor Andy Garcia, whose parents also brought him to Miami in the 1960s, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Nilo Cruz, who came in 1970. Each of them undoubtedly saw the possibility of what could be once they became exposed to the power of education.

I certainly have had a chance to succeed because of the opportunities afforded me through education. The right people at the right times have helped me climb from being that “invisible” student in the Miami public schools to being a highly visible leader among schools of education deans in the United States. And maybe the best motivation I received came from my father—who at age 84 still does occasional work on cars that need it. After leaving communist Cuba, he and my mother knew I would need to study and work hard to succeed in our
newfound home. My father would remind me by holding up his hands. If you have ever seen the hands of a mechanic who has worked on engines for more than 40 years, you know they take on a very distinctive look. Forty years of getting burned on hot engines, cut with fan belts, soaked in grease and gasoline, and exposed to a myriad of other harsh conditions made it clear that my father’s hands were the result of a life of hard labor. He would put his hands in front of me and say, “Look Gera, look at my hands. I want you to get an education, because I don’t want your hands to look like mine when you’re my age.”

So I hope that each of you will remember that you have in your hands the ability to transform and enrich a life through the work you are doing right now. The Latino students you advise and mentor may not show the highest academic performance today, but they may have things before them even they couldn’t begin to imagine right now. I certainly couldn’t envision my current role at the age of many of your students. Education is truly the great equalizer in our society—allowing all, Cuban immigrants or native Hoosiers, the chance to excel through hard work and perseverance.

Every life is precious and all students – white or black, Latino or European, rich or poor, immigrant or native – deserve an opportunity to pursue their
dreams. And in a 21st century global economy, those dreams will require higher levels of education than ever before. But in America today, Latino students, who are the fastest growing segment of the population, also are the most educationally underserved. If as a nation we fail to achieve educational equity for Latino students, we will create a structural underclass of people who by their sheer numbers will threaten the very foundations of our democratic way of life.

The terrorists involved in the London bombings were homegrown terrorist. They were not jihadist infiltrated from other countries to attack the British. They were people who for one reason or another had lost faith and hope in the future. The greatest threat to freedom everywhere is hopelessness. That’s why your work is so important. Your efforts to advance educational equity for Indiana’s Latino students will give hope to countless families and their children. But it won’t be easy. For every child who like me gets a second chance to succeed, there are literally hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, who don’t get that second chance. You, all of us collectively, may be the best hope they’ll ever have for a more productive future.

Thank you and congratulations for taking on this immense challenge. I wish you well. God speed.