

Education as Empowerment

Latino Honor Society, BMCC Gala

New York May 1st, 2011

Introduction

Thanks for the invitation to the GALA, especially to:
Irma Fernandez, Counselor and Director of the LHS
Jaime Rodriguez, President of the LHS

Topic: Education as Empowerment

I am really honored to be here tonight. With this Gala we especially celebrate those of you that have completed your degrees and are moving forward to new challenges.

We also celebrate those who have supported you—parents and loved ones, friends and colleagues, professors and counselors.

You make us proud.

You make us proud because you have maintained high academic achievement while helping others in campus and in the community.

You make us proud because you have promoted solidarity among Latinos and a better understanding of our culture and other cultures.

But in addition you make us proud for a very important reason: Just by being in college and by completing your education you have promoted significant social change.

More than any other racial or ethnic group, Puerto Ricans and other Latinos and minorities more generally are underrepresented in higher education, in professional occupational strata, and in the corporate and public sectors.

Only 7 percent of Latinos and 6.3 percent of Puerto Ricans in New York State, 25 years and over, attained a bachelor's degree compared to the overall rate of 15.6 percent.

Only 4.5 percent of Latinos and 3.5 percent of Puerto Ricans earned a graduate or professional degree compared to the overall rate of 11.8 percent.

As the data suggest, there is no more urgent need for Puerto Rican and other Latino youth than completing a college education.

Obtaining a bachelor's degree is closely linked to access to professional careers that offer higher wages, increased job stability, and potential for career advancement.

But education is also about empowerment. It is about both community empowerment and about individual empowerment.

For the African revolutionary Nelson Mandela education is about erasing racial disparities.

For the founder of ASPIRA and many other community organizations Tony Pantojas education is about enabling you to make a difference in your community.

For the great American philosopher and education reformer John Dewey education is about an informed and engaged citizen as the cornerstone of a democratic society.

And, for the visionary educator Paulo Freire education is about the liberation of the oppressed.

So if we believe in a just society and in education as the surest venue towards a more just society, the questions are:

Why is it that we don't have more Puerto Ricans and other Latinos in higher education?

Why is it that we don't have more programs like the LATINO HONOR SOCIETY to support our students?

Part of the problem of under-representation of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos in higher education has to do with how well prepared are the students to undertake a college education; part of it has to do with how well we facilitate the transition to college; and, part of it has to do with how well we support students while they are in college.

I would like to share some thoughts on these various aspects of the problem.

First, according to CUNY Chancellor Mathew Goldstein, "too many students arrive at our colleges lacking the skills necessary for college success. About 70% of graduates from NYC

public schools who enter our community colleges need remediation in at least one area-- reading, writing, or mathematics.”

The problem of readiness for college transcends those who attend community colleges. It is estimated that, across the country, “just 36% of first-time freshmen earn a bachelor's degree within four years of entering college.”

The point is, that depending on how the problem is defined, college readiness and academic remediation seems to be a problem affecting a more general college population than those who are perceived as having disadvantaged backgrounds.

Second, programs that support the transition to college matter.

Introducing a college-going culture and college-level work in high school helps students successfully transition to college:

From 2002 to 2007, college-credit course enrollments in College Now, a CUNY transition program, grew by 51%. The rate of successful completions also increased, from about 78% of enrollments in 2002 to almost 88% in 2007.

There are two reasons why programs that support transitions from secondary to postsecondary schools improve educational outcomes:

A more rigorous curriculum improves competencies for entry-level college work.

They gradually establish peer and institutional support networks

Third, we need to do better in supporting the college experience of all students and especially of Puerto Rican and other Latino students. Improving retention and graduation rates for our students is about creating and supporting more programs like the LATINO HONOR SOCIETY and ASPIRA.

When I was in college we had an ASPIRA chapter. They were instrumental in my aspiration and eventual transition to graduate school. Basically, the ASPIRA model is:

A peer support group

Student defined and centered projects that promote community development and social change

Enhancement of academic skills

Today, ASPIRA serves over 60,000 junior and high-school students at the national level. However, ASPIRA has disappeared from college campuses.

The LATINO HONOR SOCIETY works on many of the same principles that ASPIRA does. But like ASPIRA, the LATINO HONOR SOCIETY is not operative in all CUNY campuses.

I am proud of you because by sustaining your chapter of the LATINO HONOR SOCIETY and by completing your college education you are true reformers and promoters of social change.

You have shown that collective action and shared purpose can make a difference for the college, for your community and for you and your families.

The question now is what are you going to do to continue this path of growth, development and empowerment?

Ask yourself, do I want a better future for me and my family?

I am asking you: are you going to a bachelor's degree program? (Let me here it!) ARE YOU GOING TO A BACHELOR'S DEGREE PROGRAM?

Ask yourself, do I want a better future for my community?

I am asking you: ARE YOU GOING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL? (Let me here it!)

I brought enough business cards for all of you who answer yes to my questions. Centro and I will help you make a difference. Please let me know how we can help.

Thank you so much for making a difference in my community!

Thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to share these thoughts with you!