



P-03 • Winter 2002

of special interest to... **PARENTS**

Hispanics and Education, Jobs, Income: What Parents and Educators Need to Know and Do

Anthony Carnevale's comprehensive research report for the Educational Testing Service (ETS) — Education = Success: Empowering Hispanic Youth and Adults— shows that the differences in education and income between Hispanics and the U.S. population as a whole are a real cause for concern. We need to understand these differences and use this information to connect families and schools in order to improve the education and income levels of Hispanics.

What is the “Hispanic community”?

It's very hard to generalize about “the Hispanic community.” It's hard even to know the right terms to use: many prefer to be called “Latinos.” And there is no one unified community, really. Descendants of the early Spanish rancheros in California may have interests and concerns very different from refugees who have just made their way here from Guatemala, yet they are all classified as Hispanic. Language is another central issue. Some Hispanics speak only Spanish, others speak only English. Many are English/Spanish bilingual. For some immigrants from indigenous groups, Spanish is the second language and English is the third.

Still, despite this spectrum of backgrounds and interests, census data and other research findings

allow us to generalize a little about the education and income levels of those who identify themselves as Hispanic or Latino. This information does not reflect the full diversity or tell the whole story about the Hispanic community, but it does provide a starting point for looking at education and income levels within this group.

Recent achievements

First, the good news. The Hispanic community can be proud of the strong improvements made over the past 25 or 30 years. As the charts on the next page show, the percentage of Hispanic adults with no high school diploma has dropped substantially (32% lower for men and 36% lower for women since 1973) and the percentages with some college experience or with a completed four-year college degree have risen. Hispanic women show some of the greatest gains: in fact, the percentage of Latinas earning a bachelor's degree has tripled since 1973. Hispanic women are consistently more likely than men to graduate from high school, go to college, and complete a bachelor's degree.

The education/income gap

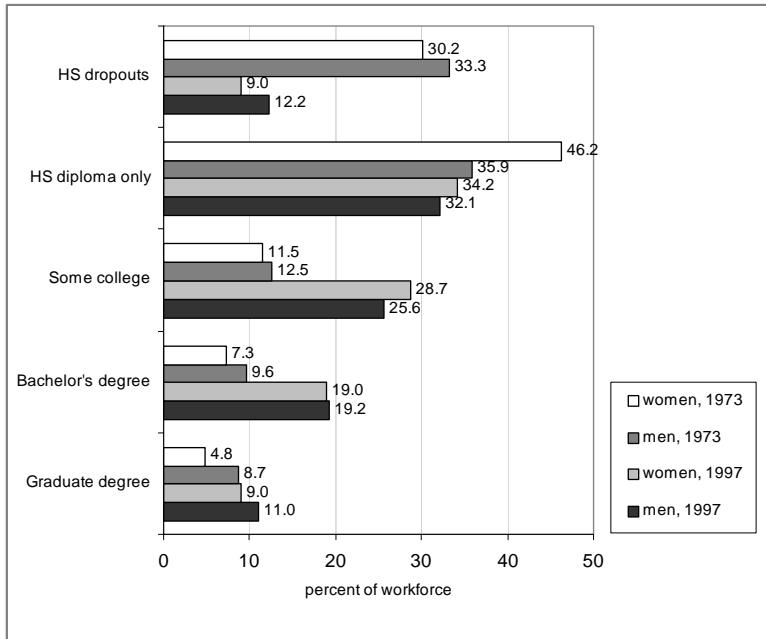
But the bad news is that the starting point for these gains was painfully low. The Hispanic community still trails the country as a whole in high-school graduation rates and in earning bachelor's and advanced degrees, and there is a long way to go.

“The bottom line is that Hispanics still have lower participation rates than the workforce as a whole, and the proportion of Hispanics with college degrees or graduate training in 1997 still has not reached the levels achieved by the general population in 1973.” (p. 26)

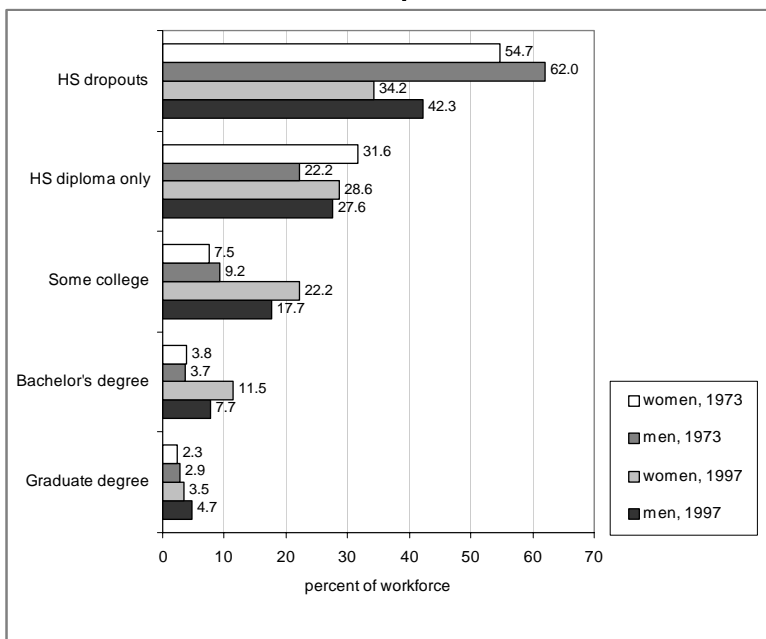
Native- vs. foreign-born

There is an additional gap to consider: there are notable differences between native-born and foreign-born Hispanics. Most Hispanics under age 18 were born in the U.S. and have attended U.S. elementary and secondary schools. While they do not perform as well as non-Hispanic whites, they succeed at a much higher rate than foreign-born Hispanics. Native-born Hispanic adults are much more likely to have completed high school than foreign-born (78% for native-born, 47% for foreign-born). The reasons are as various as the individual stories hidden behind the numbers. The educational opportunities (or lack of them) in their home countries, the age at which they came to the U.S., and the language and economic barriers they face here clearly have a lot to do with the differences in educational level.

Educational Attainment of the U.S. Workforce as a Whole, 1973 and 1997



Educational Attainment of the Hispanic Workforce, 1973 and 1997



Both charts taken from Carnevale, *Education = Success: Empowering Hispanic Youth and Adults*, 1999, p. 26

Why these numbers matter

Why are educational statistics important to Hispanic families and communities, anyway? They are important because in modern American society, education is the key, the surest way to earn a wage that can support a family. The highest level of school a person completes has a strong influence on the kind of jobs that person will get and the income he or she will probably earn. Roughly 40% of adult Hispanics today have less than a high school diploma. Roughly 50% of Hispanics in the workforce are in less-skilled, lower-wage jobs. ***This is no coincidence.***

Education = income. It makes sense. If you don't have the education, you will probably be stuck with employment in lower-skilled jobs. Lower-skilled jobs bring in less income. ***And people with low incomes often have fewer resources and lower expectations for their children,*** so those children are likely to leave school early and take low-skilled, low-wage jobs.

It's a repeating cycle—and it's hard to break, because there are fewer and fewer low-skilled jobs available these days and those few offer little more than the minimum wage. More and more, the high-paying jobs require some college education. In one analysis, 86% of all managerial and professional jobs required at least some college, and 63% required a bachelor's or graduate degree—M.A., M.B.A., Ph.D., etc. (ETS analysis of Current Population Survey, 1998). If Hispanic students do not pursue college-level education and training, their chances of competing for these high-paying jobs are slim. They will remain in the less-skilled, lower-wage occupations and the cycle will go on.

Yolanda's story: What Hispanic parents can do

Hispanic parents nationwide are asking themselves how they can help their children succeed in school and in life. "I never finished high school myself. I never even went to an American high school. I don't have good English to talk to the teachers or the people in the office. I work very hard just to make ends meet. I get the kids to school every day—which is a hard thing all by itself, sometimes! What else do they need? What else can I do?"

Let Yolanda tell you what else Hispanic teenagers need and what else their parents could be doing.

Daughter of immigrants from Mexico, Yolanda was a seventh-grader when I met her in an after-school program for "at risk" students. She was shy at first but got excited when I asked her about her goals in life. She really wanted to become an investigator, she said, because she was good at observing people and she loved solving mysteries. She was clearly bright; she knew who she was and what she wanted. She had been a good student in the past, and yet she was failing her classes now. I was puzzled and asked her "could you do better in your schoolwork if you wanted to?" Her answer stunned me.

All the enthusiasm drained out of her face. "Yes," she said, "I could do better. But I don't want to." She was making a choice *not* to. She knew that she could get homework help and other assistance at school, "but I don't want help just from school. What I want is for my *parents* to help me. They say

they don't understand the words, they say they can't help. But I just want them to *be* there, to sit with me while I do my homework, to be part of it, to know what I like and what I have a hard time with—to come along with me. But they won't."

They weren't sitting with her, listening to her, honoring her efforts, coming along with her into a new life. If Yolanda succeeded in school and career, she would have to leave her parents farther and farther behind. Loving them terribly, she made the painful, lonely decision to fail. And so she did.

Cultural barriers to college

What Yolanda showed us at the middle-school level can also hold true for those Hispanic teenagers who make it all the way through high school and are considering the next step: college.

The transition from high school to college is a huge upheaval and change in life's direction for *any* student. However, students who know what to expect because their families have college experience can usually deal with the "academic, interpersonal, family, and organizational pulls and pushes" pretty well. Students who don't have that background and don't know what to expect will have a much harder time. As Carnevale notes (pp. 90-91),

- For many Hispanic students, attending college is not part of their families' traditions or expectations. For those who are the first in their family to attend college, the experience can result in *breaking*, not continuing, family support.
- Hispanic girls in particular may have to overcome family resistance as well as their own fears about leaving home to go to college.
- All students to go through some separation from home and family as part of the transition from high school to college. For minority students, that separation adds to a radical departure from their accustomed community and culture.
- Negative stereotypes suggest that minority or poor families are destructive rather than supportive of college success. This misperception isolates students from their families even more.
- When students don't succeed in making the transition, or when they drop out before

graduation, the usual assumption is that the student, not the institution, has failed.

Unless families, schools, and communities make conscious and consistent special efforts to overcome these barriers, it can seem as if the deck is stacked against Hispanic students.

Raising expectations, raising achievement

What can be done? As the *Education = Success* report indicates, the cycle **can** be broken—there are many, many role models within the Hispanic community who can prove this. But the change only happens through the determined efforts of families and schools, efforts to raise the expectations of Hispanic students and to provide the support they need to complete high school and go on to college and career successfully.

There are specific steps Hispanic teenagers need to take, and each one builds on the one before. At each step, families, teachers, school administrators, and communities can help Hispanic teenagers on the road to success. Here's what teenagers need to do:

- stay in high school
- take challenging classes (especially the so-called “college prep” classes like math, science, English)
- study hard and learn all the skills they can
- graduate from high school
- take the SAT test (usually during the junior or senior year in high school)
- apply to college
- go to college
- study hard and learn all the skills they can
- graduate from college

Each step is a challenge; each step takes tremendous effort and motivation. That's where family, school, and community support, encouragement, and high expectations are so very important.

National studies show that 78% of “at risk” students who went on to college had parents and teachers who **expected** them to earn that college degree; 82% of the students who went on to college reported that

their parents talked to them about school **frequently** while they were in school.

What does it mean to raise expectations? It means keeping your sights high! Show your children that what they are doing and how they are doing in school is centrally important. Maybe you can't help them do their homework, but you can be there and you can make it clear how much you care that they do well. Tell them and show them that their dreams and achievements matter to you. Reassure them that those dreams and achievements will benefit your family, not break it up. Talk to them. Your interest, your questions, your encouragement, your pride in what they attempt and what they accomplish make all the difference in the world to your children.

Conclusion

My best advice and my deepest hope for Hispanic parents is this: **do everything you can to keep your children in high school all the way through graduation.** Encourage them to stick with it, and take advantage of every opportunity and all the help that the school and the community can offer. And don't be afraid to explain the barriers you are facing and ask, again and again, for what you know your children need. Getting the high school diploma is the key, the essential first step towards a more successful future for Hispanic students and the whole Hispanic community.

Young people tend to become what they expect to be. Students with high expectations perform well; students with low expectations perform poorly.
It's that simple.

—Anthony Carnevale

Resources:

Anthony P. Carnevale, *Education = Success: Empowering Hispanic Youth and Adults*, Princeton: Educational Testing Service/Hispanic Association of Colleges & Universities, 1999

Thomas Mortensen, “College Continuation Rates for Recent High School Graduates, 1959-2000,”

