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FORT WORTH STAR - TELEGRAM

The idea of college must be cultivated

By Richard Gonzales
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In a Texas A&M banquet hall, bright Latino college students listened to a speaker rattle on about a formula for success.

But their quick minds had already discovered it. And, in comments after the speech, they revealed that they are well on their way to realizing success.

A Fort Worth co-ed talked about the years of study ahead to earn her veterinary license and to treat big cats; a Latina from Dallas spoke of taking pre-med courses to become an obstetrician; a young man from San Antonio told of earning his business degree, following examples set by his Aggie uncles.

These students are the flower of Latino communities, examples of A&M recruitment efforts to attract smart Latino students to College Station. They heard the question "Are you going to college?" early in their lives.

Along with Mother Goose rhymes and ABCs, Latino kids in Head Start, kindergarten and first, second and third grades need to be asked about their college plans on the playground, in the classroom and at bedtime.

The college seed is then planted early enough in their young minds for the importance of college to take root in their fertile psyches.

Part of the problem is that too many Latino children aren't prompted to consider college until middle or high school, when the academic preparation and competition for university seats has heated up.

According to a recent *Star-Telegram* article on graduation rates, fewer Latinos graduate from college than do members of other ethnic groups -- only 11 percent, compared with 17 percent of blacks, 30 percent of Anglos and 50 percent of Asians.

Timing, financial support and affirmative action programs are the keys to more Latino college graduates.

Marta Tienda is a Princeton sociologist and the lead researcher in a study, "College Attendance and the Texas Top 10 Percent Law: Permanent Contagion or Transitory Promise?" She found that among a sample of Texas high school seniors, 53 percent of Latino students had always thought about going to college. That's far less than other groups, where 61 percent of African-Americans, 68 percent of Anglos and 71 percent of Asians had always considered college.

This is disturbing in light of the recent release of demographic projections by the Texas State Data Center.

In one scenario, Texas' Anglo population may become the minority between 2003 and 2004 but definitely by 2010. Texas Latinos may become the majority as early as 2026 but no later than 2035. The state's total population is projected to increase from 22.1 million today to 35.8 million in 2040 -- a 62 percent increase.

As the need grows for an educated populace to meet economic, political and educational challenges, the state must either start graduating more non-Anglos from college or begin importing brain power.

That could lead to social unrest among Latinos who, by their sheer numbers, will not tolerate a caste

system.

The current 10 percent solution, allowing for the top 10 percent of each high school's graduates to enter any state college, is a partial solution.

The program was implemented in 1998 in response to the 5th Circuit Court's ruling in Hopwood vs. University of Texas Law School, banning affirmative action in higher education. But the results of the program show that there has been little change in minorities' enrollment in college.

Opponents to the 10 percent plan assert that bright students from highly competitive high schools who don't graduate in the top 10 percent have a difficult time gaining admission to one of the state's flagship universities.

Tienda partially debunked this notion in another study of admissions at the University of Texas and A&M. She found that after the ban on affirmative action, the probability that Anglos and Asians in the second decile would gain admission increased. It decreased for Latinos and African-Americans.

In light of the Supreme Court ruling in 2003 that race may be used in determining college admission, the time is ripe for affirmative action to be reinstated in Texas universities.

The 10 percent plan alone has not proven adequate to recruit a diverse student body and to ensure a steady flow of leaders who resemble the state's population. Affirmative action offsets a history of racist educational practices and the increasing resegregation of the state's public school systems.

In an interview with the *Carnegie Reporter*, Tienda recalls her seventh-grade teacher asking about her post high-school plans. As a child of working-class parents, she said she wanted to become a hairdresser.

The teacher asked: "Don't you want to go to college?"

Notice that it wasn't her parents who asked.

Richard J. Gonzales is an Arlington resident and free-lance writer. Rgonz37034@aol.com