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## Preparing More Hispanic Women for Effective Workplace Learning

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## **Preparing More Hispanic Women for Effective Workplace Learning**

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Scholars and practitioners are interested in college attainment as an area of inquiry because post-secondary graduation is linked to increased life-long learning desires and skills as well as other benefits that will influence the effectiveness of future workplace training, development, and educational opportunities. For example, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) stated that college not only influences employment and earnings but it also impacts moral, psychosocial, and cognitive characteristics in addition to attitudes, values, and quality of life. Cerna, Perez, and Saenz (2009) also argued that the various forms of capital (e.g., social, economic, cultural, and human) that students have when entering college can then be strengthened during their educational experiences. As students enhance their capital, they also improve their productivity, facilitate upward mobility, and increase their likelihood of goal attainment—all critical characteristics of successful employees. As stated in a special report issued by the Lumina Foundation for Education (2009), “college attainment is increasingly important to the U.S. economy as the workforce demands education and training that properly prepare our citizens for success in the global, knowledge economy” (p. 1).

Some populations, however, do not receive the benefits listed above because very few of them complete a college degree. According to the Bureau of Economic and Business Research at the University of Utah, nearly 59 percent of Utah’s Latina students graduate from high school

while only 10 percent of those females over age 25 have received a bachelor's degree or more (Perlich, 2006). This is not only a Utah phenomenon; according to the US Census Bureau, "only 57 percent [have] a high school diploma and 11 percent a bachelor's degree" (Day & Newburger, 2002, p. 6). This dismal attainment rate is due in part because Latina/o students take longer than other ethnic groups to enroll in college and eventually graduate (Cerna, Perez, & Saenz, 2009). For example, the median time from college entrance to the completion of a bachelor's degree is approximately 70 months (Kennen & Lopez, 2005) while approximately 40 percent of Latina/os leave college within six years without earning their degree (Swail, 2004). This low graduation rate equates to fewer well-qualified Latina employees for the workforce, and Mayhew, Wolniak, and Pascarella (2007) found that diversity in the workforce is essential for creating "intentional spaces for positive interactions" (p. 353). These positive interactions are necessary for promoting and facilitating life-long learning.

Creating learning organizations is not new to human resource development (HRD), so it should be no surprise that in order to create such an environment, life-long learning habits in a workforce would be greatly desired. According to Mayhew et al. (2007), the development of life-long learning is often significantly enhanced by exposing students to explicit and purposeful educational practices during their undergraduate coursework, and growth is fostered by creating positive interactions between diverse peers while interactions that were thought to be negative inhibited growth. This concept also integrates well in the workforce but requires an organization to create a learning environment that fosters positive interactions between diverse peers.

As HRD practitioners, the development of Hispanic women in the workforce can begin by fostering a working relationship with institutions of higher education, for example. After all, one of the best ways to ensure the availability of well-trained applicants is to be involved in their

educational process, and one way to promote this type of partnership is through the offering or development of a corporate mentoring program. These programs should foster a sense of community and provide opportunities for multiple small group gatherings which encourage personal interactions while organizing meetings with the larger group in order to provide exposure to diverse perspectives (Luna & Prieto, 2009). Many Latina students need/desire multiple personalized experiences while attending college, and they place a high value on activities or programs that emphasize personal interaction and relationship building (Luna & Prieto, 2009). Various types of support (i.e., financial, emotional, and psychological) and encouragement from key individuals (e.g., family members, mentors) provide Latina/o students with feelings of acceptance, safety, and comfort in new settings (Nora, 2004). Culture affects postsecondary success indirectly through home life and concretely through teacher-student interactions and classroom participation patterns the students prefer (Brown, 2008). As HRD practitioners become more involved in the classroom setting Latina students can begin to develop the types of relationships and experiences that foster life-long learning and help create a connection and loyalty to an organization outside of the educational institution.

Although literature exists to support the argument that Latina/os who graduate from college are more prepared for the workplace (e.g., National Council, 2003; Pappas, 1997a, 1997b; Miranda, 1991), there are still many young women who do not attend or complete post-secondary degrees, and little is known about the backgrounds and experiences of these young women. Filling this gap in the research would be helpful to HRD practitioners and also those who influence young women (e.g., parents, high school counselors and teachers, college and university faculty and staff, employers and mentors) along their paths toward college attendance, graduation, and future employment. Hence, the purpose of this research study was to determine

the life-long learning habits of this population and to examine the life experiences that preceded their choice to attend and graduate from college, and the research question for this study was as follows: What are the experiences of Latina college graduates in developing life-long learning habits that are expected to promote success in the workforce? This study reports the influences that these twelve women felt during their childhood, youth, and young adulthood years. This included things such as family background, family financial status, personal relationships, family and school involvement, childhood learning experiences, peer interaction, English as a second language, citizenship status, religious affiliation, struggles/difficulties, personal aspirations, and employment.

The theoretical framework for this study is a newly created background characteristics model primarily based upon Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) theory of reasoned action, which was derived from previous research on beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behavior. It was created by a team of researchers from the Utah Women and Education Project (Madsen, Gardner, & Thackeray, 2010). As social psychologists, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) argued that an individual's behavior can be predicted by his/her attitude toward that behavior, and that beliefs (behavioral and normative) influence those attitudes. They stated that subjective norms (i.e., the beliefs of others whose opinions are important to them) are critical components of this reasoned action. This theory provided the foundation for the development of the in-depth protocol used to explore the background characteristics of women who chose not to attend college in Utah. The model discussed in this session identifies the college attendance decision as the ultimate behavioral outcome. This model brings attention to how the roles of psychological and sociological norms, beliefs, and aspirations work together to influence the intention or inattention to attend college as well as the ultimate decision about the role college will play in one's life.

This study employed a qualitative research approach to conduct in-depth interview-like surveys with Latina college graduates (ages 22-30) and examined many of the above-mentioned forms of capital. Miles and Huberman (1994) and Denzin and Lincoln (1994) suggest this approach as beneficial in gaining intrinsic understanding and insights into a specific phenomenon as a process. Creswell (1998) suggests that up to ten individuals be used as a sample size in this type of study which consists of long interview protocols, criterion sampling, and thematic analysis. The criteria set for this study encompassed age (between 21 and 30), level of post-secondary attainment (at least a bachelor's degree), residential status (preferably more than five years in Utah), and ethnic heritage (Hispanic-of any race).

This study consisted of twelve in-depth interview-like situations conducted through the Interactive Dialogue System (IDS). Using the IDS program allowed each participant to log into a secure system (a participant code was needed to access the questionnaire) and proceed through a self-paced online structured protocol which consisted of roughly 100 questions, depending on the skip logic. The Interactive Dialogue System developed by J. Patrick Garrett of Meraquest, Incorporated (Version 3), has traditionally been used in political polling and market research. Its use for educational research, therefore, has not been previously documented. The IDS program, however, provides an anonymous platform for structured online interactions. These interactions can be self-paced, which allows the participant to progress at their own speed, or it can be designed to guide the participant through each section and interject follow-up questions as needed. For consistency of participant experience, this study chose to use structured open- and close-ended questions and opted for the self-paced delivery. This particular method was chosen because of its flexibility and its ease of use for both the participant and researchers. The online delivery allowed participants from all over the state to be involved and permitted them to

participate at a time that was most convenient. Also, due to its online delivery, participants could take as little or as long as they wanted on each individual question and transcribing the interview was not needed.

This study has a host of qualitative findings that are too extensive to be included in this abstract. However, a more complete list of findings will be discussed in the conference presentation and the full paper that will be written and available at the 2011 AHRD conference as well. Some of the initial findings include strong parental, spousal, and family support, high religious involvement and the feeling that their religion encourages women to gain higher education, conversations about educational choices with people of influence (i.e., teachers, high school counselors, or religious leaders), and high value on education and learning, personal growth and development, family, and ethical behavior.

Although there are many limitations for this type of research methodology, three areas should be considered more closely. First, the recruiting strategy was based on a set of criteria but the sample was collected through both a snowball effect and by contacting Latina graduates from Utah Valley University, therefore, many of the participants grew up or lived a relatively short distance away from this university. Additionally, it should be noted that the data collected from these individuals are their perceptions of what happened in the past, how they currently see their life, and how they perceive their future. These data are subjective and should be taken as such. Finally, this data represents a small segment of the Utah Mormon population and should not be generalized to the larger population. However, this type of exploratory data can be useful due to the in-depth protocol and rich data provided in a phenomenological study such as this. It may provide insights for other groups who fit within the same criteria previously listed. In addition, the twelve interviews provide insight that will guide future research on this topic.

In sum, through the analysis of the life-long learning experiences of these Latina college graduates, this paper will explore how to better prepared Hispanic women for the workforce. It will discuss the development of competencies, knowledge, and skills required for successful completion of post-secondary education and how that completion can better prepared Latinas for workforce settings. This paper also summaries implications to HRD specifically related to workforce development and diversity. Importantly, by understanding these implications and influences, practitioners can receive insight regarding how to plan and design more effective personal development interventions for Hispanic women. This information can be useful for HRD practitioners working with Hispanic women who are employed within their organization or for those they would like to mentor and recruit to their organization. This study is one of multiple parts in the Utah Women and Education Project (UWEP). A portion of the UWEP findings were listed in a recent working draft of a report entitled Higher Ed Utah 2020 (October 20, 2010), which was created by the Utah System of Higher Education. This report will be used to influence social and educational efforts and policies within the state of Utah.

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