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Balancing School With the Call to Community Service

Hispanic Master’s Students in U.S. Theological Schools

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Abstract: Hispanic seminary students in American theological schools face considerable challenges as they work to pursue their degrees. Many balance service to the ministry and community involvement with the rigors of academia. Cultural barriers leave students pulled between two worlds. Focus groups of Hispanic seminary students and data drawn from the Latino/a Seminary Student Survey were used to develop suggestions in providing more supportive and culturally sensitive curricula to attract and retain Hispanic students.

Resumen: Estudiantes seminaristas hispanos en American theological schools enfrentan retos considerables al trabajar para lograr obtener su grado académico. Muchos equilibran servicio al ministerio y conexión con la comunidad con los rígores de la academia. Barreras culturales dejan a los estudiantes estirados entre dos mundos. Grupos de enfoque con estudiantes seminaristas hispanos e información sacada de un Cuestionario para Estudiantes Latino/as Seminariastas se empleó para desarrollar sugerencias que provean currículo de apoyo y culturalmente sensible para atraer y retener estudiantes hispanos.

Keywords: Latina/o; Hispanic; education; religión; inequality

Hispanic seminary students are drawn to seminary graduate training because of a sense of “calling” to work for their communities and their desire to do community service. Many Hispanic students act as pastors or are involved in social ministries during their time in seminary school. In fact, as Robert Pazmiño (2003) noted,
“Theological study can provide a renewable source to sustain the life of the community and provide perspective in terms of the past, present, and future” (p. 142). As such, “the emergence of Hispanic religious leaders to guide their communities assumes a critical formative role in the life of the wider Hispanic community in the United States” (Pazmiño, 2003, p. 139). Consequently, what is needed requires “supporting the formation of religious leaders who can work in transformative partnerships with other community leaders” and “a task for theological schools to undertake” as part of its educational theological training (Pazmiño, 2003, p. 139).

Yet the demands of finishing degrees can be a barrier for students who maintain high levels of community social involvement (Nettles, 1990). Hispanic students feel challenged when juggling academic demands, community needs, and family responsibilities. Like any graduate school, but perhaps more so given their missions, seminary schools have the unique opportunity to serve both Hispanic seminary students and their respective and varied communities. This article illustrates the particular challenges faced by Hispanic students as they strive to obtain seminary degrees while continuing to be engaged in social ministries and community service. Our primary goal is to assist seminary schools in providing curriculums that are more supportive of current and future Hispanic religious leaders in the United States. A second goal is to offer more general insight in the experiences of Hispanic students in higher education.

“For many Latino college students to be successful, the interplay between family, community, peers, and the institution must create an environment that is conducive to a positive experience” (Mina, Cabrales, Juarez, & Rodriguez-Vasquez, 2004, p. 79). Similar to students of other underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, Latino/a students face a number of experiences that make higher education a time of alienation and vulnerability (Gonzalez et al., 2001; Nettles, 1990). Students of color often experience segregation, discrimination, and cultural disruption in predominantly White institutions (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Gossett, Cuyjet, & Cockriel, 1998; Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002; Nevarez, 2001), and this may help explain why some students disengage from academic work (Cabrera & Nora, 1994; Major & Schmader, 1998) or have difficulty completing their degrees (Gonzalez et al., 2001; Nettles, 1990; Ponterotto, 1990).

Other elements of being a racial or ethnic minority student include a lack of support from faculty, students, and family (Gandara, 1994; McNairy, 1996); being the target of derogatory cultural stereotypes that portray them as less intelligent (Jackson, 1995; Schmader, Major, & Gramzow, 2001; Steele, 1997); and dealing with interpersonal slights to more blatant attacks of racial harassment (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003), daily acts some have called “racial microaggressions” (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Although difficult, many Latino students say they stay in graduate programs “because of a sense of obligation they had to their community and family” (Gonzalez et al., 2001, p. 578). In listening to the voices of these students, “their narratives describe a sense of fragility or vulnerability that is almost unbearable” (Gonzalez et al., 2001).
Entering a new and unfamiliar world, students may experience an “outsider within” status, enduring a great deal of social isolation (Oliver, Rodriquez, & Michelson, 1985); intimidation; and a sense of being pulled between two different worlds, their campus and cultural communities (Gloria & Pope-Davis, 1997; Mina et al., 2004). For students from cultural backgrounds that place high value on the family, family obligations such as housework or child care may become major sources of stress in conjunction with academic and other personal responsibilities (Constantine & Chen, 1997; Lopez, 1995). These difficulties are faced with the challenge of being at educational institutions that are often characterized as hostile toward Latino/a and other students.

In light of these experiences, our research underscores and contextualizes the extant literature on Latino/as’ higher educational experience by providing a demographic portrait of Latino/a students in American theological schools (ATSs). In addition, we highlight the types of community, social, and political work that Hispanic seminary students engage while obtaining seminary degrees. Ultimately, our article provides important information and recommendations that can help seminaries focus on areas to improve their curricula and make them more attractive to potential Hispanic students.

Data and Method

Data Collection of Latino/a Seminary Students

Data included in this study were collected from focus groups we conducted from Fall 2002 through Spring 2003 and survey data that were collected through the Latino/a Seminary Student Survey from Spring 2003 to Summer 2004. Nine focus groups were conducted in seven metropolitan areas and included 61 Latino/a students attending seminaries within the Association of Theological Schools. Students who participated in focus groups were recruited and selected through Hispanic faculty contacts in ATS seminaries, producing a “convenience sample” of students. Student respondents represented different stages of where they were in the MDiv/MA program and reflected the gender and ethnic diversity uncovered in the follow-up Hispanic Auburn Student Survey associated with this research.

To further understand the data collected through the focus groups, we developed the Latino/a Seminary Student Survey, a survey that included items from the 2000 Auburn Student Survey for comparability. For the survey part of the research, we selected 67 seminaries representing about 80% of the Latino/as in ATS seminaries at the time of this study. To ensure the highest response rate possible, we sent letters to the deans and selected coordinators of the institutions. Coordinators gave the surveys to all Latino/a students. Data were collected in two waves—the first from spring to early fall of 2003, and the second during winter to spring of 2004. In all, 523 completed surveys were collected, which represents a 23.4% response rate.
General Demographic Data on Latino/a Seminary Students

As very little research has examined the experiences of Latino/a seminary students, we begin with some demographic information to begin to provide a picture of the Latino/a seminary students represented in our sample. There are twice as many Latino men in our sample than Latina women attending seminary, contrasting the fact that Latina women typically outnumber Latino men in other higher education institutions—particularly 4-year institutions (Perez & Rodriguez, 1996). The demographics of Hispanic students in ATS seminaries at times mirror that of White students and at other times Black students. The average age of Latino/a MA students in seminary is closer to that of White students (36.26 for Latino students versus 36.08 for White students) than to that of African American students, who on average tend to be older (40.61).

Attending seminary typically does not occur right after college as the average Latino/a seminary student received his or her BA in the early 1990s. The later-in-life trend in seminary attendance for Latino/a students may also be explained in part by the fact that Latino/a college students typically tend to be older than both White and Black American students (Fry, 2002). Despite the college-age attendance trend, when it comes to seminary attendance, on average, Black American seminary students tend to be older than both White and Latino/a seminary students. The population of Hispanic students in seminary is almost evenly divided between those in their 20s and those in their 30s, underscoring the significant number of seminary students who do attend seminary soon after college. And although slightly more than half are married, almost an equal number are single. Interestingly, these age cohort differences are linked to differing theological and political views of students and the type of community involvement each age cohort engages. As we discuss in more detail below, there are some age cohort experiences that help explain differences between these groups both politically and socially.

The Challenge of Recent (Im)migration for Hispanic Seminarians

An important pattern to Hispanic students attending U.S. seminaries is their continued ties to their varied cultures. Twenty-three percent say they speak Spanish exclusively at home. Another 25.5% say they speak more Spanish than English, and another 20.2% say they speak equally both Spanish and English at home. Only 12.7% said they only speak English at home. This is important given the responses to a question we posed to students about how well equipped their seminaries were with working with students who speak Spanish and, more important, how well they served those whose social ministries demanded Spanish speakers. A student in a focus group conducted in Chicago noted, “Something that would
help would be to develop [courses] and make them accessible for people that do not speak English.”

However, the challenge for seminaries goes beyond the language issue in the classroom. According to the 2000 U.S. census figures, there are now more than 35 million Hispanic individuals in the United States, about 3 million more than the Census Bureau had previously predicted. Much of the growth is due to new immigration.1 Clearly, we will see the issue of language become more prominent as the number of Spanish-speaking individuals in the United States continues to increase, and we suggest that seminary schools should take account of this phenomenon—both for their students and for those whom they will serve in the future.

The seminary students in our sample come from diverse backgrounds. The largest Hispanic groups in seminary today are of Mexican ancestry. Students identifying as Mexican American are the largest group (20.6%), followed by those who identified as Mexican (16.7%). Latino/a of Puerto Rican ancestry (29.2%, with 20.8% having been born on the island of Puerto Rico) is the next largest group, followed by South American (11.9%), Central American (9.8%), Cuban (2.5%) and Cuban American (3.3%), Dominican (1.9%), and 4% not specifying their Latino/a origin. Compared with White individuals (9.2%) and African American students (19.6%), Latino and Latina students have the highest percentage of persons whose citizenship is classified as “Other.” A little more than 40% (42.7%) of Hispanic seminary students reported having been born outside the United States. Another 21% reported Puerto Rico as their birthplace.

This is important considering that one of the most important dimensions of a community’s social capital is its historical roots in a society. Immigrants’ recent arrival disadvantages Hispanic individuals, because learning how to maneuver for resources within a society takes time. This is particularly true for students and families who may be navigating U.S. educational and financial systems for the first time (Brown, Santiago, & Lopez, 2003). For example, a student in a focus group conducted in California noted, “We do not know how to work with the finance organizations of this country; there is no one to teach us. When I came to the Methodist Church, I had to learn how to organize the Church.” This is why seminaries can be a place where Latino/a students develop not just training for the degrees they seek but training that can provide useful tools for individuals who plan to return to their communities to serve in their ministries.

Thus, seminary recruiters can examine what the curriculum looks like and to what extent it matches the needs of student populations who expect spiritual as well as civic leadership training. Considering that the high number of Latino/a students who are either already ordained, plan to be ordained, or in religious life is not as high as that of African American students, it is important for seminaries to consider the cultural backgrounds and community social demands of the students in preparing them for pastoral work, whether or not students are seeking formal ordination.
The Call to Community Social Service for Hispanic Seminary Students

Hispanic students going into ministry face demands particular to the needs of communities that are on average younger and, in many sections of the country, poorer and less educated than the overall U.S. population. According to a U.S. census report (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002), only 11.1% of Hispanic students held bachelor’s degrees or higher, and of those, only 3% had advanced degrees beyond the bachelor’s. These demographic factors put greater social service needs on faith communities that serve such communities. Our data illustrate the various types of social service work that Hispanic seminary students engage in while they work toward completing their seminary degrees.

Seventy-five percent reported being a leader and participant in youth ministry, with almost two thirds leading or participating in youth organizations. For those involved in youth ministry, there is a roughly equal age distribution among respondents, with 70.0% to 79.6% of those in their 20s, 30s, 40s, and those older than 50 involved in some form of youth ministry. Of the men in this sample, nearly 80% (77.6%) were leaders and participants in youth ministry, whereas nearly 70% (69.8%) of the women were. This slight gender difference disappears when looking at seminary students’ level of involvement with youth organizations in the community outside the church and/or congregational context. Broken down by gender, roughly equal amounts of men (47.3%) and women (46.6%) acted as leaders and participants with their involvement in local community youth organizations. Furthermore, more than one third of seminary students in their 40s acted as leaders and participants in youth organizations outside their churches and congregations, whereas nearly half of those in their 20s, 30s, and those older than 50 did.

These findings suggest two things. First, those in their 40s who stated that they were less involved with youth organizations than their younger and older cohorts may reflect the varied family, work, and social responsibilities unique to this age-group when families are raising their own children. Indeed, involvement picks up again among those older than 50 around the time the children of these age cohorts begin to leave home and when some begin to retire. Second, the younger seminary students who show higher involvement in youth organizations in the community may be indicative of research that shows a civic consciousness nurtured earlier in their church and congregational experiences. Research shows that young people who are involved in religious activities also show greater civic virtue (Trusty & Watts, 1999; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1999). These levels of civic consciousness may also be underscored by those who are more closely integrated with their churches and congregations through regular attendance (Smith, Lundquist Denton, Faris, & Regnerus, 2002).

Results from the Student Survey show that 50% are leaders and participants in some type of social action ministry. Overall, 56.1% reported an active to very active
level of participation in community service involvement, with another 17.6% saying they were somewhat active. Both Hispanic men and women are equally active in social action ministry according to our findings.

This social action ministry involvement is highlighted as key to the work of Hispanic churches given the social needs of communities with high immigrant populations confronting employment issues, elevated high school drop-out rates, housing dilemmas, lack of health care, and other social issues. Students see their involvement in creating and negotiating links between their churches and community as important to their ministerial styles to bring much-needed services to the community. One focus group participant in Boston noted the efforts of a program focused on youth called Roca, Inc., that serves the communities of Chelsea, Lynn, and Revere. She explained,

Roca is a program that reaches out to teenage mothers and gang members. And they provide different after-school programs, meetings, and opportunities for them to see that they can get out of that kind of level of thinking and behaving. We also have several churches involved. And also we have the city manager and the police department that are very interested for us to see if we can do something with them. For the first time, churches and a city manager and other people are willing to sit down and negotiate to find ways how to help out.

As we can see, the community service involvement that extends beyond church and/or congregational social ministries of Latino/a seminary students is quite high. Overall, 70% of Hispanic seminary students report being somewhat to very active as community service volunteers, with 56% reporting an active to very active involvement. There are more men than women who report that they are very active with community service work; however, the percentages are roughly equal when we talk of women and men who report being active or not active. As we have seen elsewhere in the literature on women involved with the church, women are pulled in many different directions with regard to their family and work roles, thus preventing them from full active participation within community service work (Rodriguez, Guido-DiBrito, Torres, & Talbot, 2000). This may help explain why we see the biggest discrepancy in reported levels of activity among women and men with regard to trying to stay somewhat active, with one quarter of women compared with 14.8% of men.

For those in their 20s, more than 40% (41.1%) of those surveyed reported being very active in community service work, similar to the percentage of those in their 30s (36.8%). Fewer people in their 40s and those older than 50 reported being very active, although 44.9% of those in their 40s and 62.2% of those older than 50 reported being somewhat active to active in doing community service work. Again, these differences in involvement may reflect the various commitments outside of doing community service across the life span.
Hispanic seminary students are less likely to be as involved in civic or service clubs or political or social action groups as they are in being community service volunteers. But the level of involvement is still fairly to highly active, particularly when you consider that almost 40% are involved to some degree with political or social action groups. One of the more interesting findings in this study is that those who were foreign-born had the highest levels of very active participation (38.2%) compared to 32.0% of those born in Puerto Rico and 30.5% of those born in the United States.

Among those Latino/a seminary students involved in community service as volunteers, those born in the United States had the highest levels of nonparticipation, whereas those who were foreign-born had the lowest levels of nonparticipation. At one level, the results show a high level of responsiveness to the needs in the community, but the results also suggest that foreign-born Hispanic seminarians are more engaged in responding to the needs of what we know is a highly immigrant community. At another level, the cohort that is here the longest shows signs of not mobilizing as much as they could, given the social needs of the Hispanic community in the United States. Yet, collectively, the data clearly show a high level of social commitment on the part of Hispanic students to their communities.

Expectations for Church Involvement in Social Ministries

Hispanic seminary students also expect their churches to be highly involved in social ministries as we see when students were asked to reflect on the activities that their churches or congregations were involved with in the past 5 years. This yielded a variety of responses with regard to the types of social and community services rendered by the churches. One fifth of the respondents shared that they were involved with churches that focused on helping immigrants in their communities. This may reflect the shared or similar backgrounds between members of the church, congregation, and surrounding communities.

A number of students reported that in the past 5 years, their church or congregation was involved in efforts to reduce violence in the community. Nearly 16% of students were involved with churches that aided in reducing the rate of violence in their communities. Slightly above that, one fifth reported that they were involved with churches that worked to reduce the rate of violence within families in their communities.

Level of Satisfaction With Seminary Among Students

Although Latino/a students are generally satisfied with their professors and their treatment of them, the responses show that seminaries can do better. When students were asked if they would transfer, a higher percentage of Hispanic students said either definitely or probably yes at a higher rate than White students or African
American students (27.4% compared with 13.6% and 19.6%, respectively). Some of the focus group data suggest that part of the answer could lie with the ease or difficulty of maneuvering requirements. Focus group responses as well as the statistical data we collected highlighted the importance of mentors. One student noted,

I really appreciate our faculty here who serve as advisers, but for me, it’s been a hindrance that there was a total lack of concern about assigning advisers. . . . And even when I had expressed an interest in M.A. Theology, I mean, I would ask people. Nobody would give me the information about exactly what the requirements were.

This may be a result of a general lack of concern about mentoring practices more generally or may reflect the reality that racially underrepresented students often face barriers when creating mentoring relationships in higher education settings—particularly for women of color (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; Margolis & Romero, 1998). The statistical data also show the relationship between those Latino/a students who had mentors and likelihood of transferring given the chance, with those with mentors less likely to consider leaving. Similar to other educational settings, these data also suggest that seminaries must address the needs of Latina students who are often alienated as women seeking higher degrees (Barajas & Pierce, 2001; Rodriguez et al., 2000).

Conclusions

Seeking higher educational degrees can be a time of alienation and vulnerability for foreign-born or racially and ethnically underrepresented students. Seminaries must address a lack of adequate Latino/a presence among students and faculty in their recruitment decisions and provide an educational and social climate that is knowledgeable and welcoming of Latino cultures and identities. Doing so requires “thoughtful leadership,” in assuring that “creating a successful environment for Latino students is understood as a learning experience for all instead of a burden to be borne by some” (Brown et al., 2003, n.p.). Seminaries can work to provide access to Latino theological works in library collections as well as have these works well integrated into curricula. Recruitment should aim to reflect the composition of the student body in providing an institution that is supportive of a commitment to making Latino students feel at home at seminary.

Bridging Language Gaps

As our results show, a majority of Hispanic seminarians speak Spanish, maintaining language ties that are important to their senses of family, community, and varied cultures. Students in our study shared that their schools could improve in this
area to realize that Spanish is often a first language for many students and the individuals whom they serve today and the future in their respective communities. Being criticized for spoken or written English only enhances students’ sense of alienation but at the same time denies the reality that many social action ministries demand Spanish speakers. Seminary schools must recognize the growing importance of Spanish language skills as the population of Spanish speakers continues to increase in the United States.

**Immigration Challenges**

Seminaries must train students to navigate U.S. educational, financial, social, and religious institutions in taking account of the fact that many seminary students are unfamiliar with these systems. Training for seminary students must include real-life knowledge of how to understand and work with these organizations, providing useful tools for individuals who plan to return to their communities to serve in their ministries. This is particularly important because Hispanic students may often serve communities with high immigrant populations. As religious and social leaders, their role can include bridging the informational gap among immigrant populations and U.S. social institutions, thus helping immigrants traverse these systems often for the first time.

**Fostering Community Social Action**

Because many Hispanic seminarians are already involved with community and social action work, seminaries can provide more formalized curricula support for this work to count toward their degrees. Working with the community, seminaries can develop working ties with social, civic, and religious youth organizations to provide support both for their students and local communities. This work provides excellent preparation for graduates who will become leaders in their own churches and congregations, many of which will provide help in addressing social concerns of employment, education, health care, and housing.

**Mentor and Advising Relationships**

Mentoring is one of the key factors of success within any graduate program, and seminaries should provide more formalized support of creating and fostering mentoring and advising relationships among faculty and students. This is particularly important considering the levels of success among students who have mentors and the fact that Latino students (and other underrepresented groups of students) are often disadvantaged when it comes to faculty who are often willing to serve as mentors for these students. Providing mentors for all students or creating mentorship programs for students and faculty increases the success and retention of Latino
students, as our results show that students with mentors report having higher levels of satisfaction with their programs.

Looking to the Future

Perhaps most important, seminaries must recognize the fact that the U.S. demographic landscape will continue to undergo vast changes in future decades, with Latino populations that will continue to grow and expand. Effective training of Hispanic seminary students today translates into effective leadership for tomorrow’s generations of immigrant and nonimmigrant communities that will be in need of inspirational and well-trained religious and social leaders. As vast demographic changes are under way in the United States, understanding the role of Hispanic seminary students is an increasingly important area for study, as they will serve not only as future religious leaders but social action leaders in underserved communities across the United States. Many Hispanic seminarians are drawn to seminary work because of its appeal to both spiritual and civic callings. In fact, many Hispanic students actively engage in community work while obtaining seminary degrees, and this has both positive and negative consequences for students juggling both educational and social action pursuits. The current study addresses the needs and experiences of Hispanic seminarians, with the goal of guiding seminary schools to be more supportive of current and future Hispanic religious and social leaders in the United States.

Note

1. In 2000, 39.1% (or 12.8 million) of the Hispanic population in the United States was foreign-born. Of this group, 43% entered the United States in the 1990s, another 29.7% entered the United States in the 1980s, and the remainder (27.3%) entered before 1980 (Therrien & Ramirez, 2000, p. 3).

References


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