

**Studying Latinos in a “Virtual” University:  
Reframing Diversity and  
Academic Culture Change**

*by Robert A. Ibarra, Ph.D.  
University of Wisconsin-Madison*

**Occasional Paper No. 68**  
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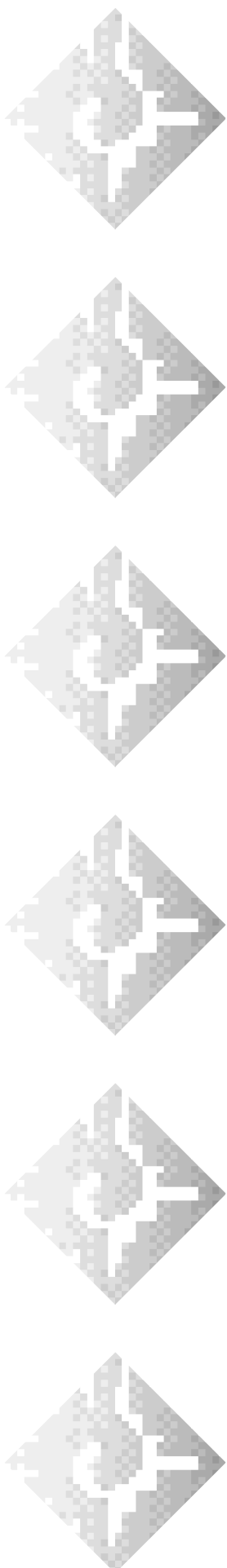


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## **Abstract:**

The advent of Internet and distant learning technology is transforming higher education at a rapid pace. Over the last decade, there has been a phenomenal growth of non-traditional institutions providing degree programs to career-track learners. The *1993-94 Peterson's Guide* listed only 93 “cyberschools.” Peterson's *1997 Distance Learning Guide* included over 760 and the numbers are increasing annually. With population growth rates projected to explode for many Latino populations in this country, what impact do these “virtual” institutions have on higher education and how does this affect ethnic diversity? Capping a 3-year national study of Latinos and Latinas in graduate education and beyond, the author further interviewed Latino students and faculty at Walden University, an accredited, distributed learning graduate school, and found cultural patterns that could radically change higher education. Attracting career-bound practitioner scholars, Walden achieves high minority enrollments (around 37%) and significant diversity in doctoral production, unaided by either minority recruitment or retention programs. Despite the current state of Low Context (limited personal contact) learning technology, Walden generates a High Context (student-oriented, multimedia) learning-centered culture which fosters a very interactive Internet community that is reshaping traditional methods of graduate education. Findings comparing Walden University with traditional resident institutions suggest that differences in organizational cultures and context hold important clues for explaining patterns of attraction and rejection among ethnic groups in academia. These cultural patterns offer new strategies for reframing the current model for enhancing diversity and attracting Latinos to higher education.

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Robert A. Ibarra received his Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and began his academic career in 1976 at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colo. During the mid-1980's he accepted a position as Assistant Dean in the College of Letters and Science and, in 1990, became an Assistant Dean in the UW-Madison Graduate School. In 1994, Dr. Ibarra was selected as a Dean in Residence at the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) in Washington, D.C., where he first became involved with distant education. He returned from Washington to the Provost's Office and has been an Assistant Vice Chancellor at UW-Madison since 1997.

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# Studying Latinos in a “Virtual” University: Reframing Diversity and Academic Culture Change

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# Studying Latinos in a “Virtual” University: Reframing Diversity and Academic Culture Change

Management guru, Peter Drucker, stated recently that higher education is in “deep crisis” and that profound changes are underway (Lenzner and Johnson, 1997). He sees at least two forces at work: uncontrolled educational costs and distance education. However, Drucker ignores the impact of demographic change in this country, a force that could play a significant role in the future of higher education. If distance learning is evolving into an educational fixture will it become a boon or another barrier for the underrepresented seeking advanced degrees.

Research among Latinos in graduate education and beyond suggests that changes in technology and the rapid growth of major ethnic populations could be important ingredients in a recipe for transforming (rather than undermining) academic institutions (Ibarra, 1996; Ibarra, in press). Preliminary research analysis indicates that graduate education via distant learning in a “virtual institution” contains inherent attractions that may be more beneficial than detrimental for long-term educational success. Interviews of Latino students attending a distributed learning institution suggest that much of the academic conflict for most ethnic minorities originates within the patterns of cultural context and cognition that differentiate many ethnic cultures from academic culture. These differences reveal important clues for building new models for diversity. This paper will describe a model of cultural context that could reframe current thinking about cultural diversity in higher education.

## The Latino Research Project

The preliminary study of Latinos in 1994-95 examined a number of fundamental questions. For example, what are the conditions surrounding Latina and Latino graduate students on campus? What are the origins of those conditions and are there clues to help explain them? What can be gleaned by studying Latinos of different national origins in the context of our traditional academic institutions? What demographic changes will affect the future of higher education (Ibarra, 1996)?

More intriguing are the questions about “virtual universities.” If they signal unprecedented change, what role will they play in higher education? What

form will these new institutions take and how will they function? What effect will they have on diversity in higher education? Ultimately, how will these new infrastructures foster change in traditional institutions? To examine these issues, the author completed two personal interview projects with support from the Ford Foundation and the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) in Washington, D.C. The initial project, conducted in 1994-95, interviewed seventy-seven individuals selected from populations of Latino faculty, administrators, graduate students and non-scholars in careers outside of the academic mainstream. A separate study, conducted in 1996-97, interviewed ten Latino students and faculty at Walden University, a leading distance-learning graduate institution. Participants were selected to reflect a cross-section of ethnicity (Mexican-American, Puerto Rican, Cuban-American, “Other Latinos”), national origin, gender, generation, region, type of graduate institution, and discipline (Ibarra, 1996).

Preliminary findings indicated that Latinos were not entering the academe in significant numbers. Many problems revolved around a conflict of cultures. For Latinos in traditional campus-based institutions, the transition toward completing graduate degrees began with the recognition that a cultural gap exists between their specific ethnic/cultural values and the dominant values of academic subcultures: departmental, disciplinary, institutional, and so on. The perception of academic organizational culture clearly emerged as a concept involving shared values that were not necessarily predicated on homogeneity (Hamada, 1994; Martin, 1992; Tierney, 1997; Tierney and Bensimon, 1996).

Most participants found that the graduate school transition was intensified by the turbulence of acculturation into academe. These stressful transformations seemed to activate overt or covert inclinations toward graduate studies usually involving their own ethnicity. The study also revealed that Latinos were interested in research and teaching about race and ethnicity increased for participants while in graduate school. Thus for some, ethnic research bridged a cultural gap by providing a means to maintain their specific Latino ethnicity while simultaneously adopting the mantle of academe (Ibarra, 1996).

## Cultural Context

The interview analysis brought to mind cultural models developed by anthropologist Edward T. Hall, a pioneer in the field of intercultural communication (Hall, 1959, 1966, 1974, 1977, 1984, and 1993). Hall's ideas describing culture, context, and cognition matched closely with the comments and patterns of behavior expressed by Latino interviewees. Hall identified populations both here and abroad with similar patterns of cultural context and clustered them on a continuum from "High" to "Low," signifying the importance or intensity of these patterns within certain ethnic and gender groups. His central argument was that certain cultures contain fundamental values which are in contradiction with each other in the context of such activities as human interaction, association, temporality or time, territoriality, and learning styles to name a few. This model has not been fully applied to ethnic minorities in higher education, but seems to account for much of the conflict and confusion arising from Latino respondents in the research project. Even second-generation Latinos, seemingly acculturated within our society, exhibited patterns of high-context conflict during their interviews.

Hall's model also explained a great deal about the fundamental conflict between Latino ethnicity and academic cultures. "High-context" cultures, identified as predominantly ethnic minorities and females in the U.S., tend to focus more on streams of information that surround an event, situation, or interaction in order to determine the meaning from the context in which it occurs. Communication is in the context, while very little is in the transmitted message. "Low-context" cultures, predominantly northern European ethnic groups and majority males, tend to filter out conditions surrounding an event, situation, or interaction to focus as much as possible on words and objective facts. Communication is the reverse of that in high-context cultures and has been described by Hall as "computer-like" (Hall and Hall 1990). If information is not explicitly stated, the message is distorted for people in low-context cultures. Table 1 synthesizes selected cultural characteristics that highlight almost 30 years of Hall's research on patterns of cultural context. Issues involving cultural context focus on the hypothesis that the fundamental conflict lies between certain high-context ethnic and gender groups struggling for success in higher education and the low-context cultures and associated value systems of academia itself. Academic cultures,

especially those associated with graduate education, are indeed a constellation of subcultures with origins in low-context populations.

For instance, doctoral education in the U.S. can trace its roots directly to a Germanic origin. Academic cultures have evolved within the infrastructures of institutions developed for high-context knowledge delivered in low-context format. That is, new knowledge is explored through every available context and process of experimentation, but the communication and educational systems delivering it are shaped and limited by the learning modes created by and for low-context cultural needs. The consequences have direct and often negative effects on many people from high-context cultures.

To explore the hypothesis, a group of Latinos from an alternative Internet-based institution were interviewed to determine if this alternative academic organization and related infrastructures was significantly different from those of traditional campus-based institutions. If so, one could presume significant differences exist between the academic cultures found within these two types of institutions. Only within the last decade have such legitimate alternative graduate schools, sometimes called "Virtual Universities," emerged for such a comparison.

## The Walden Experience

Walden University, a leader in distance education, dispersed residency, and graduate education, was founded in 1970. Today it has academic headquarters in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and an administrative and financial center in Bonita Springs, Florida. It is a North Central Association (NCA) accredited graduate school offering doctoral degrees and two Master's degrees among five professional disciplines (Applied Management and Decision Sciences, Education, Professional Psychology, Human Services, and Health Services). Since 1992, Walden has new academic leaders who are seasoned in traditional graduate institutions and guided by a mission to create a national leader in distance education at the graduate level.

As a result, Walden has begun to change and increase its faculty from around 80 or 90 to almost 170 in a little over five years. Total enrollment increased from approximately 880 in 1995 to its current approximate 1,200 students, mostly non-traditional, mid-career adult professionals from all 50

**Table 1. Selected Characteristics of High and Low Cultural Context  
(Edward T. Hall – 1959-1993)**

| LOW CONTEXT (LC)   | HIGH CONTEXT (HC)   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>1. INTERACTION</b></p> <p><b>Low Use of Non-verbal Signals</b> - Messages are carried more by words than by non-verbal cues (NVC's).</p> <p><b>Communication is Direct</b> - LC speakers tend to be blunt. Things are spelled out exactly. Being specific and getting to the point is valued.</p> <p><b>Messages are Explicit</b> - Verbal message is explicit, context is less important (i.e., non-verbal).</p>  | <p><b>1. INTERACTION</b></p> <p><b>High Use of Non-verbal Signals</b> - Voice, tone, facial expression, gesture, eye expression all carry significant parts of a conversation.</p> <p><b>Communication is Indirect</b> - HC speakers expect others to know their concerns without being specific. They tend to talk around particular points and to embellish them.</p> <p><b>Messages are Implicit</b> - Verbal message is more implicit, context is more important (i.e., situation, people).</p> |
| <p><b>2. ASSOCIATION</b></p> <p><b>Personal Commitment to People Low</b> - Relationships start up and end quickly. Accustomed to short-term relationships.</p> <p><b>Success is being Recognized</b> - Individuals seek publicity and strive to stand out among their peers to "get ahead" in society.</p>   | <p><b>2. ASSOCIATION</b></p> <p><b>Personal Commitment to People is High</b> - Relationships depend on trust, build slowly and become stable relationships.</p> <p><b>Success is being Unobtrusive</b> - Individuals seek less attention for recognition of accomplishments.</p>  |
| <p><b>3. TEMPORALITY (Time)</b></p> <p><b>Time Monochronic (M-Time)</b> - Emphasis on schedules, compartmentalization and promptness. LC people do one thing at a time. Time may equate with money and status.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Things are scheduled to be done in a particular time; one thing should be done at a time. Major goal is the activity is done efficiently. Adhere religiously to plans.</li> </ul>                          | <p><b>3. TEMPORALITY (Time)</b></p> <p><b>Time Polychronic (P-Time)</b> - Emphasis on people and completion of transactions. HC people do things simultaneously (multiple-tasks). Time doesn't equate with money/status.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Everything has its own time; time is not easily scheduled. Needs of people may interfere with being on time. Major goal is activity gets done. Change plans often.</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>4. GENDER and LC CULTURE</b></p> <p><b>M-Time Cultures are Formal = Male</b> - Formal culture is technical, highly scheduled, task-oriented, concentrated and imposing. The official world of business, government, entertainment and sports is shaped by males.</p> <p><b>Formal Culture is Team-Oriented</b> - Teams of individuals with specific skills work together on projects. Can be linked but sequential and compartmentalized (handed to others).</p> | <p><b>4. GENDER and HC CULTURE</b></p> <p><b>P-Time Cultures are Informal = Female</b> - Informal culture evolved over time from shared personal experiences tying individual people to the group and its identity. It exists in all cultures.</p> <p><b>Informal Culture is Group-Oriented</b> - Individuals with general or specific skills work on projects in a shared group process. Work can be more interactive and done together.</p>   |
| <p><b>5. TERRITORIALITY (Space)</b></p> <p><b>Space is More Territorial</b> - LC people need more social distance for interaction; personal space is compartmentalized, individualized and privately owned.</p>  | <p><b>5. TERRITORIALITY (Space)</b></p> <p><b>Space is More Communal</b> - HC people are comfortable interacting in close social distances. People are spatially involved with each other.</p>  |

**Table 1. Selected Characteristics of High and Low Cultural Context  
(Edward T. Hall – 1959-1993) Continued**

**6. LEARNING**

**Knowledge is a Rational Model** – Facts are derived by scientific analysis. Reality is elemental, fragmented, compartmentalized, easier to analyze. Few sources of info used.

**Learn by Directions** – Things are spelled out explicitly even in an apprenticeship model.

**Analytical Thinkers** – Prefer an inductive reasoning process from the specific to the general. Focused on thinking about the details. Not as easy to translate into non-verbal symbols or to externalize and apply to others as comprehensive thinking.

**Individually-Oriented Learning** – LC people prefer to approach tasks and learning individually. They tend to work and learn apart from others. Team work means individuals are assigned specific tasks to accomplish.

**Learning Takes Place Outside of People** – The creative process is highly visible with cultural extensions (books, computers, paper). The process is sequential, faster and more visible for corrections, but not as productive.

**Speed Valued** – Efficiency and speed are valued.

**7. ACADEMIC**

**"Hard Sciences"** – LC favors integrating a higher proportion of significant events than those working with living system. Deal with more easily measured variables, models are more deterministic and handle large number of variables; abstractions are closer to real events and context is less important.

**Intelligence Includes Scientific Thinking** – Values examining ideas rather than broad comprehension of real-world applications. Linear thinking is ultra specific and inhibits a broad understanding or multilayered events.

**Elaborated Communication Codes** – Highly articulated, specific, accurate distinctions (Law, Classroom, Testing).

**Academic/Teaching Style is Technical** – LC style is individualized, less interactive, and teacher-oriented. Research includes people or communities, but prefers theory and philosophical foci. Writing has fewer pronouns.

**Science Uses Linnean-Style Taxonomies** – Favors linear analytical paradigms. Research is generated by clear direction for the future with grant proposals based on strongly projected outcomes.

*(Modified from Berry, in press, Appendix to Chapter 3)*

**6. LEARNING**

**Knowledge is a Gestalt Model** – Facts are embedded in situations or experiences, and integrated in structures not easily separated for analysis. Things are interconnected and global. Multiple sources of information are used.

**Learn by Modeling** – Learn by modeling, practicing, demonstrating, and apprenticeship.

**Comprehensive Thinkers** – Prefer deductive reasoning from general to specific. Focused on expanded thinking ("big picture" ideas or complex forms). Few problems in translating a message symbolically or in externalizing the thinking process and applying it to others.

**Group-Oriented Learning** – HC people prefer to work in groups for shared learning and problem solving. Some groups prefer constant talking (interacting) in close proximity when working or learning.

**Learning Takes Place Within People** – The creative process is comprehensive and can happen "all at once." It can be very productive but outwardly appears slow, less visible, and not available for others to correct.

**Accuracy Valued** – How well something is learned is more important than how soon.

**7. ACADEMIC**

**"Soft Sciences"** – HC favors social science, and humanities disciplines more directly involved with people. Models that are more probabilistic require attention to more variables and cultural context is important. Includes professional degrees that provide a return benefit to community.

**Intelligence Includes Practical Thinking** – Values application of knowledge in real-world events (social skills). Interconnected thinking fosters creativity and broad comprehension of multilayered events.

**Restricted Communication Codes** – Associated with informal intimate language; words are shortened into dialects.

**Academic/Teaching Style is Personal** – HC style is more open, interactive and student-oriented. Research interests are directed to real-life problems with people in the community. Writing tends toward more personal pronouns.

**Science Includes Folk-Style Taxonomies** – Favors comprehensive paradigms inclined to open new lines of research. Research is only clear about the direction into the unknown but there are no clear ideas about projected results or methods.



states and 20 other countries (Knouft, 1997). It awards between 130 and 140 doctoral degrees annually. This is accomplished without the benefit of a traditional campus, associated services, and, for the most part, a professional bureaucracy. It functions much like a traditional doctoral institution, only that the campus, library, and other related facilities are provided through negotiated partnerships with traditional research institutions. Absent from Walden are the familiar face-to-face interactions, classroom structures, and other academic features associated with traditional academic institutions. Here, there are no tenured faculty and only division directors, administrators and support staff are full-time employees. Students are required to attend specific intensive week-long resident sessions, including a 2- or 3-week summer session at the Indiana University campus in Bloomington. Everyone is required to be computer and Internet literate. Students in most programs must complete a prescribed series of core-curriculum modules by interactive correspondence. However, an increasing number of programs are instituting on-line Internet classes which meet via e-mail at specified times each week (synchronously) and continuously throughout the week (asynchronously). Web-based educational sites are in development for the near future. A committee of faculty, often widely dispersed throughout the country, guides all dissertation research and thesis work at a distance. A combination of all these factors contribute to making Walden a "virtual cyberschool," a version of the new "university without walls" according to the Kellogg Presidents' Commission (1997).

## The Knowledge Industry

Walden is at the forefront of a so-called "Knowledge Industry" in the current Information Revolution. It represents a non-traditional sector of higher education which provides degree programs to career-track students who have unmet educational needs. The University of Phoenix, the Fielding Institute, and Capella University (formerly the Graduate School of America), for example, disdain the traditional campuses that they see as costly and inefficient. They focus instead on offering courses and degree programs off-site or on-line to students across the country. In this rapidly growing sector, however, these represent a mere handful of current contenders (Baker and Gloster, 1994; Gubernick and Ebeling, 1997; Phillips, 1996; Raphael and Tobias, 1997; Traub, 1997). Their growth is not only phenomenal, but also somewhat competitive. In

1993, the *Peterson's Guide* listed only 93 "cyber-schools." Peterson's 1997 *Distance Learning Guide* included 762 (Gubernick and Ebeling, 1997).

Critics of distance learning pose a number of questions for distant learning proponents to address: Is distance learning genuinely participatory and interactive or is it an illusion generated by interactive technology? Does the Net actually help form new academic communities or does it merely offer support for existing communities to continue? In that vein, do networked communities provide benefits of enculturation at a distance or is that merely another illusion keeping students further disempowered?

Advocates of distance learning programs view the criticism as part of a real paradigm shift (Gibson, 1997). They see new learning communities and "electronic villages" being formed and spilling into the wider society (Baker and Gloster, 1994; Kerlin and Smith, 1994; Weingarten and Overbey, eds., 1996). From their perspective, this is a shift from passive to active learning, and from competition to collaboration. It calls into question the role of teacher as expert. Many claim non-traditional institutions are prepared to satisfy the needs of a largely ignored segment of our society and less likely to be hindered by entrenched academic cultures resisting the practitioner side of higher education. Kearsley Lynch and Wizer (1995) describe a number of benefits for using computer conferencing on-line versus traditional course methods:

1. On-line classes exhibit a high degree of interactivity.
2. Classmates have the opportunity to see and compare their work and ideas.
3. Asynchronous (delayed response) conferencing provides ample time for students to reflect and compose responses.
4. Computer conferencing reduces impact of discrimination due to physical characteristics.
5. On-line courses are much more student centered than teacher controlled.
6. On-line courses engender a much higher "social context" than traditional classrooms, (Kearsley and Wizer, 1995).

## The Walden Minority Experience

One attraction for studying at Walden is the remarkably high number of ethnic minority students it enrolls. According to reliable internal surveys about 37%, or roughly one-third, of Walden's total enrollment comes from underrepresented ethnic minority populations. In fact, one student survey shows that almost 28% of those currently enrolled self-identify as African-American and another 4% identify themselves as Latino (Selien, 1998). Walden produces annually a significant number of minority doctorates and ranks high nationally compared to other graduate institutions. In 1994-95, Walden was ranked 21st in the country in the production of African-American doctorates, 16th in the number of Latino Ph.D.'s, and 6th among all graduate programs for Native-American doctorates, according to *Black Issues in Higher Education* (1997). Among the top 100 institutions conferring doctorates to Latinos in 1997, *Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education* (1997) placed Walden 30th on their list, ranked between the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the University of Chicago.

Those numbers are increasing by themselves. It is truly remarkable that Walden has achieved this level of diversity without dedicated minority recruitment and retention programs. This is extraordinary for a graduate institution, especially since Walden has neither official minority status (Historically Black College or University, Hispanic Serving Institution, Tribal College), nor the benefit of a location near ethnic populations to draw upon.

Why is this occurring and how does Walden accomplish this? Quite simply, diversity may be positively associated with education at a distance in the U.S. for "there is a greater participation of ethnic minorities in distance education as compared to continuing adult education for example," and that "women predominate in the distance classroom" (Gibson, 1997). The problem is that very little research has been done on this topic to date. The existing research focuses primarily on the "Digital Divide," a serious issue of inequality regarding the adverse impact triangulated with poverty, ethnicity, and access to information technology (Floyd, 1996; Larson and Wilhelm, 1994; Resta, 1994).

Some research has been encouraging. For instance, Rodriguez (1994) notes that Latino/Chicano/a student groups are apparently politically

active and effective in linking up with each other via e-mail and list-serv groups. The latest report by Wilhelm (1998) on "Latinos in the Information Age" is even more optimistic. In a survey conducted by the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute, over 1,600 adult Latinos from Chicago and across the country report a dramatic increase in computer ownership and Internet use over the past five years. "Whereas only 13% of [Latino] households owned computers in 1994, 30% now do. Internet access has also swelled to 15% of [Latino] households" (Wilhelm, 1998). If Latinos are becoming full participants in the digital revolution, are they using it to gain an education?

One reason that minority students select Walden could be a good ratio of cost-to-convenience. Although tuition is competitive with traditional graduate programs, other costs are lower because it is a non-residential institution. The obvious reason many non-traditional students select Walden is convenience. Most students at Walden are too far along career tracks, or have other responsibilities that prevent them from attending a resident institution. Walden students have varied careers and are involved with a variety of experiences: high-level administrators, executives, managers, health care providers, social workers, consultants, and some have founded their own business which can't be left unattended.

Much of Walden's attraction comes from its distinct mission which emphasizes social change and critical thinking. "Walden's goal is to develop 'Scholar-practitioners'—professionals who can adapt the theory of their discipline and apply it directly to the workplace" (Knouft, 1997). Students are expected to apply what they learn to their careers and to the world around them.

The Walden mission projects an attractive academic culture, and fosters academic programs that appeal to diverse learners by emphasizing application and change as a goal for all doctoral study. This creates a greater attraction for ethnic minorities than anyone had previously imagined. Walden's academic programs are intended to attract working professionals who can't leave their careers or relocate to get a degree. Thus, Walden strongly encourages "practical" doctoral research with the expectation that dissertations will focus on applied topics that ultimately contribute to the improvement of one's career/profession or community.

In contrast, many comparable departments and programs within traditional graduate institutions around the country are not as likely to foment such academic values and encourage such research objectives. Indeed, Latino students and faculty indicated that such applied research, especially on ethnic topics, tended to be downplayed or discouraged in favor of topics more familiar to faculty advisors or more in line with objectives expected for doing “cutting-edge research” (Ibarra 1996; Ibarra, in press). This is a bone of contention among Latinos and is found at the core of their academic cultural conflict. This major ethnic/academic cultural conflict is apparently not found at Walden.

To explore these ideas, an informal group of minority students gathered during an initial visit to a residency week to talk about Walden. Unlike previous interviews conducted on traditional campuses (Ibarra, 1996; Ibarra, in press), these students associated academic cultures with generally positive conditions. When asked why they selected Walden and what attracted them to it, three themes emerged contrasting the differences between alternative and traditional academic cultures: Convenience and Real-World Application, Cultural Adaptation, and Educational Control.

The first theme was *Convenience and Real-World Application*. As described above, students self-selected and were admitted to Walden because they were upwardly mobile career professionals in need of a Ph.D. and unable to relocate. Applied research in their career areas was not only convenient, but was especially attractive for Latino populations and other high-context cultures when ethnic topics were involved. Other researchers in virtual environments verify that the majority of students find convenience as the most important factor (Hiltz, 1995; Kearsley, Lynch and Wizer, 1995).

A second theme was related to *Cultural Adaptation*. Latino students were delighted to find that unlike their previous graduate experiences, often on a predominantly majority campus, cultural adjustments to a virtual university were greatly improved or unnecessary. Finding cultural resources in a new community, for example, ceased to be an important issue. Finding one’s way in a virtual academic environment was a pioneering experience for everyone concerned. It can prove to be a problem or barrier for some, but Latinos noted that the sting of being cul-

turally different was diminished in this unique situation. As one student noted, “I like the way we communicate here at Walden. No one can hear my accent on the keyboard!” Many students and faculty agreed that their accents and other cultural cues were less noticeable and less distracting when communicating with others via the Internet. As another student remarked, “It was a refreshing change to be recognized first on your intellectual merit. When you get the chance to meet someone face-to-face that you got to know well over e-mail, they remember you for how you think instead how you look.” The comment reflects a common complaint in a traditional classroom environment (Kearsley, Lynch and Wizer, 1995). Ethnically different individuals must first struggle through preconceived ethnic stereotypes to validate their intellectual skills and abilities. Such sustained stereotype threats can have devastating effects on performance for many ethnic minorities (Steele and Aronson, 1995).

The third and most important theme stressed was *Educational Control*. For the first time in their experiences, these minority students felt they had control over their educational process. This was a significant point made by individuals frequently marginalized in traditional graduate institutions. Educational Control for Walden students does not imply resistance to faculty guidance and mentorship. Rather, it reflects a sense of liberation from the influences of some faculty advisor’s research predilections. Latinos felt free to pursue a course of study that provided more meaning in their lives, and had considerable flexibility in shaping their own course of study. For some, that meant they were no longer fettered by work on irrelevant projects that only their advisors deemed important. This is especially important for Latino populations highly correlated with interests in ethnic research and teaching. Self-directed learning and doctoral research demands strong self-discipline or one may become lost. The Walden literature expresses it best, “this is one university where students set the pace; they’re in control of their time and can choose what to accomplish and when.”

The “Walden fit,” according to students, forms the core of academic culture. That culture principle allows for absorption of ideas with an emphasis on application and practicality. Walden perceives the learning activity as dialog/discussion – a primary learning mode in residencies that usually abstains

from course work, lectures, and tests. A multidisciplinary session, as a practical application, is an equivalent of traditional seminar components minus the theoretical pontificating, probing, and posturing of ideas encountered in traditional seminar dialog. Discussions with focus around real world applications and doctoral research are not conducted with only the intent of creating new knowledge, but rather to help change the careers and the people in them – the Walden fit.

## **The Walden Research Project**

Walden University demonstrated it could attract minority students without special recruitment, but the reasons for this success were not quite clear. One indicator for success is that minority students attending Walden showed few of the tensions and conflicts found elsewhere. None of them described racial issues or voiced any bitterness toward the university in their interviews. There were issues about administrative processes and other academic concerns, but not ethnic/cultural complaints. These complaints were characteristic of Latinos and other ethnic populations on traditional campuses, but it was uncharacteristic of Walden students to hear the same arguments. Walden students are not typical graduate students, they are older, 42 on the average, and they are locked into careers rather than academics. They are not transforming into academic faculty.

This is a critical point. Though the format of graduate education at Walden is unique compared to traditional schools, there are similarities in the interaction between faculty, staff, and colleagues; enough, even at a distance, to generate tension and conflict encountered by ethnic minorities and women in higher education. Since students are not transformed into professors, the culture and organizational structure at Walden are not driven by the same objectives as traditional schools. Objectives, in fact, are more student-oriented and more likely shaped by the demands of distributed learning systems.

If the technology is deployed effectively, distributed learning will be incorporated and delivered in a characteristically low face-to-face contact between

people, and further, interactive teaching and learning relies on low-context media and delivery systems, (i.e. asynchronous computer systems, no visual interactions and often no audio links). To counteract these impersonal conditions, low contact systems need to be compensated with high levels of friendly, supportive, people-oriented contact. It is imperative to institute high-context cultural patterns whenever possible, and as much as possible to avoid turning students away.

Today, Walden is an active academic system and culture undergoing change from less traditional roots to a slightly more traditional graduate institution by redesigning itself for the distance learning future. By doing that, Walden has inadvertently tapped into a combination of academic organizational cultural patterns that attract like-minded high-context individuals. If the organizational culture effectively combines cultural context with academic principals and does not compromise the “heritage” of higher education, Walden could lead the way toward developing a new model for diversity in graduate education, distance education, and perhaps even more.

## **Profile of Latino Students at Walden**

There were seven students participating in the interviews. Women predominated in the group of three Puerto Ricans, three Mexican-Americans, and one Latina with national origins in the Caribbean. The majority were born in the continental U.S. and only a slightly higher number came from middle-class families. Most came from blue-collar families and two participants came from migrant agricultural backgrounds.

All attended public schools, and one Latina dropped-out of high school to raise a family. The most striking similarity between members of this group and the original study group of seventy-seven individuals attending traditional graduate programs is that a large majority also attended predominantly Anglo high schools and over half took college prep courses. One Latina attended an all-girl school that she credited for her facility in math and science due to a learning environment devoid of more aggressive males. As undergraduates, almost all attended small, four-year schools, and only one started at a community college.

At the graduate level, over half completed their first degree at Masters-only institutions and one completed a Master's program at a top-ranked research institution. All, but one, were traditional graduate level institutions, relatively-well known and respected nationally. One distinct educational pattern differentiating Walden Latinos from the original study group was the notably high frequency of multiple transfers between schools at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. Though it appeared not to have greatly affected their degree progress at Walden, there are no immediate explanations for this pattern.

Other experiences associated with completion of their Master's program were very similar to those found in the original study group. While a large majority of Walden students claimed they encountered few difficulties completing their degree (i.e. Language or financial issues), slightly more than half said they had cultural problems while adjusting to the institution. The circumstances were almost identical to those given by Latinos in the original study group, and the issues (marginalized ethnically, the only minority in class, no ethnic or Latino cultural programs, etc.), were clearly ethnically-oriented as well.

### **Comparing The “Walden Experience” with Traditional Graduate Schools**

How effective are distance learning and distributed residency programs in providing quality to a graduate experience? How does it compare to a resident campus program? What adjustments do they have to make? The most notable differences focused on cultural distinctions. Unlike their colleagues on traditional campuses, many Latina students at Walden made interesting comments about academic cultures that never surfaced in previous interviews. For instance, Sofia<sup>1</sup> is a Mexican-American originally from Texas who received her Masters degree in the early 1980's. She noted the following differences as “Anglo environments”:

*Did you have to make any adjustments to the campus or the department when you entered the Master's program?* “No, I didn't have any cultural differences other than that I was in an Anglo-oriented environment and there were not many Latinos in graduate school.” *How do you describe that Anglo-ori-*

*ented environment?* “One way is when we talked about cases, and they [faculty] talk about populations they serve. And if we're talking about Medicaid and about lower income people in Texas, obviously they mean Latinos or African-Americans. I guess the hardest problem I had was ‘they’ always talked about ‘those people,’ as if they didn't have an identity. So I was always an activist in the class, and I think people appreciated me bringing up cultural issues that gave biased views of the populations.”

*Do you feel that about Walden?* “I think this is absolutely wonderful. There are two things about Walden that I think are great: one is the diversity of people and accessing it through technology gives you a universe of opportunity to learn and to experience. In a contained classroom you're at the mercy of what the professor knows, which is very limiting. Being scholar-practitioners, and mostly working adults, they bring different perspectives and views of the world. I think one of the best things about Walden is how they laid out the [curriculum] plan for looking at different professions in terms of context, human development, and organization. I think I'm having the best time doing this because I'm getting such a wonderful education.”

Barbara is a Puerto Rican from the island. She also completed her Master's degree in the early 1980's, but unlike other participants, Barbara attended a top-ranked research university and continued its doctoral program before she chose to step-out for personal reasons. Her benchmark for cultural differentiation was the “American-style University”:

*Did you have many adjustments to make coming to Walden?* “It was very similar. All the teachers I dealt with at Walden had been very open-minded and supportive. There is something going on that wasn't that way in... back then, and it's the awareness of cultural differences. Walden is very much into this trend of cultural issues and making a difference in helping people. In that sense, I found more openness in Walden than at...” *How would you describe the culture of Walden?* I am a little surprised in the sense

that I thought I was going to find a very American culture in the Walden setting. I'm glad it's not that way. It's much more open, it's very flexible, they're very interested in reaching out and in making a difference. It seems that they are aware that eventually America would be more diversified, so I think they are preparing people for those changes, and it's not only in the [specific] program; I can see it in the other Ph.D. programs that they offer." *How do you find it different?* I would say in Walden you can relate to more people. When you're in a traditional class, you don't have access to a lot of your classmates because they don't share, they don't open up, and I think people tend to open up more through e-mail."

Despite positive experiences with Walden, communication is still a big problem for adjustment, especially for those who recognize their ability to communicate is dependent on high-context cultural patterns – non-verbal cues, feedback, and high information needs (see Table 1). For Bianca, a Puertorriqueña who completed her Master's degree in the mid-1990's, there is no question that low contact, low-context media generates high stress. She believes it almost caused her to drop out:

*Can you describe your experience adjusting to Walden? How does it compare to your Master's program?* "It's very different. I think you [can get] lonely... if you don't communicate by e-mail or by the telephone. You're by yourself and everything is expensive. If your mentor is far away, I think it's very difficult for a student and a mentor to communicate. I don't speak on the telephone for hours or talk through a computer for a long period of time. That's not the type of communication that is helpful. At a traditional university... you had face-to-face teaching, so it has been very difficult for me." *When you do have face-to-face communication, are you looking at a lot of things beyond that too?* "Yes. And you find it a little more difficult to see the physical, the gestures, and other kinds of communication... When I look at people face-to-face, I'm very good at reading people and I like to see expressions

because Latinos speak with their hands a lot, especially Puerto Ricans. By looking at a person face-to-face, you can tell how much that person can share with you. By the same token, when you communicate with a person through a computer or by telephone, you're not able to see the gestures, you're not able to see if you're upsetting that person, or if the person does not understand. I want to see what you're doing to help me." *How do you deal with that?* "It's very stressful to a point that I have thought about quitting. I am not able to go to my mentor and say... 'tell me what I'm doing wrong.' The stress level is very high."

Natalia is a Puertorriqueña born and raised in New York and completed her Master's in the mid-1970's. Faced with a lack of structure, she learned quickly that self-paced convenience came with some hidden social costs and necessary adjustments in her work habits:

*Did you have any adjustments to Walden?* "Absolutely. I had major adjustments both personally and academically which affected my family as well. I had to make a system that would work for me at Walden. With Walden being a self-paced program, you could sit back and not do anything or you could work very hard. I chose to be in the middle. So there were demands that I put on myself to be at a certain level at a certain time. Another major adjustment was the lack of structure. Coming from a traditional institution and working in traditional institutions for the last 22 years was a major adjustment. I had to... look at how I could handle the lack of structure... If I find there might be something I don't understand, I don't have a problem... calling the chairperson or anyone to ask for help. With a traditional school you... have a time format, so you... prepare to get to your class. With Walden it's not like that. You don't have the structure of a classroom; therefore, you have to create structure for yourself... I find that time factor is important."

## **A Sense of Community and Cultural Differences at Walden**

One of the surprising things about Walden is the diversity of students and their innovative entrepreneurial spirit. The type of students Walden attracts work hard to create and maintain a special community of dispersed scholars. Outside the “classroom,” either on-line or at the residencies, students have to create the Walden community, and they seem to be doing quite well. At the Walden web site, for instance, African-American students have created a “Virtual Black Graduate Student Union” where students post a variety of interactions and messages, such as on-line chat groups. Latinos have begun their own list-serv, but have yet to create a visible presence at Walden’s web site. Almost all Latinos interviewed at Walden recognized that this student-generated, on-line community was highly interactive and personal, and there was no illusion that friendships and other interactions depended upon one’s efforts and input. Sofia had been a Walden student almost a year and a half, and was surprised and pleased by the diversity and community she found upon her arrival:

*Do you think there’s a sense of community at Walden?* “Yes... the sense of community is created by the students. When I entered the Walden program there was a woman who entered about the same time [in Texas] and she had a note on the board about forming a southern e-mail group... She and I started to communicate and other people joined in. Before we knew it, we had a group of 10 or 12 people that met for the first time in Phoenix. We gathered more people who got on the list and we all made plans to meet at summer sessions and we did. None of us knew each other, we were from all parts of the country... we became a kind of core group that hung out together and, of course, I was the only Latina in the group. We continued our... list-serv of about 40 people. We communicate every day and talk about Walden, what happened at the C-4 [the term for a week-long residency], who are good faculty... everyday we communicate.”

## **Adjustments to Technology at Walden**

Latino students seemed to enjoy the computer environment and learned that, while feedback and educational interactions were enhanced via these media, there were also drawbacks to using the technology, mainly hardware problems. Students and faculty are required to have computers for Internet access and interaction. Everyone receives training from Walden staff, and students are given assistance, orientation, and assignments for getting on-line.

When she first started, Barbara knew next to nothing about computers, but it was easy for her and she became an avid user in no time. She appreciated the asynchronous dynamics of Internet classes especially when her new computer malfunctioned and was out for a month being repaired. There is another feature that she found attractive about the on-line environment – less competition. Nearly every Puerto Rican who was interviewed, in both the original and the Walden projects, commented on the strong cultural differences between educational systems at home and those U.S. mainland graduate institutions. Almost everyone said how he or she felt uncomfortable with the U.S. institutions because they were too competitive or lacked a friendly, open atmosphere.

## **The Cost of Technology for Latinos at Walden**

At this stage of development, the cost for most Latinos to attend college using this learning technology could be high and prohibitive, if access itself was not a problem. Everyone interviewed at Walden recognized that, and the fact that as career professionals they at least had enough income to purchase and stay with the technology. They also remarked that it would be devastating for Latinos not to be prepared for the 21st Century and that getting a personal loan or financial aid to purchase a computer would not be too difficult and would be cost beneficial in the long run. Besides, someone else said that the prices for computers are dropping fast. The cost of this kind of education is only one barrier for Latinos, and according to Sofia, there are hidden cultural costs as well, “When I tell [Latino] people I have a computer at home, they think... ‘what kind of nerd are you.’ The one thing that I’ve noticed about Latinos is that we’re falling behind on the technology because people are just not into it.”

## Challenges for the 21st Century

The Walden study suggests high-context academic culture does make a difference in reducing the inherent and widening cultural gap found in most traditional graduate level institutions. For example, throughout the original Latino project, only thirty-two participants (approximately 44%) actually mentioned the terms “racism,” “racist,” or “institutional racism” in their interviews, regardless of their intent or implications. This was simply a tabulation by individual respondents. In comparison, none of the Latinos at Walden uttered anything related to racial discrimination. In fact, gender discrimination was discussed by only one Walden student, who described her experience in a well-known traditional graduate institution.

What this pattern suggests, by implication, is that terms such as “racism” or “institutional racism” are not part of the student lexicon of descriptors about Walden. These terms are often the same descriptions used to signal or describe high-context/low-context cultural conflicts in most institutions. This does not imply that Walden is devoid of such behavior, or even that no one uses these terms there. Rather, it implies that among students, these were not terms or concepts used to describe either the type or reason for the conflicts they encounter while interacting with Walden faculty or staff, either on-line or in person. This includes the Latina mentioned above who, when asked, confirmed she had never encountered gender discrimination in the Walden environment.

Walden students, however, are dealing with a variety of tensions not found at traditional institutions – lack of a visible organizational structure, greater requirements for academic self-discipline, and most of all, problems associated with communication at a distance. Given the opportunity to discuss both on and off the record, few students ever associated their conflicts with something other than a breakdown in a process. Walden is not the panacea for what “ails” higher education, but it may have a model for academic culture that could be well adapted for distance learning, and that seems to work.

To summarize, Walden contains cultural values that in fact represent a balance between high-context and low-contexts. The result is primarily attractive to career-track professionals unable to attend a typical resident graduate institution. It also contains academic cultural values that are attractive to a wider variety of cultural contexts than found at the traditional campus today. For example:

- *Community Is Highly Valued* – This is clearly people-oriented, attracting both students and faculty.
- *Collegial Relationships* – Students are treated as junior colleagues instead of student neophytes aspiring professorships.
- *Time Factors Appeal to Both Monochronic and Polychronic Individuals* – Walden is self-paced and self-directed, but there is more flex-time because education is not restricted by synchronous time constrained space (classrooms and schedules).
- *Education Comes to You in Your Home (“Mi casa es su casa” Concept Working Here)* – This could be very attractive to high-context cultural people, especially Latinos, because this is not only community-oriented but family-oriented, too. To stay at home and get the degree without uprooting the family from the community is particularly appealing.
- *The Instruction Is Student-Oriented and the Organization Is Learning-Centered* – Teaching and learning are less structured toward the traditional needs of faculty (inflexible) and more toward student needs (flexible). This is another people-oriented, community-focused, high-context cultural factor, which in fact has appeal to almost every adult learner.
- *Walden Values* – The Awareness of Cultural and Ethnic Differences; Making a Difference in Helping People; Application of Research for the Community.



Reflecting on the observations at Walden, one is struck by a new academic culture of teaching and learning evolving amidst a society of networked practitioner-scholars. Despite living and working quite apart from each other, faculty and students with clear high-context cultural preferences were building a new and close-knit electronic community. And though technology is still formative, perhaps inadequate for high-context cultural needs, they were outlining the boundaries of a new learning culture and framing a future “university without walls.” It has begun the process of adopting a technology that best fits a learning organization which has already broken the bounds of place and space. It has even moved beyond some of the boundaries of time. Though elements of educational instruction are still segmented into quarter sections of an academic year, Walden is no longer bound by the physical constrictions of synchronous classes.

Despite primitive technology and inconsistencies that often accompany such radical change, distance learning and virtual universities are growing more attractive and becoming quite successful in this country. The phenomenon is so new and closely tied to Internet technology and development that explanations for this are still being researched.

In the final analysis, Walden reveals three important principles from which higher education benefits:

1. *Teaching and learning must be high-context* – Using low-context or low contact distant learning media requires instructors to be as high-context as possible (i.e. people-and community-oriented thinking) to communicate ideas.
2. *High-context instruction shifts focus from faculty-oriented to student-oriented learning* – low-context graduate instruction focused primarily on words that attuned to a faculty-oriented apprenticeship. High-context instruction, using many open channels of communication – non-verbal cues, graphics – are by nature student-oriented, and thus become learning-oriented, too. In learning-oriented institutions, faculty focuses equally on how to communicate, as well as what content is appropriate to communicate. Educational delivery and context become

as critical to learning and comprehending as being able to analyze problems.

3. *Higher education must seek a balance of high and low-context learning modes* – Combining and balancing high-context and high contact, learning-oriented activities with low-context and low personal contact learning media and technology offers learning experiences that are attractive to both learning styles.

As Walden demonstrates, it has become a natural magnet for high-context ethnic minorities in spite of low-context, low contact learning media, and without formalizing minority recruiting or retention initiatives. This suggests that institutional diversity can be enhanced by re-contextualizing our academic organizational cultures. It also suggests that traditional “pipeline” models may not be enough to accommodate the new educational demands brought on by demographic change. Walden now capitalizes on the demographic shifts by offering students a multicontext-distributed learning environment. The imbalance of cultural context and the concern over the success of distance education in academia center around the issue of faculty vs. student-oriented educational systems. This issue is grounded on the principle that knowledge media – the convergence of computing, telecommunications, and the cognitive sciences – will fundamentally change the relationship of people and knowledge. “Presentation style, the user interface, the accessibility, and the interactivity” associated with people to media, could, if given a chance, change the current paradigm from teaching in the classroom to student learning anywhere (Daniel, 1997:16).

To achieve this, we must think beyond just teaching and learning, and reframe the academic organizational culture itself. Without that goal clearly set, little systemic change will take place in teaching and learning styles. At this critical juncture – the crossroad where academia engages cultural shifts of place, space, and demographic change – it is no longer simply a “good idea” for higher education to expand its current infrastructure just to enhance diversity. It now comes down to a question of survival. Which will higher education choose in the face of evolutionary change – an inclusive cultural strategy or the current strategy that has suited well for so long?

*Note: Real names of participants have been changed and other information about them is masked to protect their anonymity. As an additional safeguard, none of the fictitious names duplicate real names of participants.*

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