

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

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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.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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