

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

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Occasional Paper No. 68

August 2000

ABSTRACT

The advent of the internet and distant learning technology is transforming higher education rapidly. Over the last decade there has been a phenomenal growth of non-traditional institutions providing degree programs to career-track learners. For example, the 1993-94 Peterson's Guide listed only 93 “cyberschools.” However, three years later, Peterson's 1997 Distance Learning Guide included over 760 “cyberschools.” With population growth rates projected to explode for many Latino populations in the U.S., what impact do such “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.