

Latino Americans

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Latino Americans are one of the most diverse ethnic groups in the United States, as they share no common skin color or country of origin. However, the one factor that does help Latinos identify with each other is their cultural values (Tatum, 1997, p. 136). With the Latino American population being so diverse and spread out, it is extremely difficult not to make generalizations about the Latino community in the United States, especially in their levels of educational achievement. Most importantly, one needs to understand where Latinos are coming from, why they have arrived in the United States, and what characteristics make them unique.

Latino Americans represent people from 22 different countries, and will soon become the largest minority group in the United States. Although most Latinos speak Spanish, they do not share a common culture or race (Gines). The median age of the Latino population is 25.9 years, yet the median age varies drastically across different countries of origin. For instance, the median age of Mexican Americans is 24.2 years, whereas the median age of Cuban Americans is 40.7 years. More than half of the Latino population resides in California and Texas. Other states with high Latino populations include New York, Florida, Illinois, Arizona, and New Jersey (Gables, 2002). However, these are not the only states with substantial Latino residents, as Latino Americans are currently the largest minority group in 26 states, which means that there is no particular region in the United States where Latinos are settling (Flores, 2006).

There has long been controversy over the correct term to describe Latino Americans. Although the name “Latino” or “Latina” is most popular, other people in this diverse group prefer to be called Hispanic or Latin American. The term Hispanic implies a connection to ancient Spain and its language, whereas the term Latino represents a

nationality, which is of Latin America. It is important to note that the label of Hispanic or Latino is given to people when they come to the United States. In their countries of origin, they would not refer to themselves as Latino or Hispanic. In fact, when given a choice in the United States, many Latino Americans prefer to use their country of origin to describe themselves, such as Mexican-American or Puerto Rican American. It is important to find out what term a particular individual or group would prefer to be called, and when generalizing the group, one should use both terms together, such as Latino/Hispanic (Gines). In the remainder of this paper, I will continue to use Latino American to describe this population.

The majority of Latino Americans come to the United States from Mexico, making up nearly 60% of the Latino population. The next two largest groups are Puerto Ricans, who account for around 13% of the Latino population, and Cubans, accounting for another 5%. Smaller numbers of Latinos also arrive from other South American, Central American, and Caribbean countries, such as the Dominican Republic, Columbia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Peru, and Nicaragua (Tatum, 1997, pp. 133-136). Because Latinos come from such a wide variety of backgrounds, it is impossible to list all of the reasons why they come to the United States, and the amount of time Latinos have been in America differs significantly. Some Latino families have had roots in what is now the United States since before the Mayflower arrived (Zanner & Stevens, 2001). Others were forced to become Americans after the Mexican territory was claimed as a result of the Mexican-American War in 1848 (Tatum, 1997, p. 133). However, a majority of Latinos came to the United States after the Mexican Revolution and after World War II. There are numerous reasons why Latino Americans have immigrated to

the United States, with the most common being to escape economic depressions, political revolutions, or civil wars in their home country, and for their desire for freedom, safety, and opportunity.

Although there is great diversity among the Latino population, some general cultural patterns do exist within Latino families. One characteristic is the importance of the family. Latinos put great emphasis on their family, and especially the obligation to their family. This includes strongly defined gender roles, and respect for those who are older. A second cultural trait is in the formality of speech, dress, and relationships. Latinos believe that one must show “proper” appearance when they are outside of their home, which relates directly to status, respectability, and family pride. This can be an issue for poorer people, who may choose not to attend school because they do not have proper attire. Finally, a third attribute of the Latino community is their strong work ethic. Latinos invest a great deal of time and energy into their work, preferring to work in an organization where they can give loyalty and establish long-term relationships (Zanner & Stevens, 2001).

Even with a great work ethic, Latino Americans continue to struggle in the United States. Historically, Latinos have shown to be more economically disadvantaged than non-Hispanic Whites and Asians, especially in the areas of education, the labor force, social status, and earnings (Zanner & Stevens, 2001). As a group, most have had lower levels of education. In general, only 45% of Mexican Americans over age 25 have completed high school (Tatum, 1997, p. 134). Latino children are more likely to start school without the skills necessary for academic success, such as knowledge in math and reading. This predicament often will follow students through all of their schooling.

In order to change this trend, American educational systems will need to continue to make modifications. Several studies have taken place across the United States on how to improve education for Latino students. One way is to offer more affordable pre-kindergarten classes. Currently only 40% of Latino children attend pre-school classes. These classes have been shown to improve basic skills and knowledge in reading and math across the board. Another important factor is language. Studies have found that supporting a student's native language in school helps to improve their English language acquisition (Owens, 2006). In this bilingual education system, it works well to teach content areas in Spanish and then teach structured English courses. There is also evidence that the proficiency level in one's native language directly influences their development and proficiency in English (Tatum, 1997, pp. 142-143).

Although English proficiency continues to improve with each successive generation of Latinos in the United States, the Spanish language is extremely valued in many families. Latino Americans have not been molded into the American culture as quickly as other ethnic groups. Many Latino families have struggled with adapting the Anglo-American culture while still maintaining their traditional beliefs and practices. Because preserving their language has been so important to their culture, most children are raised bilingual. Latino Americans also hold a strong sense of community. Regardless of how long they have been in the United States or how many generations of their family have been here, their ethnic background remains important. Because of this, many young children are not only raised bilingually, but also bi-culturally as well. Finally, one last distinction is their strong commitment to family, known as familism. Many Latino families are larger in size and include extended family members. Families

also tend to settle in areas close to other Latino families for support (Zanner & Stevens, 2001).

Because Latino Americans are committed to their families, another teaching strategy is to incorporate familism into an educational setting. This is done by creating family-like relationships between teachers and students, which becomes a network of support for all involved. Classroom settings of this nature create a sense of collective responsibility, often fostered by activities such as peer tutoring. This strategy has shown to decrease high school drop-out rates, and actually increase the number of Latino students who go on to college (Tatum, 1997, p. 138).

Although some Latino Americans continue to struggle in areas of education and economic success, most continue to maintain their cultural traditions and family values. Continuing to increase the level of education of the Latino population remains a high priority across the United States. However, in working together to educate others about this diverse culture, there will be better understanding of this ethnic group and appreciation of the characteristics that make Latino Americans unique.

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