Graduating Students’ Perceptions of Outcomes of College Experiences at a Predominantly Hispanic University

JOHN P. ABRAHAM, SYLVIA S. LUJAN, ESTHER ELENA LÓPEZ, AND MARY T. WALKER

Abstract: This study was done at a university located at the United States/Mexican border of South Texas, where more than 80% of the residents are of Hispanic origin. This article reports partial results of surveys administered to graduating students over a 3-year period to assess perceptions of the outcome of their college experiences. The surveys revealed that an overwhelming majority of the graduates believed the quality of their lives was definitely enhanced because of their college experiences. The survey further revealed that the majority of graduates believed that, as a result of their education and contributing factors, they learned the value of independence, working cooperatively with others, and persistence amid difficulties.

Resumen: Este estudio se hizo en una universidad del sur de Texas que está situada en la frontera de Estados Unidos con México donde más del 80% de los residentes son de origen Hispano. Este manuscrito reporta resultados parciales de cuestionarios administrados a estudiantes graduados a través de un período de 3 años, los cuales evalúan su percepción del resultado de experiencias universitarias. Los cuestionarios revelaron que la gran mayoría de los graduados creen que la calidad de sus vidas aumentó debido a sus experiencias universitarias. Aún más, los cuestionarios revelaron que la mayoría de los graduados creen que, como resultado de su educación y otros factores adicionales, ellos aprendieron el valor de la independencia, del trabajo cooperativo, y la persistencia en medio de las dificultades.

The University of Texas–Pan American (UTPA) is located in Edinburg, Texas, less than 20 miles away from Reynosa, México. About 82% of all UTPA students are of Hispanic origin, reflecting the demographic characteristics of the immediate region (McAllen Economic Development Corporation, 2000). The region is distinctly bicultural; the majority of residents speak both English and Spanish. The university includes six academic colleges: arts and humanities, business administration, education, health sciences and human services, science and engineering, and social and behavioral sciences. Annual student enrollment is approximately 13,000.

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Literature Review

Minority students (Hispanic, Black, or African American, Asian, and Native American) now account for one fourth of all college and university students. Nearly half of all minority students are Hispanic (Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 2000). Hispanic individuals constitute the fastest-growing minority in the United States. Even though college and university enrollments of Hispanic students in United States have more than doubled over the past 10 years, the enrollment rate has not kept up with their population growth. Margarita Benitez (1998) wrote, “In 1993, Hispanics earned only 7 percent of all associate degrees, 4 percent of all bachelor’s degrees, 3 percent of all master’s degrees, and 2 percent of all doctorates granted in the United States.”

Carnevale and Fry of the Educational Testing Service (2000) predicted that by the year 2015, there will be more Hispanic college students than from any other minority group. Although there are many historically Black colleges and universities, there are no historically Hispanic institutions of higher education. If an institution of higher education has an enrollment of undergraduate, full-time-equivalent students that is at least 25% Hispanic students, it is classified as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). This classification entitles the institution to direct federal HSI funds from the Title III Institutional Aid (Wolanin, 1998). Those colleges and universities located in the United States/México border cities and in Florida educate more than 60% of all Hispanic students. UTPA ranks third in the nation in Hispanic student enrollment. Because of the proximity to México, almost all of the Hispanic students at UTPA are of Mexican origin.

At present, many Hispanic parents occupy unskilled temporary jobs and migrant farm work. Most of them lack the necessary knowledge and skills to guide their children to pursue higher education. First-generation students are those whose parents never enrolled in postsecondary education. Most first-generation Hispanic students cannot afford to live away from home. Perhaps this partly explains why White students have the highest 4-year college entry rate and Hispanics the lowest (Cameron & Heckman, 1999). If there are no postsecondary institutions in or near their hometown, many otherwise qualified Hispanic students simply do not attend college.

Purpose

According to the U.S. Census of 2000, the number of Hispanic individuals living in the United States has increased by 58% from the 1990 Census (Education Week, 2001). This brings the Hispanic population of the United States to 12.5% and is almost equal to the African American population (12.9%). It is essential to gather data about this fastest-growing population, particularly in the area of higher education, to properly direct resources.
Cameron and Heckman (1999) reported that the data available suffer from major limitations such as the lack of information about family background and family income on college enrollment decisions. The purpose of the study was to gather demographic information about entering and graduating students, to explore perceptions of graduates about their educational experiences, and discover the effect that college has had on their lives. Information gathered in this study will be used as a baseline for subsequent studies planned for every 5 years.

**Method**

The American College Testing (ACT) Alumni Survey (1998) was used to conduct the study of the graduating students. The survey was composed of the following two major parts: the demographic information and perceptions of the graduating students about their educational experiences. In addition, the ACT Class Profile Report (ACT, 1998) and the ACT Student Opinion Survey Report (ACT, 1997) were used to gather information about the entering freshmen students. ACT reported (ACT, 2002) that their studies have demonstrated the appropriateness, meaningfulness, and usefulness of the survey instruments used for this study. They also reported reliability of each item on the questionnaire ranging from 0.89 to 0.99.

The study was conducted over a 3-year period from August 1996 to May 1999. A total of 3,338 graduates were asked to complete the survey, of which 949 responded to the survey—a return rate of 28.4%. No attempt was made to increase the return rate by contacting the nonrespondents due to the difficulty of finding graduates once they leave campus. We acknowledge the limitations that low response rate might indicate, such as the possibility that this sample may not be representative of our target population.

**Results**

**Demographic Profile of the Entering Freshmen**

The demographic profile of entering freshmen, as derived from the survey, is reported here for comparison purposes. As displayed in Table 1, the demographic data of the entering freshmen showed that more than 80% were Hispanic students and 7% were White students. Nationwide, the college enrollment rate for Hispanic students has been on the rise since 1990 (Mortenson, 1994, 1999), along with substantial gains in the overall Mexican American population. Although UTPA does not keep track of Mexican American subpopulations separately, it is the observation of the authors that because of UTPA’s proximity to México, the Hispanic population reported here is almost exclusively made up of Mexican American students.

The remaining 10% in Table 1 consisted of African Americans, Asians, Native American, and nonresident students. More than 70% of the entering
freshmen were first-generation college students as compared to the national average of only 43%. Approximately 60% of these students’ parents had a high school diploma or less (fewer than 18% of the parents had baccalaureate or advanced degrees). The average age of the entering freshmen was 18.9 years; 93% were 20 years of age or younger. The average age of the entering freshmen has decreased over the past 5 years, indicating more and more Hispanic students are attending college immediately after high school graduation. The composite average of ACT score was 17.9. More than 40% of the freshmen received a GPA of less than 2.0 after the first semester. It is interesting to note that more Hispanic students major in science-, engineering-, and health-related professions than other fields of study.

Demographic Profile of the Graduating Students


The ethnicity of undergraduate degree recipients for the reporting period is summarized in Table 2. Out of a total of 3,771 undergraduate degree recipients, 3,306 graduates (87.67%) were Hispanic students, 360 (9.55%) were non-Hispanic White students, and the remaining 105 (2.78%) were students from other ethnic groups. The national norms, as reported by ACT Normative Summary Report of 4-year institutions, were 2.5% Hispanics, 90.1% Whites, 5.8% others, and 1.6% none indicated. Possible explanations for such a great difference between the national norms and UTPA could be the proximity of the university to the Hispanic students’ homes and the preponderance of students of Hispanic origin at UTPA.

Although not shown in the tables, available data revealed that over the nine graduating classes for the reporting period, the Hispanic undergraduate degree recipients ranged from 85.1% to 90.2%; for non-Hispanic White graduates, the results ranged from 6.8% to 11.5%; and the percentage of other graduates ranged from 2% to 4%.

Compared to the entering students’ data (Hispanic, 82.7%; White, 9.6%), the percentage of graduating students (Hispanic, 87.7%; White, 9.6%) is higher, whereas a significant reduction is reflected in the remaining category (decreased from 10.2% to 2.8%). It is possible that the majority of individuals placed in the remaining category (African Americans, Asians, Native Americans, and nonresidents) either dropped out or transferred to other colleges and universities.

The ethnicity of graduate degree recipients is given in Table 3. Out of a total of 732 students receiving graduate degrees, 69% were Hispanic students, and 22% were non-Hispanic White students. Comparing Table 1 and Table 2, it is evident that relatively fewer Hispanic students pursue
graduate-level degrees. However, other available data not included in the tables indicate that over the 3 years of this study, the percentage of Hispanic students receiving graduate degrees has been increasing.

National norms are not presented in Table 3 because the authors were not successful in finding national norms for Hispanic students graduating with a master’s degree. There were 2,377 (63%) female graduates out of 3,771 total undergraduates. The percentage of female graduates is 5% above the national norm of 58.4%. This is consistent with the nation, as an increasing number of females are entering college (Mortenson, 1999). Among the Hispanic group in this study, 64% of graduates were women and 36% men. The Hispanic women constituted 56% of the total graduating class, whereas Hispanic men constituted 32%. Results of the tabulation are given in Table 4.

The College of Education and the College of Health Sciences and Human Services have majors in career fields traditionally entered by women. These departments at UTPA have consistently graduated higher percentages of women. Although there were variations within each of the graduating classes, these variations do not appear to be consistent in increases or decreases over the period of the study. However, the entering freshmen data suggested that an increasing number of students declare science as their major but later change it to one of the other areas.

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### Table 1
Classifications of Entering Freshmen Classes (in percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Fall 1998</th>
<th>Spring 1998</th>
<th>National</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>45.10</td>
<td>54.80</td>
<td>46.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>54.90</td>
<td>45.20</td>
<td>54.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>81.60</td>
<td>83.80</td>
<td>7.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>6.70</td>
<td>7.10</td>
<td>78.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11.70</td>
<td>10.20</td>
<td>13.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First generation</td>
<td>70.10</td>
<td>77.00</td>
<td>43.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### Table 2
Ethnicity of Undergraduate Degree Recipients, Graduating Classes of August 1996 to May 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Total Graduates</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>National Norms %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>3,306</td>
<td>87.67</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>9.55</td>
<td>83.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3,771</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Compared to the entering freshmen data, in which these students were equally distributed among men and women, a substantial increase of 13% is seen in women graduating. Within the Hispanic community, this may be perceived as a reversal of gender roles.

Other relevant information is given in Table 5. The mean age of a graduating student is 27.22 years. On average, the student has an ACT score of 16.31 and has spent 6.42 years completing the baccalaureate degree. This is complementary to another study by Abraham and Lujan (2000), which revealed the mean age of entering freshmen was 18.9. This seems to indicate an increasing number of students are entering college directly out of high school.

Students were asked to choose only 1 out of 12 reasons considered influential in their decision to attend the university. The one overwhelming reason to attend the university was its proximity to home (86.4%). Thus, it may be that attending the local university is the choice between going to college and not going to college. Hispanic students probably attend the hometown university, whereas non-Hispanic students see themselves as having the choice to attend college elsewhere. Perhaps this explains why there are more Hispanic graduates (88%) than the percentage of Hispanic population (83%) in the region.

Table 3
Ethnicity of Graduate Degree Recipients, Graduating Classes of August 1996 to May 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Total Graduates</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>69.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>22.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>7.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>732</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4
Gender of Undergraduate Degree Recipients, Graduating Classes of August 1996 to May 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Total Graduates</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>% Within Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic women</td>
<td>2,106</td>
<td>55.85</td>
<td>63.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic men</td>
<td>1,199</td>
<td>31.80</td>
<td>36.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White women</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>5.81</td>
<td>60.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White men</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>39.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other women</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>49.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other men</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>50.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3,771</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Outcomes of College Experiences

A series of questions was asked of the recent graduates to evaluate their experiences at UTPA. These questions included subjects dealing with satisfaction with a variety of aspects of academic life and the extent to which their intellectual, career, and personal development had been enriched. The information that follows provides the results of some of these factors.

Improved Quality of Life

Regardless of financial benefits to the graduates, the majority believed their quality of life was enhanced because of their college experiences. More than 65% of all graduating students responded that their quality of life was definitely improved as a result of the college education; another 30% responded that their life was probably improved. Furthermore, 70.5% of the first-generation graduates, compared to 57.1% of the other graduates, tended to be more positive about the enhancement of their quality of life. There were some differences based on the ethnicity, 68.4% of the Hispanic graduates and 60.6% of the White graduates reported that their quality of life was definitely improved.

Single Most Important Outcome of College Experiences

Graduates were asked to identify the most important outcome of their college experience. Of the nine responses available to them, two emerged as most important: 27.5% chose the opportunity for professional advancement and 27% selected personal growth and understanding. Other responses scoring more than 10% were: financial success, more interesting and challenging job; a stable, reliable job; and the opportunity to make contributions to the world. The opportunity for professional advancement was more important to master’s-level graduates (41.8%).

Contributions to Personal Growth

Graduates were asked to respond to 24 questions that may have contributed to improvement in their lives and thus to their personal growth and de-
velopment. The top-ranked 10 items were (a) work cooperatively in a large
group, (b) learn on my own, (c) plan and carry out projects, (d) persist at dif-
cult tasks, (e) speak effectively, (f) understand written information, (g) 
work independently, (h) use the library, (i) define and solve problems, and 
j) write effectively.

Other Influential Factors in Academic Development
Students were asked to select those elements that they believed were 
most influential to their academic development. Of the nine experiences 
listed for their response, only three emerged as having had an influence on 
approximately 20% of the graduating class. Of the graduates, 26% believed 
their classroom experiences contributed most to their academic develop-
ment, whereas 21% believed that their experiences and interactions with fac-
ulty/advisor contributed most their academic development. Opportunity to 
interact with other students was the third most commonly cited reason for 
their academic development.

Employment
At the time the survey was administered, almost 75% of the graduates 
were employed full-time, self-employed, or were employed while continu-
ing their education. Most of these had found employment prior to or within 3 
months of graduation. Of the employed group, 28.7% expressed satisfaction 
with the challenges of their present job, 26.8% with their working condi-
tions, and 37.5% with the location of their employment. Of the employed 
graduates, 24.4% were satisfied with career potential in their current posi-
tion. Of the graduates, 19.8% reported problems in finding jobs that paid 
enough. Of the employed, 14.3% expressed dissatisfaction with their present 
salary and benefits, and 35% believed that they were underemployed. Ap-
proximately one third of the employed received a salary of less than $24,000 
per year, another third received a salary between $24,000 and $30,000, and 
the other third received a salary above $30,000. Out of the 25% of graduates 
who were unemployed, almost 50% were unable to find full-time employment.

Discussion
This study showed that 88% of the graduating students were of Hispanic 
origin. This percentage is higher than the percentage of Hispanic individuals 
in the area. A possible explanation for this difference became evident in the 
analysis of a survey administered to the graduates. The Hispanic students at-
tended college because the university was located within their reach, whereas 
non-Hispanic students attend college elsewhere. The Hispanic students were 
not inclined to attend college away from home because of financial restric-
tions or family responsibilities. The study also found that relatively fewer 
Hispanic individuals pursue graduate-level degrees.
The large difference between Hispanic enrollment at UTPA (84%) and the national average (8%) could not be explained by local population statistics alone. Hispanic students appeared happy with the culture of UTPA, where the majority of students are of Hispanic origin. They feel more comfortable in interacting with other students of the same culture, often speaking in Spanish. Kanter (1977) postulated that as a minority group becomes proportionately smaller, members of that group experience decline in performance, self-esteem, and satisfaction. At UTPA, as the Hispanic student population becomes larger and larger, the students experience increased performance, self-esteem, and satisfaction.

There was approximately twice the number of Hispanic women graduating than Hispanic men. There were more White women than White men graduates, but the disparity was not as great as seen in the Hispanic population. Although there is a national trend of increasing numbers of women graduating from college, the disparity seen here is much greater, and no clear-cut explanation is evident from the analysis of the survey. From the combined 60 years of their experience at UTPA, the authors postulate that this disparity could be attributed to the cultural expectation that male students provide financial support to their families.

Of all Hispanic graduates, 75% were first-generation college students compared to 10% nationwide. A first-generation student may not be able to get proper educational guidance at home due to limited parental formal education. But, having a HSI in or near their hometown makes up for this deficiency. This survey, and another survey of the entering students (Abraham, & Lujan, 2000), revealed that the success of the first-generation college student depended on factors other than the actual classroom, such as availability of faculty outside the classroom, orientation to the university in general and its climate, and interaction with other students. Fleming (2000) reported similar findings with other minority populations. She reported that African American students succeed best in colleges in which they received more help with adjustment issues. Of the first-generation college graduates, 70% believed that their quality of life was enhanced because of their college experiences.

References


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