The Role of Citizenship for Hispanics in U.S. Higher Education
February 24, 2011

The following remarks were delivered as part of the MIT 150 Human Diversity and Social Order Forum Series, Part 3: Minorities in the United States.

Author: Christine Ortiz, Dean for Graduate Education, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

As we consider the role of citizenship for Hispanics in US Higher Education, we can never get too far away from the immigrant story, which is really the American story. The cultural makeup of our country today is built upon wave after wave of immigration: first the European immigrants in colonial times, then an influx from northern Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, then a wave from southern and eastern Europe at the turn of the twentieth century. The decades since 1965’s Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments, which abolished national-origin quotas, have seen immigrants primarily from Latin America and Asia. According to the Migration Policy Institute, in 2006, the top twelve emigrant countries were Mexico, the People’s Republic of China, Philippines, India, Cuba, Colombia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Vietnam, Jamaica, South Korea, and Guatemala. [1]

As mentioned above, Hispanics make up a large portion of the most recent immigrants. We talk about “Hispanics” for the ease of referring to people with origins in countries strongly tied to Spanish language or culture, but this title cannot begin to encompass the diversity such of an extremely heterogeneous group. “Hispanic” does not connote race, but rather embraces those with origins from from North and Central America, South America and the Caribbean. I’m sure it comes as no surprise that the culture and traditions of these countries vary as widely as their geography.

To give a bit of perspective on timeline and my own background, I arrived at MIT in 1999 as an assistant Professor in the Department of Materials Science and Engineering. My father was born and raised in Puerto Rico and graduated with a degree in Electrical Engineering from the University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez in
1969. I was born in Texas in 1970 while my father was serving in the Air Force as an engineering instructor; soon after, he and my mother moved to New York. The history of Puerto Rico is unique among Hispanic lands. Granted US citizenship as of the 1917 Jones-Shafroth Act, large numbers of Puerto Ricans migrated to New York in waves. Spurred by the Great Depression to search for jobs, they found work in factories and ship docks after the start of World War II. Another wave occurred after the war’s end, as many soldiers used the GI Bill to attend college. They settled in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and in East Harlem, NY establishing neighborhoods rich with cultural vitality.

As we all know, Hispanics are the most rapidly growing population in the United States. In 1900, the American population numbered a mere 76 million, and the subset of Hispanics was a miniscule 500,000, or 0.7% of the population as reported by the Population Reference Bureau. One hundred years later, the Bureau reports, the Hispanic population had swelled to more than 35 million out of over 281 million residents, or 12.5%. From 2000 to 2006, the Hispanic growth rate was more than three times that of the total population, as reported by the US census. Today, Hispanics are over 16% of the total US population and are projected to increase to 29% by 2050. The densest concentrations are present in California, Texas, Florida, New York and Illinois.

Though Hispanics make up the largest minority population, they are still underrepresented in all segments of higher education. According a report from the Center for Urban Education,

"Latinos constituted 19% of the college-aged (18- to 24-year-old) population in 2006. In that year, however, only 8% of bachelor's degrees, 3.5% of master's degrees, and 4.4% of doctorates in STEM fields were awarded to Latinos. This is not due to a lack of interest. Among Latinos who enroll in four-year institutions, 36% indicate an intention to major in a STEM field. Latinos also enter STEM majors at rates similar to whites and African Americans."
Indeed, according to an Associated Press-Univision poll as reported by USA Today, "Hispanics value education more than do Americans as a whole. 87% said a college education is extremely important, compared with 78% of the overall US population.” So why do only 13% of Hispanics have a college degree or higher? The poll cited several contributing factors: Hispanics often cannot afford the tuition and prefer not to take out loans; they devote much time to the needs of family; they do not feel largely supported by teachers.

I'd like to now discuss the history of Hispanics at MIT. Hispanics began enrolling at MIT in the late 1800's. Our earliest records of a Latin American graduate was Sophia Gregoria Hayden Bennett, the daughter of a Chilean who earned her Bachelor's of Science in the Department of Architecture in 1890. In 1910, students formed the MIT Club of Mexico, followed shortly in 1913 by Club Latino-Americano de MIT, whose goal was to keep "in friendly touch with each other all the Latino Americans of [MIT] and [foster] mutually beneficial relations between them as individuals and as representatives of their several nationalities.”[2] 1916 saw the enrollment of the first three Puerto Rican students. In the early 1960's, 100% of Puerto Rican alumni participated in funding the construction of La Sala de Puerto Rico in the Stratton Student Center.[3] In 1979, Spanish House (La Casa) was "Established to provide an environment to practice Spanish and to allow residents to develop an appreciation of Hispanic cultures.” The Association of Puerto Rican Students was chartered in 1981. LAMITA, the Latino Association of MIT Alumni/ae, was founded in the summer of 1989 to serve as a vehicle for service to the Latino community, particularly in promoting science and math education in local school systems, and to serve as a voice within MIT for Latino concerns. The Society of Mexican American Engineers and Scientists was established in 1997. And in 2001, Teatro Latino was founded to "produce theatrical performances in the Spanish language by students who embrace theater and want to gain a higher appreciation of the Latin culture.”

Our Hispanic alumni have included luminaries such as Luis Ferre ’24, SM ’25, a former governor of Puerto Rico. Rodolfo Eduardo Herrera Llerani ’38 was one of the
Hispanic Americans have been the largest growing under-represented minority group over the last decade in MIT’s graduate population. In 2004, the MIT faculty passed a unanimous resolution to double the percentage of underrepresented minority faculty and triple the percentage of underrepresented graduate students within ten years. The faculty adopted this resolution in recognition of MIT’s commitment “to developing and maintaining a robust environment that values and celebrates the potential of all the members of the MIT community as that potential enhances MIT’s mission to continued excellence in teaching, research and community service.” While the numbers have increased significantly since 2004, in particular over the last few years, Hispanics still today represent just ~6% of the total domestic graduate population, which translates into ~200 students. At MIT, there are an additional ~200 Hispanic international students with the highest populations from Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Columbia and Argentina.

In 1996, a round table discussion was held with an ad-hoc group of Hispanic MIT students on their experiences at MIT, specifically with regards to race, produced by Dr. Clarence G. Williams who was the Special Assistant to the MIT President at that time. This resulted in a video series entitled *It’s Intuitively Obvious* and is now available on the MIT Diversity website. This thoughtful, and now historical footage,
provides a snapshot of these students of what the environment, the concerns and the lives of these students were like at this time at MIT as seen through their eyes. My office held a similar round table discussion approximately one month ago, ~15 years later, and I will discuss some of the similarities and differences in themes by comparing and contrasting these two forums.

A number of major themes emerged during the 1996 discussions. Firstly, students expressed a desire for the larger community to recognize and acknowledge the heterogeneity, the rich cultural, socioeconomic and racial diversity within both the national and international Hispanic populations. Students felt confusion over being characterized and / or seemingly expected to participate in specific ethnic subgroups, as well as the dichotomy between cultural pride and celebration versus the potential of being perceived as a separatist. The role of stereotypes, academic expectations, self-confidence, the need for more Hispanic role models and mentors in the faculty and administration, climate, retention and the responsibility of giving back to the community all were raised and discussed.

As we scan forward 15 years to 2011, we can ask ourselves; what has changed? What has emerged? What is still relevant? Hispanic and Hispanic-American graduate students at MIT still are a highly heterogeneous group from a set of diverse cultures, nationalities, races and socioeconomic backgrounds - from those who are wealthy to those whose salary as a graduate student was more than their entire family combined. One emergent theme is the value of higher education and, in particular, how success is perceived and defined in Latin American and Hispanic communities. Often, there is a sense of appreciation for the value of professional degrees, for example medical doctors and lawyers, since these play a visible and interacting role in daily life, as well as engineers who in many Latin American countries, for example those that are historically agrarian-based, had been responsible for the development of cities and were a symbol representing national economic progress. Such professions can be perceived as stable while other degree program, for example a PhD in other fields, sometimes can be viewed as of higher
risk. At our round table discussion, it was furthermore questioned whether or not views on higher education were more heavily influenced by socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, rather than citizenship, nationality and ethnicity. There was a sense of the significant role of gender on the pursuit of higher education in the context of marriage and traditional male-female societal roles. Hispanic students who pursue higher education are often viewed with great pride by their families and communities and yet still can experience feelings of detachment and pressure to return home.

For Hispanic students arriving to MIT, cultural adjustment can be challenging (just as for the many international students we enroll each year). MIT is a remarkable institution and it is characterized by a fast-pace, rigor, and a strong work ethic, as well as by extraordinary creativity and innovation. We’re open 24/7. We strive to make the graduate experience at MIT a transformative one where all students are challenged, inspired, where they can identify and form mentoring relationships, where they tap into and hone talents they may not even be aware of, where they develop important transferable skills such as communication, collaboration, tenacity, and critical thinking. We aim to create an environment and provide opportunities where ALL graduate students find their path and passion, develop self-confidence, unlock their imagination and creativity, realize their potential, become life-long learners and achieve their academic, personal and professional goals. While our undergraduate population and administration have diversified significantly over the last decade, strides still need to be made at the graduate and faculty level, but I am encouraged by the increasing numbers over the last five years and the slope of this trend. Even so there are still challenges to be met; the need for more role models, how to create a sense of community among such a diverse population and financial pressures for many students to send money back home and to support their extended family.

With that, I am also encouraged by the recent emphasis and community support for campus climate and inclusivity, and considering this important area in addition to
the population statistics. We want to be a place that welcomes those of all races, nationalities, genders, cultures, sexual orientations, disabilities, socioeconomic backgrounds, ages, religions and languages. The recent MIT Initiative for Faculty Race and Diversity has made historical advancements in this area and included an in-depth study of the experiences of minority faculty on campus, including a survey and quantitative personnel data, a cohort analysis, and interviews of minority faculty at MIT and a comparison group of non-minority faculty. We will be drawing on some of the methods in this work to assess climate for graduate students at MIT through an upcoming Enrolled Graduate Student survey. Ultimately, I think we all can contribute to creating an environment in US higher education in which all of its members are intellectually and socially engaged, valued, interacting and more closely connected to each other and the world. I hope all of us can take on that challenge to create an educational experiences which truly celebrates our differences and empowers the our students and the next generation the achieve their dreams.

I would like to take a moment to acknowledge the students, post-docs, and faculty who participated in last month’s round table discussion. Many thanks to:

*Graduate students*

- Santiago Eloy Alfaro
- Juan Rene Alvarez
- Rodolfo Camacho-Aguilera
- Nancy Guillen
- Kari Hernandez
- Jose Luis McFaline
- Maria Telleria
- Miriam Solis
- Jaime Jose Rivera
Angelita Mireles Cesar Emil Rodriguez Garabot, Research Fellow Hector Hernandez, Post-Doctoral Associate Assistant Professor Enectalí Figueroa-Feliciano Margarita Ribas Groeger, Director of Spanish Language

...and to the staff of the ODGE.