

Getting Ready for the Future

“Why aren’t there more Latinos in hi-tech?” a local reporter asked me once when I was Mayor of San Jose.

The answer, of course, is not simple. The issues affecting Hispanic student achievement are well chronicled, including the lack of quality affordable pre-school education, low English reading comprehension, lack of role models, and low enrollment in high school math and science courses needed for college. These are just a few of the factors contributing low numbers of Hispanics pursuing hi-tech careers. I know there are Hispanics in hi-tech, since I spent much of my career at Hewlett-Packard; there just aren’t enough of us.

San Jose is the nation’s tenth largest city, and we pride ourselves as the “Capital of Silicon Valley.” The Hispanic population of Silicon Valley is close to 30%, yet our representation in the ranks of local hi-tech firms is far below that level. Most Hispanics in high tech quickly discover they’re the only Hispanic engineer or computer scientist in their group, and very seldom do they have a Hispanic mentor who can help them reach their career objectives.

I told the reporter that part of the answer might be that most Hispanic students don’t know what a hi-tech engineer does---even in here Silicon Valley. I told him that most probably would say that an engineer either drives a train or builds bridges. When the reporter doubted this, I suggested that he survey Hispanic students.

Sure enough, a month later, he acknowledged with astonishment that he had surveyed Hispanic students and only a handful knew that an engineer also could build computers and systems. I wasn’t surprised. I’ve visited Silicon Valley classrooms over the past two decades and talked with students about their career dreams. Most said they dreamed of being an attorney, actress, or professional athlete. It was an extremely rare student who wanted to be a computer engineer.

The Hispanic Foundation of Silicon Valley is dedicated to inspiring community giving, engagement, and investment in the health, educational achievement, and leadership development needed to strengthen our thriving local Hispanic community. The Foundation strongly believes that the future of our Hispanic community in Silicon Valley, California, and the nation depends on the current generation of students being more successful in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) curriculum. To this end we are pursuing partnerships with other foundations, corporations, and business, education and community leaders to address the enrollment and graduation rates of Hispanic students in these fields.

This issue recently received more attention at the national level when the Congressional Hispanic Leadership Institute conducted a Congressional briefing on “STEM: How the U.S. Hispanic Community will Define the Future of U.S. Competitiveness.” Implicit in the title is the understanding that our nation must seriously address the Hispanic education achievement gap or our nation’s long-term economy and security will indeed suffer.

President Obama recognizes the urgent need for improvement, and he has called for STEM initiatives to be launched nationwide. Communities and states now are preparing their applications for federal stimulus funds to help reduce the achievement gap, and the Hispanic Foundation is collaborating with local organizations that specifically target Hispanic students in their plans.

We need effective Hispanic leadership in every community across the nation to step forward to ensure that Hispanic students can get the preparation they need to fully participate in increasingly complex technological society. The pace of change is accelerating, and so is the urgency of getting our students ready for the future. They are depending on all of us, because we will be depending on them in the coming years.

Ron Gonzales is President & CEO of the Hispanic Foundation of Silicon Valley and past Mayor of San Jose, CA.