



## Texas works to boost Latino enrollment in universities

Columnist Mercedes Olivera

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Texas Latinos are as diverse as the U.S. itself.

They represent different nationalities, linguistic abilities and income levels; some are bilingual, some are English-dominant, some speak only Spanish.

The same holds true for their children. But Latino students have one thing in common – like all children, they can learn at high levels, said Texas Commissioner for Higher Education **Raymund Paredes**.

"Raise your levels of expectation for them, focus on saying that they *can* go to college, and they'll succeed," he said this week.

As proof, he cites new figures that show the state is starting to make measured progress in its strategic plan, "Closing the Gaps," to increase all enrollment at colleges and universities by 2015.

But the goal of increasing the number of Hispanic students, whose dropout rate is the highest in the state, has proved especially difficult, though the numbers are improving.

Hispanic enrollment at state colleges and universities grew 49 percent – by 103,915 students – between 2000 and 2007, according to Closing the Gaps: 2007 Progress Report.

The changes, Dr. Paredes said, have come through an extensive use of outreach programs, such as "Go Centers" throughout the state, and by using counselors to promote a college culture – one in which attending college is more the rule than the exception.

Go Centers are areas in a high school devoted to offering students information on everything from admissions and financial aid in college to course requirements and degrees offered.

A one-size-fits-all strategy doesn't always work to educate Latinos, he said, because they are such a diverse group.

A diverse student body also means teachers must become more agile, sophisticated and nuanced in their teaching methods, he said. They also must be more scholarly, be active researchers and able to master new skills all the time, he said.

"The kinds of teaching skills required are now more complex than before because the country has a more diverse population than before," he said.

**Ruth Bail**, principal at Woodrow Wilson High School, said that students in this new media age have become quicker at response times but slower at reflection and critical thinking. Teachers have to be more creative in their lesson plans and help students digest what they learn at a much deeper level, she said.

Dr. Paredes goes further, saying that the "best teachers find a way to make lesson plans more relevant to their students' lives."

He will address the issue of service learning, as well as the Closing the Gaps goals, when he speaks next Friday at 10 a.m. at the University of Texas at Arlington library.

One point that he may not have to dwell on, though, is already on the radar of many higher education institutions, which are drawing from the same pool of high school graduates: Over the next 15 years or so, Hispanics will account for 80 percent of the growth in the college-age population in Texas.