

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 319 328

HE 023 521

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 TITLE A Profile of Incoming Freshmen at the University of Maryland, College Park, 1989-1990. Research Report #1-90.
 INSTITUTION Maryland Univ., College Park. Counseling Center.; Maryland Univ., College Park. Office of Minority Student Education.
 PUB DATE 90
 NOTE 16p.
 PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS Academic Persistence; Career Planning; *College Freshmen; Counseling; Extracurricular Activities; Higher Education; *Hispanic Americans; Intellectual Disciplines; *Profiles; State Universities; *Student Attitudes; *Student Development; *Student Educational Objectives
 IDENTIFIERS *University of Maryland College Park

ABSTRACT

The University of Maryland's College Park campus conducted a student survey of 935 entering Hispanic freshmen for 1989-1990 to determine their attitudes towards the university, academic life, extra-curricular activities, and counseling, and their career orientation. Hispanic students felt that their weakest academic areas were their study habits (26%), their math skills (26%), and their writing skills (13%); however, most tended to agree that they knew how to use the library. About 26% felt that they would not drop out from UMCP for any reason and appeared to be in college for practical, career-oriented reasons; they tended to be primarily concerned with developing skills in college directly applicable to an occupation. Hispanic freshmen appeared to be interested in intercollegiate sports and other fitness activities, and would consider seeking counseling for educational/vocational issues, but not for emotional/social issues. Contains 15 references.
 (Author/GLR)

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A Profile of Incoming Hispanic Freshmen at the
University of Maryland, College Park, 1989-1990

Jairo Fuertes and William E. Sedlacek

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This study was sponsored and partly conducted by the Counseling Center and the Office of Minority Student Education at the University of Maryland, College Park. Computer time for this project was provided by the Computer Science Center of the University of Maryland, College Park.

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Summary

The University New Student Census for 1989-1990 was administered to 935 entering freshmen students at the University of Maryland, College Park. The ethnic make-up of the students was White (70%), Blacks (13%), Asians (11%), Hispanics (3%), other (2%), and Native Americans (<1%).

Generally, Hispanic students felt that their weakest academic areas were their study habits (26%), their math skills (26%), and their writing skills (13%); however, most tended to agree that they knew how to use the library well. About 26% felt that they would not drop out from UMCP for any reason, and appeared to be in college for practical, career-oriented reasons. They tended to be primarily concerned with developing skills in college directly applicable to an occupation. Hispanic freshmen appeared to be interested in intercollegiate sports and other fitness activities, and would consider seeking counseling for educational/vocational issues, but not for emotional/social issues.

Introduction

During the decade of the 1980's, Hispanics grew at five times the rate of the rest of the U.S. population. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1989). Their increase in numbers has been evident in higher education, specially during the ten year period from 1976-1986 (Evangelauf, 1988). Statistics show that in 1986, there were 624,000 Hispanic students enrolled in higher education, compared with 384,000, in 1976; that is a 63% increase in enrollment, compared with 9% for White students during the same period (U.S. Department of Education, 1988). However, like most minority students, Hispanics have found it difficult to adjust to academic and social life in predominantly White colleges (Garza & Nelson, 1973; Hunt, 1975; Lyon, 1973; Olivas, 1982; Sedlacek, 1987). Hispanics have reported not feeling welcome at predominantly White colleges and of being treated like uninvited guests in a strange land (Parker & Scott, 1985).

Research on Hispanic students is scarce, and the limited research that has been done on Hispanics has found them to be a heterogeneous, complex group, originating from over 20 different countries, each with differences in language and culture (Quevedo-Garcia, 1987). White and Sedlacek (1987) point out that the attitudes of White students toward Hispanics are somewhat more positive than they are towards Blacks, though they are still negative. Their social behaviors on campuses differ depending on geographical location in the U.S. (Patterson, Sedlacek, & Perry, 1984), and acculturation (Fuentes, Sedlacek, & Westbrook, 1989).

It seems logical that in order to better retain and develop these students, research will have to be done to assess their needs in the U.S. college environment. The purpose of this study was to create a profile of freshman Hispanic students entering a predominantly White institution in the Northeast by assessing their attitudes toward the university, extra curricular activities, academic life, and counseling.

Method

The University New Student Census (UNSC) was administered to 935 Freshmen (52% male) attending a summer orientation program at a predominantly White, eastern university. Of the 935 students, 70% were White, 13% Black, 11% Asian, 3% Hispanic, 2% other, and <1% Native American. Since nearly all new freshmen attend orientation at this university, the sample of students that take the UNSC can be considered representative of all freshmen at this institution. The UNSC consists of 79 items which assess demographical and attitudinal information from students. A descriptive analysis of the responses given by Hispanic students (n=31, 52% male) to selected items is reported by percentages. Gender differences are not reported due to the low number of respondents.

Results

The majority of the students (68%) lived in the suburbs before entering the university, and reported having grown up in neighborhoods in which 25% or less of the residents were Hispanic (55%). The majority of the students reported they would live on campus their first semester (65%), and tended to agree that they would identify primarily with their residence hall mates.

Attitudes Toward the University

Hispanic students selected the university largely because of its geographical location (30%), and because of the quality of a specific program in a department (27%). The remaining reasons included the university's overall academic reputation (23%), its affordable tuition (17%), and its athletic programs (17%). Most students heard of the university through university publications (37%), visits (37%), and college guides (17%). The majority of the students responded that the university was their first choice (58%) among schools they had applied to, and that their parents (42%) and other students (16%) were most influential in helping them decide on a school.

Attitudes toward Academic Life

Hispanics felt their weakest academic areas were their study habits (26%), their math skills (26%), and their writing skills (13%). When asked why they would likely drop out of school, 26% reported that they would not drop out of school for any reason, 23% attributed rising school costs to their dropping out, and 16% considered lack of interest in school work for possibly dropping out. The majority reported that in high school, they usually studied between 4 and 8 hours per week. In addition, 37% of them reported that in high school they usually kept up with their work, and 33% reported that sometimes they fell behind. The majority of the students agreed that they knew how to use the library well.

Career Orientation

Most students appeared to be enrolling in the university for very practical, career-oriented reasons. The majority of the students (61%) responded that their most important educational objective was to learn skills directly applicable to a job. Other educational objectives were to decide upon a career path (16%), and to become independent in thinking and behavior (10%). This

job-oriented thinking was further reinforced by the answers students gave to an item related to educational philosophies.

Clark and Trow (1966) devised a model to better understand the educational philosophies of students. The model consists of four philosophies, each expressing a different reason for being in college. The four philosophies (Table 1) are Vocational, Collegiate, Academic, and Non-conforming. The philosophies chosen by Hispanic students were Vocational (45%), Collegiate (27%), Academic (22%), and Non-conforming (6%).

When Hispanics students were asked why they would stay at the university until graduation, students responded that it would be because they needed the degree to enter graduate school (33%), or because they needed the degree to enter their chosen profession (26%). Only 17% answered that they would stay in school until graduation because they were interested in ideas and the pursuit of knowledge. Students responded that the highest academic degree to which they aspired was the M.A. or M.S. (39%), the medical degree (23%), and the B.A. or B.S. (20%).

Attitudes Toward Extra-Curricular Activities

Hispanic freshmen appeared to be most interested in recreational or intercollegiate athletics (42%), student publications (13%), musical or dramatic organizations (13%), and special interest groups (10%). When students were asked what contributed the most to their development in the last year, they responded that their social life was most influential (32%), followed by friendships made (16%), their jobs (16%), and contact with teachers (13%). Most Hispanics tended to agree that they would participate in some kind of recreational sport or fitness activity during their tenure at the university.

Attitudes Toward Counseling

The majority of the students tended to agree that they understood human sexuality well, and were optimistic that they would be able to find channels for expressing complaints at the university. Hispanics tended to agree that would seek counseling for educational/vocational issues, but tended to disagree that they would seek counseling for emotional/social concerns.

Discussion

Sedlacek (1987) has shown that a minority student that is confident, realistic, and resourceful will most likely succeed in a predominantly White environment. It is interesting to note that the percentage of students answering that they would not drop out of school for any reason (26%), is very close to the percentage of Hispanic students that graduate in 5 years or less on the average from this same institution. Tracey and Sedlacek (1987) provide evidence that responses to that item as part of the Noncognitive Questionnaire (NCQ) correlate with the graduation of minority students up to six years after initial matriculation.

Students reported their study habits to be their weakest academic area. It may be especially helpful to Hispanic freshmen students to provide them with a study skills course that promotes the development of time-management skills, note-taking skills, test-taking skills, etc.. This course could also help Hispanic freshmen develop assertiveness skills which are essential for college success (Quevedo-Garcia, 1987). Hispanics appear to enter college for career-oriented reasons, yet they may not be able to initiate career development behaviors their first year in college. Since they are willing to engage in

educational/vocational counseling, the course mentioned could provide students with assignments that require them go to a Counseling Center on campus and find out about vocational testing and counseling.

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Table 1

Educational Philosophies

Philosophy A: (Vocational) In college primarily to prepare for a career; view practical work experience as more important than intellectual discussion or extra-curricular activities.

Philosophy B: (Academic) Attaches greatest importance to interest in ideas, pursuit of knowledge, and cultivation of the intellect; often spends leisure time reading books not required for course work and in intellectual discussion.

Philosophy C: (Collegiate) Highly involved in social and other extracurricular activities. Considers learning from social relationships as an important part of college experience.

Philosophy D: (Non-conforming) Emphasizes individual interest and styles, concern for personal identity, and is generally critical of and detached from the college, faculty and administration.