Where are the Latinos?: improving representation at Metropolitan Community College in South Omaha, Nebraska

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Where are the Latinos? Improving representation at Metropolitan Community College in South Omaha, Nebraska

by

Erin Eileen Joy

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: Teaching English as a Second Language/Applied Linguistics (Literacy)

Program of Study Committee:
Roberta Vann, Major Professor
John Levis
Donna Niday

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2005
Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Erin Eileen Joy

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

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Major Professor
For the Major Program

For the teachers who have helped shape me,
especially the two greatest,
my parents
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ABSTRACT

This study examines the gap between Latinos and higher education, with a focus on lessening that gap in a community college in Omaha, Nebraska. The development of the South Omaha Latino community and educational challenges specific to it are discussed. To present a picture of the community, information from ethnographic interviews with Latino scholars, college decision makers, and community agency representatives is given. After considering factors relevant to the educational attainment of Latinos, recommendations for improving Latino representation in the college’s student body are offered.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The topic of immigration is one of the most heatedly debated in our country today. One only has to listen to talk radio, read letters to the editor in newspapers and magazines, or watch television news to see how open an overwhelming majority of Americans are about their negative views about undocumented Latino immigration. In the months preceding the writing of this thesis, national attention was directed toward the issue of illegal immigration through several news items. One leaving quite an impression on the nation was the Minuteman Project in Arizona. Beginning in April of 2005, volunteer citizens, some armed, began patrolling the Arizona border looking for undocumented immigrants from Mexico. They claimed that their policy was only to call the Border Patrol to report such crossings, but even President Bush warned the participants against vigilantism. On the other hand, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger cheered the group on, saying they were doing “a terrific job” (Berestein, 2005).

In the same month, Schwarzenegger addressed the topic of illegal immigration in a speech to the Newspaper Association of America: “Close the borders in California and all across Mexico and the United States,” he said. “Because I think it is just unfair to have all those people coming across” (“Arnold,” 2005). After receiving a number of complaints about advocating closure of the border, the governor claimed to have misspoken, citing language confusion as the reason: “Yesterday was a total screw-up in the words I used. Because instead of ‘closing,’ I

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1 The term *Latino* is used throughout this thesis instead of *Hispanic* (unless in a source) because it refers to people in the United States of Latin American ancestry, including Spanish-speaking countries such as Mexico and non-Spanish-speaking countries such as Brazil. It is worth noting, though, that many people, especially in debates over immigration, use terms such as *Latino, Hispanic,* and *Mexican* interchangeably.
meant 'securing.' I think maybe my English, I need to go back to school and study a little bit" ("Arnold," 2005). Despite accepting Schwarzenegger’s apology, California Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez pointed out to CBS news that the governor had advocated for closing the borders before in an interview with Fox’s Bill O’Reilly, indicating that Schwarzenegger’s excuse of faulty English may have been an easy way of allaying the outcry from the state’s considerable Latino community ("Arnold," 2005).

Of course, this attention toward illegal immigration is not new. Perhaps the most anti-immigrant measure approved by voters in the last decade of the 20th century, Proposition 187 in California, was passed in 1994. Its purpose was to deny state services to undocumented immigrants, but it has suffered several successful challenges in court.

Despite the challenges to Proposition 187, citizens continue to vote for and support bills at the state level that limit access to services for people who cross the border illegally. On May 12, 2005, the Arizona state legislature passed a bill that denies childcare assistance, adult education classes, and in-state tuition at public universities to undocumented immigrants. Some claim that laws such as these unfairly target immigrants instead of the industries whose survival and/or profit margins depend upon their labor. Senators John McCain and Ted Kennedy introduced a federal bill the same day the Arizona legislature passed its bill to enforce stricter employer sanctions for businesses that do not properly verify documents (Berestein, 2005).

Unlike California or Arizona, though, the heavy influx of Latino immigrants is fairly new to Midwestern states such as Nebraska, with most of the population arriving since 1980. Despite the fact that businesses in the state, especially in the meatpacking industry, rely upon immigrants to fill labor shortages, citizens there
are some of the most vocally anti-immigrant. As Nebraskan researchers and writers Gouveia and Stull say, "Racism and xenophobia have often shaped immigration policy and the reception given immigrants in the United States. [...] As a result, public pressure to restrict immigrant rights is increasing, and public willingness to welcome and assist them is waning" (1997, p. 15). This affects all areas of social policy, including education.

The American media's reporting on Latinos resonates with Nebraskans; coverage is generally negative, dealing with issues such as illegal immigration, social and governmental issues related to illegal immigration, drug trafficking, and gang involvement (Lopez, 2001). Latinos are not the first American immigrant group to experience resistance, though; they are simply the latest:

"Today, as in previous periods of significant immigration, many believe the U.S. is being 'overrun' by 'aliens,' a misperception reinforced by public statements that we have 'lost control of our borders.' Anti-immigrant sentiments are historically associated with times of economic insecurity, high unemployment, and low wages. Irish, German, Italian, Polish, Asian, and Latino immigrants have all at one time or another been blamed for whatever social and economic ills besiege society at the moment." (Gouveia & Stull, 1997, p. 15)

To escape such constructions of identity, effective, critical education is necessary. One possible reason that Latinos do not pursue education as aggressively as other ethnic groups is because they often feel shut out, and this perception is fueled by racist views commonly held and openly expressed by the majority, Nebraskans in and around the city of Omaha included (Lopez, 2001).

While much research has been produced about the educational status of Latinos nationwide, few reports have examined the situations of Latinos in specific Midwestern cities. The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the gap between the Latino community and Metropolitan Community College (MCC) in Omaha,
Nebraska. MCC's main campus is located in South Omaha, a predominately Latino community, made up of foreign-born and native-born Latinos, mostly from Mexico or of Mexican descent. Despite the college's location in the heart of this community, very few Latinos are enrolled in programs there, prompting the president of the college to call the representation of Latinos in the student body "abysmal" during a speech to the college's administrators and instructors in the summer of 2004.

The college has more reason for concern than simple geography. According to Fry (2002), Latinos are more likely than any other ethnic group to choose two-year college institutions. Forty percent of Latinos aged 18-24 attend these institutions, while only 25% of African American and white students in the same age group do. This indicates a severe failure on MCC's part to tap into the student body that other community colleges have, made worse by the fact that these students are literally right outside of their doors.

Of course, several barriers have to be considered when trying to understand why the Latino population in Omaha is not enrolling at MCC or other institutions. For native-born students, Hurtado et al. (1997) say that "among...high-achieving groups, [Latinos] remain least likely to apply to college during high school. This behavior is clearly mirrored in national statistics that indicate approximately 55% of Latinos in college are attending two-year institutions, which is the largest percentage of any racial/ethnic group" (p. 64). In fact, the same researchers found that 47% of Latino students do not apply to college during their twelfth-grade year. For foreign-born students, who usually work in the meatpacking industry in Omaha, time constraints due to work and family, as well as a general alienation from institutions of higher education, often act as barrier enough to prevent enrollment in the ESL programs offered.
It is not as if MCC has not tried to address the issue. In its 2003-2006 Strategic Planning Outcomes, MCC identified many goals, several of which were related to Latino recruitment. Some of the initiatives that have been implemented include distributing Spanish-language literature about the college and taking new photos for the literature that reflect a more diverse student body. One program that has been successful in reaching the community is offered for single mothers, allowing them to work on their degrees while learning about parenting. However, there is still a large gap between the goals outlined by the college and the community it is trying to recruit.

**Research questions**

This thesis attempts to present a picture of the current status of Latinos and education in the Omaha area, with a focus on the South campus of Metropolitan Community College. The study is guided by the following questions:

1. What is the history of Latinos in Omaha?
2. How did South Omaha develop into a Latino community?
3. What is the current status of the gap between Latinos and higher education, nationally and locally?
4. What does this gap look like at MCC?
5. How do people in the community feel about the education of Latinos, especially at MCC?
6. How can the South Omaha campus of MCC reach out to the Latino community that surrounds it, creating trust and rapport to increase Latino representation in its student body?

To answer the first two questions, the history of Latinos in South Omaha is described based on historical documents and books relevant to the city’s history. These are presented in the second chapter. In answering the third and fourth
questions, the third chapter offers an examination of Latinos and education nationally, in the state of Nebraska, and at MCC. This information comes from articles, books, and other published materials, as well as from an interview with MCC’s assistant dean of communications and industrial technology. In the fourth chapter, to answer the fifth research question, information from personal interviews conducted with Latino scholars, MCC decision makers, and community agency representatives is presented. Finally, based on research and commentary from interviewees, recommendations are formed and presented in the sixth chapter.

**Methodology**

Originally, the purpose of this thesis was to design a course that would attract Latinos to MCC’s South Omaha campus. While working on that project, one nagging question overshadowed considerations of curriculum and outreach: Why is MCC unsuccessful in attracting Latino students in the first place?

Of course, one can play a guessing game to answer that question, and, unfortunately, that has all too often been the extent of the inquiry. However educated the guesses may be, the goal of this thesis is to investigate the lack of Latinos at MCC by talking to individuals in the community. Fifteen personal interviews were conducted with Latino scholars, MCC decision makers, community agency representatives, and members of the community to piece together a picture of the current situation. Interviewees were selected based upon their high-profile presence in issues related to the Latino community or to MCC itself. Although several interviews were conducted, based on the scope of this study and the issues it is investigating, information from six of the participants whose commentary was most relevant to answering the research questions will be given in the fifth chapter. Of the participants whose sessions were selected for inclusion in this thesis, three were Latinas, two who have been in the Omaha area for some time, and one who
only arrived a few years ago. Together, their comments about and insight into the
gap between Latinos and MCC provide a picture of the situation and provide the
foundation for recommendations to improve it.

Before examining the current situation, however, it is important to
understand how the South Omaha Latino community was formed. The next section
documents the history of this community and its Latino members to show its
evolution to the ethnic center it has now become.
CHAPTER 2
THE BUILDING OF SOUTH OMAHA’S LATINO COMMUNITY

Today, South Omaha is clearly identifiable as a Latino community. Walking down 24th Street, the main road in the area and heart of the business community, Spanish is spoken more than English, and signs are generally written in either Spanish alone or Spanish and English together. On this colorful, busy street, visitors will find many Latino businesses and organizations, including restaurants, groceries, thrift stores, and the main social service agency, the Chicano Awareness Center. On its monthly publishing date, people can be seen reading the local bilingual newspaper, Nuestro Mundo. Latino men, usually older ones, gather daily to talk at La Plaza de la Raza (The Gathering of the Races), a small area of grass and benches near a parking lot.

While all of these things make Latinos feel more at home and contribute to the vibrancy and beauty of the community, they also make it insular, which adds to the hostility from non-members of the community. Grumblings from non-Hispanic, usually white, Omahans are many. They see South Omaha as a city of “illegals,” think of Spanish speakers as “un-American” or “lazy” for not speaking English, call Latinos “dirty,” among many more disparaging labels. Undocumented Latinos are “taking American jobs” and “using taxpayers’ money to live” (Lopez, 2001). Of course, many worse things are said, but this is not the first time such beliefs have been so accepted by other citizens about the inhabitants of South Omaha. Though most Omahans outside of historians do not know or have forgotten about it, such racist beliefs wiped out another ethnic community in 1909 from the very city Latinos now inhabit, known at that time as “Greek Town.”
The anti-Greek riot of 1909

According to Bitzes (1964), Greeks in Omaha were despised in the early 1900s in a way quite similar to the way the Latino community is disliked now. The almost entirely male population did not care to learn English or American customs. During the winter months, when they could not work on the railroads as they had all summer, the men frequented coffee shops by day, adding to the belief that they were lazy. During the month of February, the newspapers had many editorials calling the Greeks unsanitary, a threat to American women, and, most importantly, a threat to American laborers (see Bitzes, 1964). In the Omaha Daily News, editor Joseph Pulcar wrote: “Greeks are a menace to the American laboring man—just as the Japs, Italians, and other similar laborers are” (1909, February 23, p. 4). When Greek immigrant Jon Masourides shot and killed South Omaha Police Officer Edward Lowery (himself an Irish immigrant) on February 19 during an attempted arrest, Lowery’s name became a rallying cry for running the Greeks out of town. Again, the newspapers took center stage, printing hate-filled articles about the Greeks and organizing a meeting. The Omaha World-Herald was perhaps the worst, calling a mass meeting in its Sunday morning edition, published February 21. One condition is listed below before the resolution itself, though others were given also, including calling Greeks outlaws, flagrantly insolent, and cowardly for murdering Lowery:

“Whereas, The so-called quarters of the Greeks are infested by a vile bunch of filthy Greeks who have attacked our women, insulted pedestrians upon the street, openly maintained gambling dens and many other forms of viciousness,”

“Therefore be it resolved. That we, the undersigned citizens and taxpayers of the city hereby believe that a mass meeting should be held on Sunday afternoon, February 21, 1909, at the city hall to take such steps and to adopt
such measures as will effectually rid the city of the Greeks, and thereby remove the menacing conditions that threaten the very life and welfare of South Omaha.” (8)

An already outraged group of citizens, more outraged because the almost certain lynching of Masourides had been prevented by his speedy transport to an Omaha jail, became a mob of about 1,000 men at the meeting called by the newspaper that afternoon. Almost certainly fueled by the riotous language used in the resolution, the mob looted and burned buildings in the neighborhood, beating any Greeks encountered in the street, forcing a mass exodus of the Greeks from town who crossed the bridge into Iowa looking for shelter. Masourides was sentenced to hang but then served five and one-half years of a fourteen-year sentence granted in a retrial. The number of Greeks, however, “melted away to a few hundred” from the two or three thousand in the area before the anti-Greek riot of 1909 (Bitzes, 1964, p. 119).

Although the current situation in South Omaha has not escalated to a riot, the sentiment expressed from the non-Latino community is frighteningly similar, and rather than in riots, it evinces itself in actions such as indiscriminate INS raids on businesses that hire undocumented workers, resulting in subsequent mass deportations that affect every family in the community; if a family member has not been deported, then a friend has, and it causes each person to worry about whether his or her workplace will be next. These raids often happen in meatpacking companies, an industry that has brought more Latino immigrants to Omaha than any other (Lopez, 2001).

The rise of South Omaha as a meatpacking center

Though Omaha is well known now for its meatpacking industry, it took some time to get off the ground. The Union Stock Yard Company was proposed in 1876 by
John Smiley, but the project was abandoned. Later, the Omaha Stock Yards Company was established, but it soon had to sell out to the Union Pacific (which had aspirations of being inextricably tied to the stockyard industry) because the railroad levied heavy taxes on the transfer of cattle that the company could not afford to pay. Finally, in 1883, a businessman from the Ogallala Land and Cattle Company, William Paxton, organized a “Syndicate” with Omaha businessman and Wyoming “Cattle King” Alexander Swan (Larsen & Cottrell, 1997, p. 74). Because of financial troubles at the Union Pacific, the syndicate was able to negotiate fair shipping rates, and it established the Union Stock Yards Company of Omaha (Limited) and the South Omaha Land Company in 1884.

The South Omaha Land Company was the mother of what is now South Omaha. Because the syndicate worked so well to gain business from the established meatpacking cities of Chicago and Kansas City, the area began to thrive. Bringing some of Chicago’s meatpacking to Omaha, in a deal credited to syndicate shareholder John McShane, “assured [Omaha] of becoming the dominant city in an emerging region” (Larsen & Cottrell, 1997, p. 76). Soon, South Omaha, not then part of the city of Omaha, was promoted as the “Magic City,” and it had over 10,000 inhabitants and 37 cattle companies by 1890 (Larsen & Cottrell, 1997).

However, 1890 also brought a terrible crop year that caused Nebraska’s economy to crumble, and it continued to do so until it became paralyzed by a depression in 1893 called “The Panic.” Throughout this time, the livestock market remained steady and may have been the saving grace of the city. In 1915, South Omaha’s 25,000 residents became part of the city of Omaha. Alfred Sorenson, a reporter and later a Nebraska historian, credited Paxton for the prosperity of Omaha, calling South Omaha its “backbone” (Larsen & Cottrell, 1997, p. 79).
The Latino immigrants of South Omaha

South Omaha, despite its financial success with the stockyards, remained an immigrant community, with the more well-off citizens living in Omaha proper. After the Greek population was depleted in 1909, Latinos began to settle in South Omaha in 1910, mostly in the boxcar-and-tent section called “Mexican Town.” Mexicans had found work in Omaha since the 1860s as railroad or field laborers, but they did not settle during that time. Although there were some workers from Central America, the majority of Latinos working in Omaha were single Mexican men, called solos.

During WWI, Mexican and other immigrant laborers helped fill in labor shortages caused by men being drafted for the war. Approximately 1.5 million Mexicans immigrated to the United States between 1910 and 1930 (Sanchez, 1995). McWilliams (1968) estimated that one-tenth of the Mexican population immigrated to the United States between 1900 and 1920, during the first major wave of Mexican migration to the country. Two powerful forces combined to spur this movement: the vast economic opportunities available in America, and, of course, the Mexican revolution, which began in 1910. At that time, there were 3,611 Mexicans living in the state of Nebraska (Gamio, 1971).

Rather than being replaced after the war by returning soldiers, Mexican laborers were used to break strikes as the businessmen were in a constant struggle with labor unions for power. Some Mexicans stayed after the strikes were broken to work in the meatpacking houses while others worked on the railroad or in the sugarbeet fields. Many settled in South Omaha.

There is no question that South Omaha experienced its golden age in the 1920s. It was home to the largest manufacturing industry in the city area because of the twelve packinghouses. Omaha was known as an “immigrant city,” especially
during that decade, “when roughly fifty percent of the population were immigrants and their children” (Larsen & Cottrell, 1997, p. 158). Ethnic groups had established neighborhoods in the older areas of downtown and in South Omaha. Some immigrant groups at the time, namely the Germans, Swedes, Danes, Irish, and Russian Jews, quickly acculturated and became “mainstream” Omahans (many Irish through marriage in other groups as there had been attempts to run them out of town after the railroad was completed), while others, including the Poles, Italians, Greeks, and Hispanics, did not.

Due in part to the fallout from the Mexican revolution and to the first large influx of Mexican laborers to the area, Mexican families began to settle in South Omaha. There were about 1,000 Mexican men living in Omaha during 1924 (Nixon, 1979), when the first Cinco de Mayo celebration was held in the city at the hall of one of the meatpacking plants. The center of Mexican life, then and now, was Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, first organized in 1919 by Father Leonardo Azcona, where members worshipped in a school hall, later in a bakery, then a storefront, and finally in the current building, erected in 1951. By 1929, church records indicated that there were more than 2,000 Mexicans in Omaha (Lopez, 2001).

When the need for Mexican labor was wiped out during the Great Depression, the early 1930s saw massive forced deportation of more than 400,000 Mexicans from the United States, including 138,519 repatriated in 1931 alone (Hoffman, 1974). The impact was great on the number of Mexicans in Omaha, too, as those who were not deported went to rural areas to find work in the fields. Some did stay on in Omaha with the federal work programs, but the community was not revitalized until WWII. Between 1930 and 1940, the immigrant population in Omaha fell by almost ten percent. Immigrants who stayed, though, Latinos included, overwhelmingly lived in South Omaha, “where they continued to dominate cultural
life, giving the former industrial suburb an identity and consciousness that set it apart from the city proper” (Larsen & Cottrell, 1997, p. 232). The city proper took on “an increasing American character” (Larsen & Cottrell, 1997, p. 233) after WWII (much like the city today), which only fueled hostility toward immigrants and minorities in the city. South Omaha has been considered “apart from the city proper” ever since.

During and after WWII, Omaha prospered, especially in the meatpacking industry. As in WWI, Mexican laborers were used once again to fill in openings in packinghouses and construction while American men went to war. Some were undocumented, while others were part of the Bracero program, developed to help relieve labor shortages during the war by bringing in contracted Mexican workers.

The Stockyards were the beating heart of the business community, and by 1958, Omaha became the leading supplier of meat to the nation, surpassing former giants Chicago and Kansas City. The business that year generated more than $5 billion. Only ten years later, though, the meatpacking industry in Omaha fell apart. Modern slaughterhouses that could produce more product in a shorter period of time were popping up all over rural communities in Nebraska. Three of the four big meatpacking companies left Omaha, causing the loss of 10,000 jobs (Larsen & Cottrell, 1997). Politicians avoided economic disaster by turning what had been some of the stockyards into an industrial park, attracting new businesses and creating new jobs that did not require skill at entry. Although new business and jobs were brought in, by the 1970s, South Omaha had “progressively deteriorated” (Larsen & Cottrell, 1997, p. 278). White citizens moved away to newer, better suburbs, leaving poorer groups to the “badly decayed” commercial district (Larsen & Cotrell, 1997, p. 278). It was at this time that South Omaha became recognizably Latino in its membership, and it has been that way since. If not for the Latinos,
however, the businesses of the 24th Street area and the residences of South Omaha would probably have become a ghost town.

A majority of Latinos living in Omaha now, though, came or were born to people who came during the wave beginning in the 1980s, when the meatpacking industry picked back up again in Nebraska. Like in the 1920s, the availability of work in the U.S. and the poor economic conditions in Mexico and parts of Central and South America brought new migrants to Omaha, who, in turn, brought more family members, a process that continues today: "Labor migrants open the door for others to follow. They are often the advance guard in the development of an ethnic community" (Lopez, 2001, p. 10). Since the 1980s, the Latino community has boomed, though many of its newer members are undocumented, and more than 80% of its members are Mexican (Lopez, 2001). The 1990s saw the biggest change according to the U.S. Census Bureau, with the population almost tripling from 10,288 in 1990 to 29,397 in 2000 (Gouveia & Powell, 2004). It is difficult to estimate how many Latinos actually are in Omaha, though, because of documentation issues. Most of the undocumented find work in janitorial, construction, or meatpacking jobs. In fact, Latinos make up 80% of Nebraska's meatpacking workforce (Gouveia & Stull, 1997).

The immigrants to South Omaha today

Lopez (2001) describes the South Omaha of today as being made up of "old-timers" and "newcomers." Old-timers include those who came after 1920 but before 1980 and their descendants, and because of their families' time in the area, they are more established and have more resources, especially when it comes to education. He defined the relationship between the old-timers and the newcomers as "tenuous" (p. 19) after interviewing members of both groups, saying that "Old-timers came from a higher socioeconomic strata. They tended to live in nicer homes, have newer
automobiles, and many of their children were professionals” (p. 50). They also overwhelmingly saw newcomers in a negative light, in many cases reflecting views of Latinos heard by the most anti-immigrant, conservative voices of our time. One old-timer commented on the language issue:

I don’t believe we should change for them. I don’t. Just like putting signs in front of the post office with directions for them. My mother learned directions. My mother learned to go to the grocery store and buy her groceries the hard way, you know. Why can’t these people learn? (p. 50)

Others interviewed associated many newcomers and young Latinos with gangs and drug use, views echoed in Omaha’s El Museo Latino’s recent exhibition *Presencia y Memoria*, a collection of recorded interviews with old-timers in the area.

Although Lopez’s distinction between old-timers and newcomers is helpful in seeing the divide between established and non-established Latinos in the community, it is perhaps more useful for this study to identify three main groups in the Latino community of Omaha today. Fry and Lowell (2002), based upon the work of Oropesa and Landale (1997), Friedberg (1991), and Rumbaut (1997), classify immigrant generations in a helpful and simple manner. They define the first generation as people who immigrated to the U.S. after age 13, generation 1.5 as people born outside of the U.S. but who arrived before age 13, and the second generation as people born in the U.S. with at least one immigrant parent. Subsequent generations are native as they have two U.S.-born parents and are less likely to be influenced by immigrant heritage than previous generations.

In Omaha, there are many first-generation immigrants, most who have limited or no English proficiency. Many in this group are undocumented, although some do have legal documentation, perhaps by being sponsored by a family member, marrying an American, or having professional training that qualifies for a
green card or citizenship. Those with professional training tend to be from South America more than from Mexico. In the second group are the children of first-generation immigrants. These children are documented if they have documented parents or if they were born in the U.S. to undocumented parents. Anti-immigration groups such as the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) call children born to undocumented parents “anchor babies” because they anchor the family to the United States, and, according to the organization, “When the children turn 21, they can sponsor the immigration of other relatives, becoming ‘anchor babies’ for an entire clan” (FAIR). Also in this group are children who crossed with their undocumented parents and are therefore undocumented themselves, what Fry and Lowell called the 1.5 generation. Many in this group are bilingual, whether they have documented or undocumented parents, using Spanish in the home and English at school. They range from limited to advanced in their English proficiency. In the final group are “nativized” Latinos who are English proficient but still live in the community.

Both migrant waves to Omaha from Mexico, first in 1920 and then in 1980, answered needs for cheap labor in industries experiencing shortages. All of the immigrants faced similar challenges from the surrounding communities, namely racism and racist-inspired hostility. Omaha has been a center of immigration in the Midwest, and several ethnic groups have made it their home and later assimilated, including Germans, Poles, Czechs, Italians, and Irish. Like other immigrants to this area, Mexicans have built communities, had families, and preserved traditions. While Latinos are no longer the “newest” group of immigrants, with Omaha more recently having become home to a large number of Sudanese refugees, they remain in the lens of other citizens as outsiders. In “Mexican American traditions in Nebraska,” perhaps Gonzalez-Clements (1998) expressed it best:
While the experiences of Mexican Americans are different, depending on their place of origin and length of time in the United States, most have experienced racism and discrimination in everyday life. Nebraskans who are not of Mexican descent often are unaware of the long history, traditions, and contributions of their fellow citizens of Mexican descent. (p. 35)

She goes on to say, “While some of our traditions are different from other cultural groups, our core values are quite similar to those of most Nebraskans” (p. 37).

The 24th Street described at the beginning of this section is changing with a major construction and beautification project financed by First National Bank of Omaha. Part of this project involves lining the street with grass and trees, and creating a much larger and more park-like La Plaza de la Raza. Soon, First National will open a branch next door to the Chicano Awareness Center, and because of its location and involvement in the community, it will generate increasing business for the bank. Its involvement is fitting enough given the bank’s founding by the Kountze brothers in 1863, sons of a German immigrant to Omaha.

Yes, South Omaha is moving forward, but in order for it to reach its potential, the gap between higher education and its members must be examined and narrowed. Because of its presence in the center of the community, Metropolitan Community College should play a pivotal role in this change. Educational issues related to Latinos, including at MCC, will be examined in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 3
THE CURRENT STATE OF LATINOS AND EDUCATION

The 2000 U.S. Census found that Latinos represented almost 13% of the nation's population. Nationally, more than 25% of all adults have a college education, while only about 11% of Latinos do (Santiago & Brown, 2004). There are approximately 1.5 million Latinos enrolled in U.S. colleges at present; however, Latinos represent only 9.5% of the student population enrolled in institutions of higher education (Schmidt, 2003). Before examining the educational status of Latinos at Metropolitan Community College, it is useful to review information on educational performance in high schools and colleges at the national and state levels.

Education of Latinos in the U.S.

Participation and success in high school is, of course, often a deciding factor in whether or not a student will continue on to college. Fry (2003) claims that statistics about dropout rates for Latinos in high schools are misleading because they often include many immigrants who never attended U.S. schools in the first place. When only Latinos who have actually attended U.S. schools are counted, the national dropout rate is at about 15% instead of the 30% or more figures most commonly cited. However, even the reduced dropout rate is twice that of white students and is cause for concern.

This might lead one to the conclusion that foreign-born Latinos drop out of high school more often than U.S.-born Latinos, and they do, accounting for 60% of the Latino dropout rate. However, this means that 40% of Latino dropouts are students who were born in the U.S. and have been in the American education system since kindergarten (Fry, 2003). This rate is alarmingly high given that native-born students do not have the barriers that foreign-born students may have of
entering the educational system at different grade levels and/or difficulty with English proficiency. According to Lopez (2001), native-born students in public schools often have a negative view of education based upon experience with racism and that this can affect foreign-born students as well: “The children of immigrants encounter native co-ethnics who have experienced discrimination and have developed an adversarial attitude towards the majority group. One aspect of this adversarial attitude is the belief that education does not result in upward mobility and pursuing education is disparaged” (p. 12). In other words, when immigrant children live near and are educated with native co-ethnics, they are more likely to fall into the pattern of downward assimilation if one has been established. Although this is somewhat counterintuitive and contrary to other studies, Lopez is speaking specifically about the situation in Omaha, where downward assimilation is a trend among U.S.-born Latinos.

Downward assimilation does not fully account for the high dropout rate among Latinos from area schools. One common reason given for the dropout rate is the increased pressure on both native-born and foreign-born Latinos to earn money for the family. Fry and Lowell (2002) call the teenage years “a critical period” for young Latinos as they choose between part-time and full-time employment, choices that affect whether or not they stay in school and have lasting consequences: “The available data suggest that these teen outcomes and choices have long-term implications for educational attainment, earnings, and overall labor market success” (p. 5). For first-generation teens aged 16 to 19, the authors found Latinos to be the most highly paid, earning an average of $250 a week, while the average for white and black teens in the same age group was $150. Generation 1.5 Latino teens earned an average of $209 weekly, and second-generation Latino teens earned an average of $180. This is usually because Latino teens work more hours than their peers,
sometimes because they do not attend school. In adulthood, however (ages 25-44), the earning amounts reverse, with second-generation Latinos making more money than the other Latino groups. During the teenage years, the authors explain that this difference exists because "a majority of first and even many 1.5-generation immigrant children do not complete high school" and earn more money because they have "abandoned schooling" (20). While emphasizing that school and work are not "mutually exclusive," the authors did find a correlation between the amount of education Latinos had and their future earnings:

"In short, the economic progress of the first generation Latino teens appears confined to their early work life. By age 25, second generation Latinos are substantially ahead of their immigrant counterparts, including 1.5-generation immigrants who have been in the United States for a very long time. Immigrant Latino teens are focused on work and have little involvement with formal schooling. Second generation teens are more marginally attached to the labor market and are much more engaged with formal schooling." (p. 18)

Still, the second generation "seems likely to fall short of enjoying the kind of employment and the standard of living that most white Americans take for granted" (p. 4). To come closer to the standard of living of the majority, more Latinos must earn a college education.

An important factor in whether or not a student chooses to pursue tertiary education is parental involvement in primary and secondary school. Torrez (2004) points out that "There is a general misconception that Latino parents have a distinct lack of expectation that their children will go to college" (p. 55). After conducting a survey of Latino parents in southern California, she found that 75% of them thought a college education was important for their children. A majority of parents believed that their students were getting college preparation in school, even though many of their children had been placed in programs that did not meet the requirements for
admission to California's state colleges. Overall, Torrez found that Latino parents' trust in the school system to prepare their students and subsequent lack of involvement in their students' curriculum put their children at a great disadvantage over students from other ethnic groups.

More than 50% of all Latino college students attend in California or Texas (Santiago & Brown, 2004). Of Latinos who enroll in college, 66% begin in "open-door" institutions (schools that admit any student who has completed high school) compared to 45% of white students (Fry, 2004). As discussed in the first chapter, Latinos choose two-year colleges more than any other ethnic group, with 40% of the 18- to 24-year-old population enrolled in such institutions (Fry, 2002). Latinos earning associate's degrees mainly earn them in the liberal arts, business, and the medical profession. Those who go on to earn bachelor's degrees focus their attention on business, social sciences, and psychology (Santiago & Brown, 2004).

Of Latinos who either enroll initially in or transfer to four-year colleges, "Hispanic undergraduates disproportionately enroll on campuses that have low bachelor's degree completion rates, so that their pathway through postsecondary education starts on a low trajectory" (Fry, 2004, p. 4). Indeed, of all students enrolling initially at community colleges, white students are twice as likely as Latinos to finish a bachelor's degree (Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004). Fry (2004) claims that baccalaureate achievement for Latinos must be improved: "The disparity between white and Latino college students in finishing a bachelor's degree is larger than the high school completion gap and is the largest attainment gap facing Hispanic youth as they progress through the U.S. education system" (pp. 2-3).

It also takes Latinos longer to earn their degrees. They are less likely than their white peers to maintain continuous enrollment, with 43% attending continuously compared to 67% of white students. They are also more likely than not
to attend school on a part-time basis, with 51.8% of enrolled students attending part
time (Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004).

Of course, a big consideration for any person considering college is the ability
or inability to pay for it. Since 1993, average tuition and fees have risen by about 22%
at community colleges and by almost 50% at four-year institutions (Santiago &
Brown, 2004). This significantly affects Latinos when they choose educational
institutions, especially given that more than half of Latino students in college come
from families whose income is less than $25,000 per year (Swail, Cabrera, & Lee,
2004). Additionally, Latinos “are nearly twice as likely as whites to have children or
elderly dependents, and are more likely than white undergraduates to be single
parents. The additional family responsibilities adversely affect college completion.
Having financial dependents and single parent status are college persistence risk
factors” (Fry, 2004, p. 16).

Overall, of Latinos who enter post-secondary programs, only 36% graduate,
12.8% with a certificate or associate’s degree and 23.2% with a bachelor’s degree
(Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004). As shown throughout this chapter, it is difficult
enough for Latinos to gain access to college, which makes the 64% rate of failure
once there all that more discouraging.

Besides preparation, financing, persistence, and completion issues, Latinos
have culturally based considerations that some other American students do not.
Perhaps the best-known narrative about education written by a Mexican-American,
if only for its controversial content, is Richard Rodriguez’s Hunger of memory: The
education of Richard Rodriguez (1982). In it, Rodriguez describes himself as the
“scholarship boy,” a minority student whose advanced education forced him to
assimilate. He describes being called Pocho by his family members, defining it as
“the Mexican-American who, in becoming an American, forgets his native society”
Rodriguez does not necessarily disagree with this label; he says that his status in American society because of his education comes at the price of alienation from his family's culture and especially from his parents.

Most claim that Rodriguez's experience with and perception of his higher education is extreme, though. College does not have to cause such separation from culture, but family support is important. As with other minority groups, Latinos who pursue higher education are sometimes seen as turning their backs on their families and the community. Theresa Barron-McKeagney, a Nebraska resident and Latina scholar, discusses such issues in her book *Telling our stories: The lives of Midwestern Latinas* (2002). Barron-McKeagney details *el cuento de Chonita* (the story of Chonita), a university counselor. In her interview, Chonita describes her struggle with education as being proud of going to college on one hand, and her difficulty with her family on the other.

"It was just starting to take a toll on me and I went to see my older sister. I don't ever want to try and prove that I'm better than the family because I'm not. I'm a family member. But I think when I come home and start talking about things, I make people feel uncomfortable. My sister said that there were a couple of things I needed to do. She said to just sit back and not always give out information that I've learned with some of my family members. She also said that she would talk to the family and tell them what I was doing was good. She told the family that I was the first and they needed to support me. I get choked up about it because I think if I hadn't gone to my sister, I wouldn't have graduated from college." (75)

Family issues will be further discussed in the fourth chapter, which also details information from an interview with Barron-McKeagney.

Still, it is important to acknowledge that the educational gap for Latinos has narrowed significantly over the past 30 years. Between 1970 and 2000, the number of Latino immigrants who graduated from high school increased from 18 to 41%, and
the number of college graduates almost doubled, from 9 to 18%. Additionally, because undocumented immigrants are included in these numbers, Lowell and Suro (2002) emphasize that the numbers “understate recent improvements in the education of legally admitted Latinos” (p. 15). Educational attainment for native-born Americans, they predict, will slow in the coming years as Latino achievement continues to rise toward that of the native-born population, especially as more Latinos graduate from high school. “Educational achievement is—and will continue to be—a critical factor in determining whether or not millions of foreign-born Latinos will move forward” (Lowell & Suro, 2002, p. 1).

Most disadvantaged among Latino students are members of the 1.5 generation who are undocumented. It is difficult to estimate how many of these children are involved in the American public school system, but Bean, Hook, & Woodrow-Lafield (2002), after statistically analyzing available data, estimated that there are about 4.5 million undocumented Mexican workers in the U.S. and 1.5 million undocumented Central Americans. This means that the 1.5 generation’s numbers are significant. Despite having been educated—at least in part—in U.S. schools, these students are often denied in-state tuition at colleges and universities because of their undocumented status. Due to the high rate non-residents are charged at state institutions, this makes paying for college just about impossible, especially because they are not eligible for federal loans or financial aid without a Social Security number. At the time of this writing, however, nine states have passed bills that provide in-state tuition to undocumented immigrants: California, New York, Texas, Utah, Illinois, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Washington, and Kansas. Many other states have had bills introduced to do the same thing, including Nebraska, but few are ever released from committee, and those that are face other serious
challenges. State legislators across the nation are waiting for the results of a federal challenge to the law passed in Kansas.

People who oppose such measures say that it is unfair to offer in-state tuition to people who are not American citizens while out-of-state students who are citizens must pay higher rates. Of course, there are many other issues to consider when a bill of this nature is proposed. Senator DiAnna Schimek, from Lincoln, who introduced LB 152 in the 2003 session, a bill that would allow for undocumented Nebraskans to qualify for in-state tuition, called it "a knotty problem." The bill and its challenges will be discussed further in the fifth chapter. Next, the educational attainment of Latinos in Nebraska will be examined.

**Education of Latinos in Nebraska**

In 2004, Latinos made up 9.3% of students in Nebraska public schools, with future increases certainly expected (Gouveia & Powell, 2004). Among Latinos in Nebraska over the age of 25, 18% have eight or less years of schooling (Rochin & Siles, 1996). This 18% is almost exclusively made up of first-generation immigrants.

Nebraska has the highest dropout rate in its public schools among all of the Great Plains States, which also include Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and South Dakota. In grades 7-12, Latinos make up 19% of dropouts. In 2002, the Latino dropout rate in Nebraska was 15.5% of all total dropouts, even though Latinos totaled less than 6% of the student population in those grades. In fact, the only ethnic group in the state with higher dropout rates is Native Americans. Consistent with national rates, U.S.-born Latinos in Nebraska are more likely than foreign-born Latinos to graduate from high school. Data from 2000 based on Nebraskans over the age of 25 indicate that 73.7% of Latinos born in the U.S. graduate from high school, while only 28.2% of foreign-born Latinos do. This still leaves a staggering 26.3% of U.S.-born and 71.8% of foreign-born Latinos in the state without a high school diploma (Gouveia &
Powell, 2004). U.S.-born Nebraskan Latinos are more likely than foreign-born Nebraskan Latinos to have earned a bachelor's degree or higher as well, with 10.5% for U.S.-born compared to 6.3% of foreign-born (Gouveia & Powell, 2004).

High rates of poverty many Latinos experience have a direct negative effect on education: "Parental socioeconomic status (a combination of education, occupation and home ownership) is a strong predictor of children's school achievement" (Gouveia & Powell, 2004, p. 3). Indicating the level of poverty for Latinos in the Omaha area specifically, Gouveia and Powell (2004) say, is the number of Hispanic students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches at 73.4%, compared to 34.6% of Caucasian students.

In the Omaha Public School District, forced busing to desegregate schools ended in 1999, which allowed children to attend the schools in their own neighborhoods. South High School, located on busy 24th Street in South Omaha, estimates its Latino student population to be about 23%, of which approximately 15% are undocumented (Lopez, 2001). The dropout rate for Latino students there is high, especially for undocumented students. Lopez (2001) summarizes the situation well: "Latino students at South High School experience a high rate of absenteeism, have little parental involvement, and perceive limited opportunities to attend college" (p. 83). The situation at South High will be further investigated in the fourth chapter with information from the director of ESL education at the school.

To positively change the educational attainment of Latinos in the state, including in South Omaha, change has to begin in the early stages, including with teacher training. Gouveia & Powell (2004) perhaps state it best: "Educational institutions at all levels must adopt novel initiatives to increase the presence of linguistically and culturally competent staff and faculty at every level. The small
proportion of such faculty and staff in our institutions weighs heavily on our capacity to improve recruitment, retention, and graduation rates" (p. 8).

Additionally, Nebraskan educational professionals have much to learn from other states, including California. California has been particularly successful in bridging the gap between high school and college for its Latino students through the Puente Project. The project links 36 high schools and 56 community colleges (Hagedorn & Cepeda, 2004). Puente is a program that serves first-generation college students by providing Latinos with counselors and mentors who are usually Latinos themselves. Participating students also take an intensive first-year composition course rich in readings about Latino culture and identity.

The results of this approach have been impressive. Puente has a 97% retention rate, and 48% of its students transfer to baccalaureate programs, compared to only 7% of non-Puente Latinos (Laden, 1999). Laden (1999) says that the program works for students because it involves networking between high schools, community colleges, universities, and businesses. Additionally, many Puente graduates serve as mentors in the program after establishing their own professional careers.

The Puente project has had a little more than twenty years to establish itself and achieve these results. Nebraska’s educational institutions, though, including South High and MCC, should look to Puente’s success over time in creating models to better serve their own Latino students.

Metropolitan Community College and the education of Latinos

Metropolitan Community College serves more than 27,000 credit students per year in Nebraska.² It has come a long way since it opened in 1974, when it served

² All general and statistical information about MCC in this chapter was taken from its 2002 self-study report and from its web site: www.mccneb.edu.
2,430 credit students. MCC offers many non-credit classes as well, and in 2003-2004, its total enrollment was 44,512. Of the six community college systems in Nebraska, MCC is the largest; indeed, it is the third-largest postsecondary institution in the state, following the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

In its mission and vision statement, MCC describes itself as follows: “Our mission is to provide quality learning experiences for a diverse community of lifelong learners. Our vision is to become the community’s number one resource for postsecondary learning. We will exceed expectations for value, quality, community access and student choice.”

The college is housed on three campuses but also offers classes in three educational centers in the area. The South Omaha campus, which is located on 40 acres on 27th and Q Streets, serves more students than any other campus, although it does not have the most buildings or space. The college attributes this to easy access from the interstate. This year, more than 13,000 students will be taught at South campus.

At the time of this study, the campus was undergoing exciting changes. On June 2, 2005, a groundbreaking ceremony took place for a $6.9 million expansion project. This was to add a library, a new building for classes, offices, and student commons, and a Metro Area Transit (MAT) terminal. MAT is the bus transportation system of the city of Omaha. The new facilities, especially the bus terminal, were expected to lead to a dramatic increase in student enrollment at South campus.

In student satisfaction surveys administered annually by the college, students overwhelmingly say that they choose MCC because its class scheduling is convenient, locations are close to home and work, and it is affordable. As of June, 2005, the average class size was 16 students. Tuition was $35.50 per credit hour for
residents and $58 per credit hour for non-residents. Property taxes paid for the majority of the college's expenses at 39%, while state aid covered 32%. Student tuition and fees accounted for the rest of the college’s revenue, with the exception of 1% from other sources, i.e. donations.

As of 2005, 43% of MCC’s students were 18 to 25 years old. As in most community colleges, the majority of students attend part time, with 64% of MCC’s students falling into that category. Women make up 58% of the student population. Most of MCC’s students are Caucasian, although minority students account for 23%, with Hispanic students comprising about 6% of the total student population.

“We have a long way to go with Latino recruitment,” said Lyn Brodersen, assistant dean of communications and industrial technology. She estimates that Latinos make up “less than 2%” of all students at South campus.

Brodersen, who works at the South Omaha campus, considers recruitment of Latino students as a “top priority.” However, she says, South campus is not “hurting for students.” Instead, MCC is experiencing difficulty in servicing the high numbers of students it is already attracting in some cases, especially in its ESL program.

“An influx of Sudanese and Slavic students has caused the demand for ESL to go up,” she said. “We certainly want and welcome more Latinos in the program, but we really have to put more of our effort into servicing the students we already have.”

Brodersen also believes that the number of immigrants from the Middle East to the Omaha area may increase as the state accepts more refugees from the region. Still, she says, it disturbs her to work in the South Omaha community and not have an adequate Latino representation in the student population. Most of the Latinos at

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3 All information from Lyn Brodersen was obtained through a personal, oral interview 30 September 2004.
the campus are actually Latinas, she said, enrolled in the Single Parent/Homemaker program. This program helps assure the success of single parents and single, pregnant women enrolled in MCC classes.

One area Brodersen says will help improve recruitment of all minority populations is increased diversification of faculty. In 1992, only 3% of full-time faculty members came from minority groups; that number increased to 10% in 2002, the last time MCC published figures in that area.

There are three groups of Latino students that MCC can consider for recruitment, each with its own potential barriers from pursuing education. The group least likely to enroll in credit classes at the college is first-generation, adult immigrants. As discussed elsewhere in this thesis, time is usually barrier enough to pursuing education. Work and family commitments, combined with generally poor previous academic preparation and issues with English proficiency make college seem often out of reach. Additionally, if the immigrants are undocumented, the perceived threat of deportation and higher tuition rates because of non-resident status are difficult to overcome. Still, some of these students do take free, non-credit classes offered through the college. These classes will be discussed further in the next chapter.

In the second group is the 1.5 generation, children of first-generation immigrants. Although weak academic backgrounds and struggles with English proficiency can limit these students, the major barrier is their ineligibility to qualify for in-state tuition rates, an issue that will be examined in the next chapter. Additionally, as discussed in the previous chapter, there is often a family expectation that these students will work and earn income for the family, a commitment that limits time and funding for higher education.
Finally, in the third group are nativized Latinos, those whose parents are not immigrants. Academic performance in secondary schooling is usually a good indicator as to whether students will go to college or not. For those who do well, financial aid such as scholarships are widely available. However, the high Latino dropout rate and performance of Latinos in high schools indicate that this group is much less likely than its white peers to pursue higher education, as discussed in the last chapter.

MCC is growing rapidly, especially at its South Omaha campus. Because the college has failed to adequately recruit Latino students from the community at the time of this writing, the danger of leaving this population behind during its growth is great. Because of MCC’s location, it has to continue to pursue and improve upon efforts to join the community rather than grow further away from it. In the next chapter, more issues relevant to the education of Latinos in the Omaha area will be discussed before recommendations are given in the fifth chapter.
CHAPTER 4
PUZZLE PIECES: VOICES FROM THE COMMUNITY

This section presents views about the Latino community, education, and policy from people whose voices and experience are shaping the future of the residents who live there. Included is information from Dr. Theresa Barron-McKeagney, director of the University of Nebraska at Omaha’s (UNO) School of Social Work; Lissette Krayenhagen, director of social services at the Chicano Awareness Center (CAC); Nebraska State Senator DiAnna Schimek, who introduced a bill that would offer in-state tuition to undocumented students; Dr. Joan Hamilton, director of ESL education at South High School; Jeanette Evans, MCC’s director of the ABE/GED program; and María Vazquez, director of student services at MCC’s South campus. Together, their voices piece together a picture of Latino life and education in South Omaha and help fill in gaps that statistical research cannot. Their expertise and opinions will be used in the next chapter, where recommendations will be given that take their opinions into account.

"Flavor of the month," an interview with Dr. Theresa Barron-McKeagney

In an office on the upper floor of UNO’s School of Social work, I found Dr. Theresa Barron-McKeagney working by lamplight, with lit candles warming the space behind her. Aside from the conference table and chairs, the room looked more like a home than an office, and she welcomed me with a smile. As director of the school and as a highly visible and active Latina, Barron-McKeagney is always busy in the community. We sat at the table to discuss her perspective on Latinos and education, including what she thought about MCC.

Barron-McKeagney is the youngest of 11 children. Her parents were Mexican immigrants who settled in Council Bluffs, Iowa. She began her education at the community college there, Iowa Western, before receiving her B.A. in social work
from the University of Iowa. Later, she earned her master's degree in social work at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. While working as an instructor at the university, she participated in the Minority Faculty Development Program, which allowed her to earn her doctorate. She became an assistant professor in 1994. Because of her background and educational experience as a Latina, she has worked closely throughout her career with at-risk, minority students, and she continues that work today as coordinator of the Aguante Project, a family mentoring program for urban Latino youth.

"Latinos are the flavor of the month," she said about the recent surge of interest about the community from institutions and businesses. "People are beginning to realize that they're economically viable."

Because she is well known for her work in the community, Barron-McKeagney is often consulted for her expertise. Most recently, she and a colleague received a grant from Boystown National Research Hospital and Creighton University (both located in Omaha) to investigate why Latinos are not biomedical research participants. Simply put, she said, the difficulty the research centers have with recruiting Latinos for studies lies in their lack of knowledge about Latino culture. Latinos she talked to who had participated in medical studies were offended by what they perceived to be an extreme lack of respect and humility on the part of medical professionals. Although doctors are not necessarily known for being humble people, the participants saw themselves as doing a favor for them and expected to be thanked. They were also disappointed that none of the professionals were themselves Latino. Additionally, transportation to clinics that are usually far away from the community was an issue, one not fixed by offering to transport participants, Barron-McKeagney says. To increase Latino participation in biomedical studies, she told researchers in a preliminary results session, the researchers have to
go to the community, not expect it to come to them, and they must establish trust and rapport with its members.

"You have to step outside the box to reach the population," she said. "You can't use old standards or expect Latinos to conform to yours; otherwise, you miss out."

She cites a misunderstanding about Latino culture as being a key issue in the educational gap, especially as it concerns the family's role in education. In the Aguante Project, Barron-McKeagney emphasizes family education, which involves both parents and students; it is imperative, she says, for the parents to be engaged.

"In the Latino community," she says, "everything is done together. We need to break out of the mindset of the solo institution and get back into the community."

Few people know as much about education and the South Omaha Latino community as Barron-McKeagney. She has been working there for more than twenty years, her early years spent as a social worker and an educational counselor at the Chicano Awareness Center before she became an instructor at UNO. As an educational counselor, Barron-McKeagney counseled Latino students enrolled at South High and encouraged them to pursue higher education. Often, she brought students to educational institutions in the area to show them what options they had.

"I always had a lot of enthusiasm from Latino students," she said. "They wanted to go to school; what they didn't know was how to do it, how to pay for it, what was expected. Money usually wasn't an issue because we were able to find what they needed. Someone just had to take the time and energy to help them out without making them feel inferior."

She believes the feeling of inferiority prevents many Latinos from pursuing higher education. That self-image may prevent them from seeking options like the counseling still offered at the CAC, but those who do, she says, are the greatest
success stories. One she shared was the experience of a young male she worked with at the center. He had only a 1.8 grade point average in high school and did not think he could get any scholarship help—if he could even be admitted—from an institution. Barron-McKeagney took him to the Goodrich Scholarship Program at UNO, a program that pays tuition and fees for students with potential (even if their academic backgrounds are shaky) from families that cannot finance education because of their economic status. Goodrich instructors interview potential students and accept 25-35 students per academic year. Barron-McKeagney’s student was one of them, and he is now an officer in the Omaha Police Department and a mentor for Latino youth in the area.

“It shows you what support and encouragement does for someone most people would give up on,” Barron-McKeagney said.

Programs like Goodrich are limited, though, because of funding. Goodrich is also unlike other scholarship programs because it accepts students based on their motivation and desire for education, not entirely on their academic accomplishments. Additionally, Goodrich and other scholarship programs are usually only offered to documented residents, which does not help a large undocumented, teenage population in Nebraska.

Whether documented or undocumented, Barron-McKeagney says one of the greatest failures of Omaha’s educational institutions and local businesses is overlooking the bilingual population available in South Omaha. One example she gave was the recent recruitment of English-Spanish bilingual teachers from colleges in New Mexico by Omaha Public Schools.

“Look out your own back door,” she said. “We need to support bilingual youths in four-year, two-year, and vocational schools. They have a lot to offer in return. We can’t lose the youth with these great skills.”
Barron-McKeagney said support for bilingual development is an area that MCC can develop to better recruit Latino youth, especially those who want to work in social-service related fields or business.

For adults, though, she says it is important to understand that family and work commitments limit time available for education. Instead of relying on daytime and evening class offerings that do not attract Latino adults at present, she recommends trying a weekend approach with a strong social element and activities related to pressing issues having to do with immigration, citizenship, work, and family. It has to be in a place people can get to easily, she said, and childcare should be offered.

"Most importantly," she said, laughing, "you have to have food. If you make it social, people will come."

Visibility in the community, she says, is of the utmost importance. Despite its geographic location in South Omaha, MCC has yet to become an integral part of Latino life. In order to do that, Barron-McKeagney says MCC should form a Latino Advisory Board with members from the community and engage them in every part of their decision-making processes.

Ultimately, she says, there remains a lot of work to do for all educational institutions and businesses in the city as it concerns Latinos. She emphasizes that it all works out economically in the end, for everyone.

"The end result is that you have a community that’s empowered," she said. "We need to invest in that now."

"Remember the other Latinos," an interview with Lissette Krayenhagen

I was dust-covered when I finally made it into the Chicano Awareness Center (CAC) from the construction outside to meet with Lissette Krayenhagen, director of social services. She smiled as I brushed myself off.
“I see you have passed through our beautification project,” she laughed.

“Would you like to see the plans?”

We looked at a framed sketch on the wall near her office that showed the changes taking place on 24th Street.

“It’s really going to be great for everyone,” she said.

As the social services director, Krayenhagen is in charge of everything from assistance with immigration, parenting classes, and English classes, to health education, legal assistance, and employment assistance, among other duties. She has worked at the center for three years. Because of funding received from the United Way, the CAC has to keep close track of phone records from community members requesting social services. The numbers, she said, have increased from 1,086 in 2001, to 2,400 in 2002, to 2700 in 2003, to more than 3,000 for 2004. At the time of our interview, more than 600 phone calls had already been received in January and February of 2005 alone.

Originally from Guatemala, Krayenhagen calls her journey to America a “love story.” While attending an international TV and radio convention in Las Vegas because of her work as a journalist, she met the American who is now her husband at a club. He asked her to dance, but she said her English was so limited that she did not understand him. Finally, after gesturing for a while, they danced, and later—despite their communication difficulties—they began dating. After several visits to Guatemala by him and America by her, the two were married and moved to Sioux City, Iowa, in 1997, where Krayenhagen enrolled in a one-year intensive English program at the community college. She credits her proficiency to hard work, and she is now enrolled in a master’s program.
"People assume that immigrants don't have education," she said. "They do, though. A lot of South Americans are professionals who can't work when they come here because of the language."

One program the CAC was recently involved in took advantage of that educational background. Because of the large demand in the area for bilingual health professionals, especially certified nursing assistants, the center and Clarkson College's school of nursing teamed up to certify Spanish-speaking health professionals from other countries. Fifteen participants completed a seven-month program that was designed to help them learn English vocabulary. At the end of the program, all of the students were placed into jobs, and similar projects are in the works.

Krayenhagen said she wished there were more programs that would allow professional immigrants with credentials from other countries to become certified to practice medicine, teach, etc., in America more quickly.

"We spend a lot of time and money in our countries," she said. "But it doesn't matter here. You have to spend more time and more money—two things a lot of immigrants don't have."

Despite these drawbacks for first-generation immigrants, Krayenhagen especially expressed concern about generation 1.5 high school students who are not currently eligible for in-state tuition in Nebraska. She said it is unfair to allow undocumented students to attend high schools and prepare for college when they are unable to qualify for financial aid from the government.

"After high school, the doors are closed," she said. "There are a lot of Hispanics here at the center who want to go to college, but they can't because they don't have a Social Security number."
At this time, she says, there is not much the center can do to help those students, but it is strongly supporting the state bill discussed in the next section that would allow in-state tuition for undocumented students.

The CAC is already significantly involved with English language learning, though. It collaborates with MCC to offer free English classes to community residents. Currently, three classes are offered. One is for women, one is for men, and the other is for both. The classes meet two times a week for three hours each, and they take place in the center. Krayenhagen says that the women-only group meets during daytime hours while mothers' children are in school. This class discusses issues related to family and parenting more than anything else. The men-only group meets in the evenings and mainly discusses issues related to the workplace and law enforcement. Finally, the mixed group discusses a wide spectrum of issues during evening sessions. The classes are taught by bilingual instructors from MCC.

As in many free, non-credit classes, Krayenhagen admits that attendance is sometimes an issue.

"There aren't enough chairs when the class starts," she said. "By the end, however, there are about half that many."

Learning English, she says, should be the most important thing for immigrants to Omaha. Although she understands time constraints and family commitments, Krayenhagen says she worked through them and anyone else can, too.

"If they want to learn, it is a sacrifice."

"Not their fault," an interview with Nebraska State Senator DiAnna Schimek

Nebraska State Senator DiAnna Schimek became interested in writing and introducing a bill that would allow undocumented immigrants to qualify for in-state tuition rates after reading material about the bills passed in California and Texas.
"We have a large Hispanic population here," she said. "This bill will mostly help children of illegal immigrants who are here by no fault of their own."

Schimek introduced LB 152 to the Education Committee on February 3, 2003. The bill would allow two types of students to qualify for in-state tuition. The first group is alien students with citizenship petitions pending with the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The second group is best described directly from the bill:

A student resided with his or her parent, guardian, or conservator while attending a public or private high school in this state and (a) graduated from a public or private high school in this state or received the equivalent of a high school diploma in this state, (b) resided in this state for at least three years before the date the person graduated from high school or received the equivalent of a high school diploma, (c) registers as an entering student in a state postsecondary educational institution not earlier than the 2003 fall semester, and (d) provides to the state postsecondary educational institution an affidavit stating that he or she will file an application to become a permanent resident at the earliest opportunity he or she is eligible to do so.

The wording is similar to that in the bills already passed by nine states; in fact, Schimek used the bill in Texas, the first one to be passed, as a model. It remains in committee, but Schimek expects it to be released to the Unicameral this year and believes it will be brought to a vote in the 2006 session. By that time, she says, legal questions about the bill should have been answered by a ruling from the federal courts on an almost identical bill in Kansas. That ruling is expected sometime in 2005 and will set a precedent for existing bills and those that have yet to be introduced on the topic.

The main legal challenge to a bill of this nature is Section 505 of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, which says that illegal aliens cannot receive postsecondary education benefits based on residence unless a citizen or national, whether a resident of the state or not, is extended the
same benefits. Schimek says there are two important Supreme Court rulings that support the legality of her bill. First is Phylervs. Doe (1982), a ruling that said states cannot deny undocumented children the right to a free public K-12 education because it violates the equal protection clause of the Constitution.

"I think we can make the argument that if it applies to school-age children," Schimek said, "it should apply to those same children when they are trying to go to college and better themselves."

Schimek also says that states should have the right to decide whether or not to offer in-state tuition to undocumented immigrants, not the federal government. She says the 1995 U.S. vs. Lopez ruling supports her position. In that decision, the Supreme Court determined that states are sovereign in making educational decisions, and that Congress only has control over federal funding.

Similar arguments are being made by the attorneys defending Kansas’s law. The suit challenging the law was brought by 20 out-of-state students attending postsecondary institutions in Kansas who say that the extra money they are charged for not being residents of Kansas must be refunded if illegal immigrants are granted in-state rates. Their legal team is being funded by the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), which paid for advertisements in local newspapers to recruit the students for the challenge (Moon, 2005, May 11).

I asked Schimek if she thought the purpose of her bill and others is lost in a larger battle over illegal immigration.

"Unfortunately," she said, "yes, I do. And it’s not their fault—these undocumented children—that they’re here. All children should have opportunities to excel to the best of their abilities. That’s what this bill is about, not illegal immigration."
Still, she expects that there will be a "loud, vocal minority" of conservative Nebraskan senators who will oppose the bill when it goes to the floor, but says that she believes the citizens of Nebraska will see that it benefits them in the end, especially with the support of businesses in the area. Most recently, she received a letter of support from the Gallup organization.

"It's in businesses' best interest to promote this kind of thing," Schimek said. "They get a more educated pool of people for their workforce, many who are bilingual."

Although Omaha has the largest Latino community in the state, Schimek said the situation in Lincoln, the district she represents, is particularly disturbing. At the hearing, Oscar Rios, bilingual liaison for Lincoln Public Schools, testified that 75% of the 2,100 Latino students in that system are undocumented.

"This bill will make our communities better," Schimek said. "We have an obligation to support these students who have been shut out for decisions that weren't theirs in the first place."

**Education “foreign to them,” an interview with Dr. Joan Hamilton**

Almost every available surface, including the floor, of Dr. Joan Hamilton's small office at South High School was piled high with papers and boxes. A narrow pathway led to her desk.

"I think this shows what my job is like," she said, clearing a seat for me. "We're in testing now, so it's usually a little less crowded in here. A little."

As director of ESL education at the school, Hamilton is responsible for about 360 students. She says they make up about 18% of the population, and many of them are Latino.
"The good news is that Latino names occupy a bigger and bigger part of the honors list," she said. "The bad news is that there's still a long way to go for most of them."

In describing the Latino students enrolled in the ESL program, Hamilton identified a number of challenges. First, she says, absenteeism is an issue for many of the Latinos in the program because of their work schedules. Most are employed in jobs that require eight hours a day or more of labor, and even if those hours are outside of the school day, she says that it is difficult to balance work and family obligations with school, especially given the added language work.

"It's not that they don't value education," she said. "It's just foreign to them."

Because the Latino students enrolled in the ESL program at South tend to be recent immigrants to the area, Hamilton says it is difficult to catch them up with the general population. Additionally, she has experienced considerable difficulty in most cases with involving the parents.

"Survival is the first concern for them. Education can't always be the highest on the priority list," she said. "We do our best for the students with the time they have."

For students who do complete the program, Hamilton finds it difficult to estimate how many continue to college. South High has a counseling department that works with her students and discusses options, she said, but issues with documentation can act as enough of a financial barrier for many of her Latino students. Because MCC is more affordable than four-year or private institutions, Hamilton says it should be more aggressive in recruiting the Latino population at South High.

"Metro doesn't present a face that Latino students find familiar," she said. "That's why students who might consider college don't think of it."
On the other hand, Bellevue University, a college located just outside of Omaha, directly recruits Latino students from South High School.

"Bellevue comes in with Latino faces and money for students," Hamilton said. "Metro simply doesn't counter that. And that's too bad because, since they're right here, students could have a lot of success by starting college there."

"Build it and they will come?" an interview with Jeanette Evans

As director of MCC's ABE/ESL program, one of Jeanette Evans's responsibilities is to coordinate the non-credit English language classes that take place at the Chicano Awareness Center. She calls those classes "traditional survival ESL."

Evans paints a different picture than Krayenhagen about the classes. First, she says, the CAC's insistence that instructors be bilingual shuts out a talented pool of possible teachers who might do a better job.

"Just being bilingual doesn't mean they're going to be good, effective teachers," she said. "I know a lot of teachers who would do a great job but can't be given the chance because of that condition."

Additionally, Evans says that it has been difficult to fill seats in classes at the center. They have tried innovative approaches but still face problems with enrollment and retention. According to Evans, the transient nature of the Latino population, pride, and undocumented status are the three main issues preventing students from attending the classes. After the September 11th attacks, she said, undocumented Latinos are more wary of getting involved with any organization, even the CAC. Evans tries to assure students of a safe environment.

"Metro's classes are risk-free," she said. "We don't care what their status is."

Still, the CAC classes are not attracting the number of students they did in previous years. Money spent to offer the classes, she says, could perhaps be put to
better use at another location where more students would take advantage of the opportunity to learn English.

"There's a monumental amount of work to be done and limited funds with which to do it," Evans said. "It's tough to justify paying for classes that students aren't attending."

The students who are taking English classes with MCC's instructors at the center are not counted as part of the college's Latino population because they do not earn credit for participation. Evans says very few transfer to MCC's ESL program for credit.

"It's a minute amount," she said. "At the early end of the single-digit percentage."

She believes that offering the non-credit courses at the college instead of at the center might increase the rate of transfer. At the same time, however, she acknowledges that some students who feel comfortable in the center may not feel comfortable at MCC.

In addition to the classes offered at the CAC, Evans says Metro is involved in partnerships with local businesses offering workplace English for Specific Purposes courses for Spanish-speaking Latino employees. Participants are allowed to learn "on the clock," and in return, the businesses are better able to communicate with them.

"Everyone wins. These classes have been so successful," she said. "We're learning almost faster than our students."

While experiencing success in partnering with businesses, Evans expresses frustration about working with Latino organizations.

"One problem is that you have three agencies competing for the same population," she said, referring to the CAC, the Nebraska Association of
Farmworkers, and the Latina Resource Center in South Omaha. "They shouldn’t be competing for people; instead, they should be working together to cut down on duplication of services. Everyone has their own agenda, though."

Evans says this view has evolved because she is contacted often by people from all of the different agencies about newer, bigger programs.

"The theory now is 'build it and they will come,'" she said. "And then they wonder why no one comes. Maybe if they asked the population what they wanted instead of deciding for them, they’d be more successful."

"Need to work on attitudes," an interview with Maria Vazquez

Maria Vazquez began her education at MCC. After earning bachelor’s and master’s degrees in social work from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, she returned to the South Omaha campus as its director of campus and student services, and she is one of MCC’s strongest connections to the Latino community.

"As director, one of my roles is visibility in the community," she said. "I always advocate for Metro."

As a high-profile Latina, Vazquez says that she is painfully aware of the gap between the institution and the community, one she is working to lessen.

"Even though our campus is bursting at the seams as far as space," she said, "there is a missing link."

Because she has so many responsibilities, including counseling and advising and running the career network center, testing center, financial aid department, and facilities at the campus, Vazquez says she is "always trying to meet the needs" that exist. She enjoys working with Latino organizations and serves on several boards, including the board of the Latina Resource Center. Still, she admits feeling overwhelmed at times.
“It takes an incredible amount of energy,” she said. “And in our community, the same people are tapped over and over again.”

Vazquez is involved with several efforts at MCC that target Latino recruitment and achievement. First, she regularly works as a recruiter at events where potential students will be. Second, she is an advisor for the Latino Achievement Council, which was organized in the fall of 2004. Third, she organizes a bilingual career fair twice a year, which brings businesses interested in employing bilingual employees. This, she says, is not only a good opportunity for Latinos to find employment, it is also acts as a way to expose them to the campus and perhaps get them to consider applying. Finally, Vazquez says she uses her resources as a Latina and her connections with the greater Omaha community to form positive relationships for future endeavors.

“A lot of partnerships are kind of bubbling out there,” she said.

One of her greatest challenges, Vazquez says, is trying to change people’s attitudes about MCC being a third, fourth, or fifth choice when it comes to education.

“I started here at Metro,” she said. “If you’re looking for a two-year program, Metro is great. Even if you want a four-year degree, this is a wonderful place to start. I’m working on communicating that message.”

She is not alone. A group of four Latina law students enrolled at the prestigious Creighton University Law School, also in Omaha, work in the South Omaha community to encourage families to consider MCC. Their message is that an education at Metro can lead anywhere.

Another of Vazquez’s personal concerns regards undocumented immigrants.

“We need to ask incoming students if they have a visa,” Vazquez said, “but if the answer is ‘no,’ we don’t ask further. You don’t need a Social Security number to
attend college, but undocumented students are in an incredible catch-22 when it comes to financial aid.”

For interested undocumented students, Vazquez says she takes payment “one step at a time.” She tells them to start with one class in a quarter and lets them know that monthly payment plans are available.

“The point is that it doesn’t require thousands of dollars up front,” she said.

Unfortunately, though, Vazquez says that there has been a significant increase in the “fear factor” for undocumented immigrants in recent years because of the surge of anti-immigrant sentiment she says is all too obvious in the state and nation.

“They are afraid to go anywhere where their status may even come up,” she said. “And I’m not sure I blame them. We can say this is a safe zone, and it is, but if I weren’t a citizen, I’m not sure I’d risk it. It’s unfortunate because there is such an intelligent group out there that we are all missing out on.”

Conclusion

The people whose views were presented in this chapter paint a picture of the South Omaha community and the educational issues facing it that national and state statistics cannot. Their perspectives show challenges that MCC and its potential students face in the educational process, and their opinions will be used in the next chapter to form recommendations to better bring the two groups together.
CHAPTER 5
RECOMMENDATIONS

The insights provided by people interviewed for this study offers some valuable perspectives that can be used to form recommendations, both for the community in general and Metropolitan Community College in particular.

Recommendations for the community

Issues identified and discussed by the interviewees showed three main areas of potential improvement for people working in the community. First, as Jeanette Evans pointed out, the “If we build it, they will come” philosophy is making failures out of many good-hearted efforts. Too often, those who propose and implement educational programs and outreach plans assume knowledge of what the South Omaha Latino population wants, especially, unfortunately, if they are Latinos themselves. One example of this, Evans says, is a project that a well-known Latino businessman is currently trying to organize. The two spoke recently and discussed his idea to create an educational institute in South Omaha that would focus on workplace readiness skills, literacy, ESL learning, job training, and job placement for Latinos. When Evans asked what kind of focus groups he had conducted, she says his answer was that they were not necessary because he was a member of the community.

"It would make so much more sense to ask them what their needs are than to wonder why they don’t come," Evans said.

Of course, from a positive perspective, this and similar efforts demonstrate sincere intentions to improve the community. On the other hand, though, and perhaps more importantly, the time, effort, and funding that goes into these initiatives could be better spent on programs that the population wants and would make use of. Additionally, all of the services in the project mentioned above are
available elsewhere; in fact, they are offered in several different institutions, which will be explained further in the next recommendation. In short, before pursuing any new program or curriculum in South Omaha, it is advisable to first ask members of the community what their needs are, thereby identifying potential participants, and to make sure that the new program or initiative is not simply duplicating a service that already exists.

Second, agencies whose primary mission is to serve Omaha’s Latino population need to communicate and cooperate more with one another. This refers to three main social service agencies. First is the Chicano Awareness Center, whose services were described in the previous chapter in the interview with Lissette Krayenhagen. This is the main agency in South Omaha, and it serves the general population. Second is what was the Nebraska Association of Farmworkers (NAF), now called NAF Multicultural Human Development Corporation (NAF-MHDC) because it serves rural and Latino low-income populations as well as its original population of seasonal and migrant farmworkers. Its main services are job training, disease prevention, health, and education. Third is the Latina Resource Center (LRC), new to the area, which, as the name implies, was designed to meet the needs of Latina women. Partnered with Catholic Charities, Family Services, and the YWCA, much of the center’s outreach involves issues of parenting (with a focus on single teenage mothers), health, and domestic violence.

Although all of these organizations serve Latinos, their target populations are different. At the same time, however, they replicate many services, especially in the area of education. For example, each organization offers free ESL classes in South Omaha, though NAF-MHDC also services rural Nebraska populations where the meatpacking industry—and therefore Latinos—are present. As discussed by Jeanette Evans and Lissette Krayenhagen, the ESL classes offered at the CAC have
suffered from low attendance lately, a problem that may be due to all of the organizations vying for the same population of people. Whether that is the reason or not, these organizations could save resources by cooperating with one another and collaborating to offer free ESL classes that would service all of their clients.

Of course, the problem with merging services between the agencies is essentially one of territory. The CAC opened in 1971, and it was considered a "revolutionary" organization by many of the old-timers in the beginning with its posters in support of freedom movements in Latin America (Lopez, 2001). Given its duration in and connection to the community, it wants to maintain its position as the primary social service agency in the area. While it is not competing directly with the LRC or the NAF-MHDC, it certainly has not focused as much as it should on collaboration with these other agencies. As the main and most established outlet for Latinos in South Omaha, the CAC should organize the other agencies and streamline services and programs. Such cooperation can only serve to strengthen assistance programs and better manage existing funds.

New programs backed by individuals or other organizations—such as the institute proposed by a local businessman that Evans discussed—though well intentioned, generally do not make use of existing resources, and this, along with the lack of research in the community, contributes to their ultimate failure. Sometimes, it seems, pride and control are issues, whether on the part of the individual or organization proposing a new program or the agency. The fact remains, however, that there are people and organizations with good ideas who could make the agencies better if the two would work together and if the established agencies would work more effectively with one another.

Third, besides spending more time in the community conducting needs assessments and establishing better communication and cooperation between
agencies, organizations, and individuals in South Omaha, human resources should be united in a more effective way. As Maria Vazquez pointed out, Latinos involved in South Omahan advisory boards and committees are overextended because the same people are called upon repeatedly by different organizations. As with the agencies, these committees often double up on issues, and they do not seem to communicate well with one another unless they share a high-ranking member. Again, as with the agencies, these boards and committees all differ slightly from one another, but their work frequently overlaps. In order to make the most of the time high-profile Latinos have to offer, a South Omaha Latino oversight board should be created to organize the surplus of boards and committees into a more effective structure, one more like that used in legislatures. For example, single committees could be formed for areas such as health, family, business, and education that could then work out their own subcommittees. This would facilitate better communication in all areas, especially in education, as representatives from different grade levels, including primary, secondary, and post-secondary, could discuss issues such as retention and transfer. In addition, communication between different post-secondary institutions would improve. Overall, the spirit that motivates people involved in the community would be put to better use, and the common goals that members share for its advancement could be realized sooner.

Of course, this would be a rather ambitious undertaking. Even if an oversight board is not agreed upon by the existing organizations, better communication between those institutions could have amazing results. One way to make such communication possible would be to create a web site where all of the different boards and committees could report activities and host discussion forums. Areas of duplication would become clear quickly, and new, better partnerships could be formed in similar areas.
In all of this, Metropolitan Community College needs to emerge as a leader, and it could earn that position by acting as the organizing force for bringing various agencies and committees in the community together in the ways similar to those described above. However, its most pressing need is to recruit more Latino students now, and recommendations toward that end will be discussed next.

**Recommendations for Metropolitan Community College**

After learning more about MCC's structure and programs, and after speaking with employees there and to others in the Latino community, I identified five main areas that, if improved, could certainly increase the Latino presence at the South Omaha campus.

**Create a multicultural affairs office**

The creation of a Latino advisory board for MCC suggested by Theresa Barron-McKeagney is highly unlikely. As much as the institution wants to increase its Latino population, especially on the South Omaha campus, it should focus first on improving recruitment, retention, mentoring, and graduation of all of its minority students. A good start would be to create a multicultural affairs office that serves students of color and acts as a center for these learners.

At the time of this writing, the closest thing to a multicultural affairs office that MCC has is what it calls the department of International/Intercultural Education, which has two staff members for all of the college's campuses, a coordinator and a clerk. That means that two people are responsible for coordinating educational services for international and intercultural (multicultural) students. A quote from Robert A. Scott stands alone on the department web site's main page to support joining the two student groups:

We have educators who believe that international and multicultural education are different areas for different populations. Many people, even
educators, seem to think that ‘international’ refers to ‘over there,’ while ‘Multicultural’ refers to populations in our cities. Yet nothing could be farther from the truth. These two themes are siblings in the same family, and they should be partners in an institution’s priorities.\(^4\)

While the quote is written in engaging language, it is out of a larger context that should explain the rationale for grouping the two types of students together. This cannot be found on the web site or in literature from the office. Perhaps it is because financial resources are channeled elsewhere in the college and because multicultural learning is not seen as a priority. The other postsecondary institutions in and around Omaha, such as the University of Nebraska at Omaha, Bellevue University, Creighton University, and the College of St. Mary, separate the offices for international and multicultural students because they identify very different needs for these groups. While an exhaustive list of separate needs is outside the realm of this study, main differences include language and cultural education. International students have English learning needs that U.S.-born students of color do not. Additionally, international education generally has a strong focus on learning about American culture, one that multicultural students are already aware of because of their membership in that culture and American schooling.

One clear problem with joining the student groups together is that the office still ends up separating them, with multicultural students in the periphery. The International/Intercultural Education department has a stronger focus on international students and study abroad programs. For example, all of the students featured on the “Student Information” page giving testimonials about the MCC education are from other countries; not a single minority voice is present. In fact, the only issues relevant to multicultural students that the office participates in are

\(^4\) Taken from MCC’s International/Intercultural Education web site. Date of access 2 May 2005. http://wwwfp.mccneb.edu/intercultural/
observances of history months—Black History Month, Hispanic/Latino Heritage Month, Asia/Pacific Islander Month, and Native American Month. Although these months are worthy of attention and activities, observance months alone certainly do not meet the needs of multicultural students.

Because MCC serves such a large number of students, almost a quarter of whom are identified as minorities, its failure to have an office of multicultural affairs is unfortunate. Such an outlet would work to provide services that are generally available in other postsecondary institutions, including recruitment, retention, mentoring, and graduation of minority students. These offices also work to provide financial and professional support. The current International/Intercultural Education Department does not offer any of these services. Rather, it describes itself as "a resource to globalization curriculum, equip faculty/staff/students for employment within a diverse workforce and facilitate international/intercultural experiences to enhance professional and personal objectives." While this may be a valuable resource to faculty and students, it is not doing enough—indeed, not anything—to ensure the success of students of color, and if that is not one of the department's responsibilities, a separate office must be created to meet the need. This recommendation is a practical one because it will not only help Latinos, but all minority students in the college.

Get more involved at the high-school level

As the literature shows, high school is a critical educational period for Latino youths. Many postsecondary institutions recognize the value of being involved with local high schools, particularly in the area of recruitment, but MCC is admittedly weak in this area. When I asked Maria Vazquez to discuss MCC's connection to high schools in Omaha and specifically to South High School, she frowned.
“It’s not good enough. There are spotty efforts, but nothing consistent,” she said.

This lack of high school recruitment helps explain the diminutive Latino presence at MCC. If the college were to be more involved with guidance and recruitment during the high school years, presenting the “familiar face” Joan Hamilton says it is lacking at South, more students might consider enrolling. The strongest messages MCC can deliver are the affordable cost of tuition and range of programs available. If an office of multicultural affairs were created, it could send recruiters best qualified to target the Latino population, especially if they were Latinos themselves. Such an office could also serve as a selling point because it would provide students with a strong support system.

*Promote family education and parental involvement*

MCC is an invisible resident in South Omaha, at least as far as the Latino community is concerned. The few Latino employee representatives, i.e. Maria Vazquez, cannot be solely responsible for advocating MCC to the residents of South Omaha. Some of the reasons for not going to college that Vazquez says she has heard from families in the community include finances, time, and transportation. Unfortunately, beliefs that these obstacles are too great to overcome can prevent parents and children from looking further into educational opportunities. MCC is a sensible solution because its tuition is more affordable than other educational institutions, it specializes in part-time education, and transportation to the campus is not difficult as it is in the community, especially with the new bus terminal being built at the time of this writing. While MCC does advertise itself as an affordable school with flexible scheduling, its failure in the Latino community is in communicating this message effectively to families, parents in particular, who are likely to respond positively if they are aware of the advantages the college can offer.
Involving the family rather than focusing on individual students is one area Theresa Barron McKeagney says is very important because, as she mentioned in the interview, Latino families make decisions more often together than alone. The teenage population in South Omaha is more likely to go to college if their parents encourage and support them in pursuing education.

One way that MCC can help get the message out is in an aggressive campaign directed toward Latino parents. The college could organize informational open houses specifically for Latino families with the message being as simple as, “Do you want your children to go to college? Take them there.” Successfully implementing such a campaign would be relatively inexpensive as the best ways to communicate with the parents would be by buying time on the Spanish-language radio and/or television stations and advertising in church newsletters and speaking at church functions. Activities like this would also help MCC become a more recognizable presence in the community, and they could result in enrollment from children and even their parents in available programs.

Be more aggressive in recruiting undocumented teenagers

One potential population of Latino students that MCC could really corner the market on is undocumented teenagers. As research presented in this study has shown, these students have a critical disadvantage when it comes to college education. After being granted the right to attend primary and secondary schools like American citizens, they suddenly become non-resident aliens at the doors of postsecondary institutions. At the hearing for LB 152, a student from South High School, Rosselyn Garcia, undocumented herself, said, “I came here to support LB 152 because a lot of Latino students drop out because they think, ‘What am I doing here? I’m not going to go to college or anything.’”
MCC, by being more involved in local high schools, could seek out these students and show them how a college education is possible. It could even offer in-state tuition rates without waiting for the legislation to pass, a practice that Dennis Baack, executive director of the Nebraska Community College Association, testified many community colleges are following if the undocumented students have a diploma or GED from an accredited state institution. Again, an office of multicultural affairs would be valuable here because it could support these students the way no department currently in the institution could.

By recruiting more undocumented teenagers, MCC would show commitment to Latino culture and the community, creating a stronger connection between the people of South Omaha and the college.

Create partnerships with local businesses that need bilingual employees

Recruiting undocumented teenagers has another benefit to the college, Omaha businesses, and the teenagers themselves that is often overlooked. Undocumented Latino teenagers are often bilingual in Spanish and English. The need for bilingual employees in Omaha is growing, especially as the Latino immigrant population grows. As Theresa Barron-McKeagney mentioned, MCC has a unique opportunity to create a dual-language development program that would educate these students and answer the need for bilingual professionals in the local job market. Such a program could be funded, including scholarships and/or tuition reimbursement for students, by the businesses in need of bilingual employees. Once more, an office of multicultural affairs would serve as a good coordinator of such partnerships.

Conclusion

Metropolitan Community College, as it experiences growth on its South campus, has a unique opportunity to change from an invisible occupant to an
emerging leader in the changing Latino community of South Omaha. By listening to and learning from Latino professionals such as Theresa Barron-McKeagney, Lissette Krayenhagen, and its own Maria Vazquez, MCC can implement successful Latino recruitment programs. Additionally, organizing a multicultural affairs office to oversee the recruitment and education of all minority students will show commitment to a diverse student population that will later become a diverse, professional workforce.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to investigate the gap between Latinos and higher education in the area, especially at Metropolitan Community College’s South Omaha campus, where Latino representation in the student body was almost non-existent. Several research questions were posed to frame the study that will be revisited here with brief commentary.

The first two questions asked about the history of Latinos in Omaha and the development of South Omaha into a Latino community (examined in the second chapter). Research showed that Latino presence in the city and in the state was limited to transitory Mexican workers on the railroad and in the fields until after WWI, when Latino families began to settle in the South Omaha area, less than one hundred years ago. Latinos, especially those of Mexican descent, filled labor shortages during the two World Wars, and many of the laborers stayed in the area after the wars were over. Still, the first major wave of Latino immigration to the area was during the 1920s, and although the Great Depression caused forced deportations of many Mexicans, a considerable number in stayed in Omaha. These Latinos and their descendants played a vital role in the rise of South Omaha’s meatpacking industry, and they kept the city alive after industry fell apart in the late 1960s. The most recent wave of Latino migration to the city began in the 1980s, when the meatpacking industry returned to the area. The continued immigration of Mexicans and Central Americans to South Omaha over the 20th century and into the 21st has established it as a Latino community. As Lopez (2001) points out, the immigration pattern of Latinos to South Omaha is unlike other immigrant groups, resulting in a unique community: “Newcomers have extended the life of the Latino ethnic community of South Omaha by supplying a constant influx of migrants to the
area. Social networks and a history of Latino immigration to Omaha have created inroads to the city. In contrast to European immigration, Latino immigration has continued” (p. 97). While other ethnic groups such as the Poles and the Irish, separated from the mainstream in the early 1900s, have since assimilated and dispersed, leaving no identifiable “ethnic section,” the steady stream of new arrivals to South Omaha have helped it remain a visibly Latino community.

The third research question called for an examination into the current gap between Latinos and higher education (see Chapter 3). Nationally, research shows that a quarter of all American adults have a college education, but only 11% of Latinos do. The high dropout rate of Latinos in high schools is cited as a major reason for poor enrollment in postsecondary education. Additionally, barriers such as cost, time, poor academic preparation, and family commitments and their effect upon college success for Latinos were discussed. Latinos who do go to college usually choose two-year schools, but retention is a major concern. In the end, less than two-fifths of Latinos who enroll in postsecondary education actually graduate. The research also showed that Nebraska has the highest Latino dropout rate of all the Great Plains states, one that is worse than the already troubling national average, and that it has poor Latino representation in its colleges. The state’s failings concerning undocumented children were discussed, which is important because “Immigration policies that erect barriers to the successful integration of Latino children hinder the state’s capacity to safeguard its future and must be reformed” (Gouveia & Powell, 2004, p. 8). The gap at MCC was also examined in the third chapter, answering the fourth research question, showing that less than 2% of all students at its South campus are Latino.

The fifth research question sought to discover how people in the community feel about the education of Latinos in the Omaha area, including at MCC.
Information from interviews with decision-makers and academics was presented in Chapter Four. The interviewees, for the most part, felt that MCC did not have a strong connection to the community and that it needed to become more involved to become an integral part of Latino South Omaha. A general misunderstanding of Latino culture and lack of dual-language programs were discussed by Theresa Barron-McKeagney as reasons why MCC has been unsuccessful in recruiting students. Lissette Krayenhagen suggested that MCC develop more certification programs for Latinos who have postsecondary degrees from their countries but need to learn English. She also suggested, as did Jeanette Evans and DiAnna Schimek, that MCC become more involved with recruiting and supporting undocumented teenagers. Joan Hamilton said that MCC should become a recognizable presence in area high schools and offer scholarships to prospective students. Finally, Maria Vazquez, MCC’s most high-profile Latina employee, pointed out the positive changes that the college is making in reaching the Latino community and expressed optimism about the success of future efforts.

Finally, the sixth research question asked how the South Omaha campus could increase its Latino student population by creating trust and rapport with the community surrounding it. Recommendations were given in the last chapter to that end that include developing an office of multicultural affairs, getting more involved at the high-school level, promoting family education and parental involvement, becoming more aggressive in recruiting and retaining undocumented students, and creating partnerships with local businesses in need of bilingual employees. Recommendations for organizing forces in the community were also given.

The history of Latinos in Omaha is a young one, and because immigrants continue to make new lives and establish families in South Omaha, that history is still very much in the making. Will the Latino residents of South Omaha continue to
exist as a community set apart from the mainstream city surrounding them, or will they assimilate like European immigrants who settled there before them, such as the Polish? Higher education will be a key factor in determining their future. Lopez (2001) says that the separation of South Omaha from mainstream Omaha is only hurting Latinos:

"The Latino community needs to look to itself in improving its situation. [...] Self-segregation from the majority group only results in increased isolation. The Latino community must capitalize on the sacrifices those before them have made and use the resources available to them and maximize their educational and occupational opportunities. Social change will not come from outside, but from within." (pp. 100-101)

One positive thing about the insularity of the community is that it has helped preserve language, culture, and traditions. Some Latinos certainly worry that the attainment of higher education comes at the cost of losing these markers through assimilation, as Richard Rodriguez (1982) describes in his autobiography. It seems that the majority, however, understands the value of higher education and recognizes its potential to improve the lives of Latinos and the economic situations of their families and South Omaha. Language is preserved by the bilingual youth in the area, culture is maintained by close family and community connections, and Latino traditions are so well preserved, it is difficult to imagine them dissolving in the way that many European cultures' traditions have through assimilation given the steady arrival of new immigrants to the area.

Latinos will be the majority ethnic group in America by 2050, surpassing African Americans (Swail, Cabrera, and Lee, 2004). Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the educational performance of Latinos is receiving more national attention. However, the education of Latinos in Southern California differs from the education of Latinos in remote, rural areas of Michigan, which differs from the education of
Latinos in Omaha, Nebraska. We have to recognize that our Latino populations, based on geography and economics, are wholly diverse, so smaller studies are valuable in presenting a more in-depth picture of our unique communities. One organization in particular, the University of Michigan’s Julian Samora Research Institute, is funding and publishing studies focusing on Midwestern states and cities, including Nebraska and Omaha, making available research from scholars dedicated to those areas and the people who live in them. Nebraska-specific studies are beneficial because, according to figures from the U.S. Census, the Latino population in Nebraska is expected to increase by 140.74% between 1990 and 2015. The only Midwestern state with a larger projected increase is Minnesota (Lopez, 2000). The significance of this study, I hope, is that it acknowledges the big picture while trying to present a much smaller, specific aspect of Latino education by focusing its research in the individual community of South Omaha. Research like this can be used to transform the situation from the community upward to the state and to the nation.

Improving the educational attainment of Latinos in Nebraska is critical to both the communities they live in and the state itself. By 2030, it is conservatively estimated that the Latino population in Nebraska will reach 300,000, while other population projections indicate that it may reach as much as 450,000. At a minimum, then, using the more conservative estimate, Latinos will make up 15% of the state’s population (Gouveia & Powell, 2004). It is clear that the educational needs of Latinos are not being met at present, including at MCC.

For MCC to remedy the gap between itself and the Latino community, besides implementing some of the recommendations discussed in the fifth chapter, it has to acknowledge the unique needs of Latino students. This includes assisting families with admittance processes and issues of financial aid. MCC should also
familiarize faculty and staff, at least at its South Omaha campus, with the distinct barriers that Latino students face in college so that their instructors can help encourage and promote their success. MCC also needs increased Latino presence in its faculty; if there were more role models for students like Maria Vazquez, Latinos could thrive in MCC’s programs. Put simply, with focused efforts, MCC can significantly improve its Latino representation at South campus.

In the 1890s, South Omaha was known as the “Magic City” because it was flourishing with opportunity and achievement. Great things were happening there then, and we can see at the time of this writing that great things lie in the community’s future with the further education of its residents. Metropolitan Community College, the only postsecondary institution in the area, should take a leading role in bridging the gap between Latinos and higher education. In doing so, the college will also lessen the gap that exists between it and the surrounding residents, benefiting MCC, Omaha businesses, Latinos themselves, and the greater Omaha community.

As the great Cesar Chavez was famous for saying, “Sí se puede.” It can be done.
REFERENCES


