

PERSPECTIVA

Do the Math

BY JOSÉ ANTONIO TIJERINO

Erin Sepulveda, a recent college grad who was a recipient of our Youth Award and majored in math and engineering, calls me for guidance on job opportunities in engineering. He is one of hundreds of emerging Latino professionals who have reached out to me for direction and one of tens of thousands we have in our network who share the same needs.

Government agencies and Fortune 500 companies also call me for guidance in finding emerging Latino professionals interested in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) fields as they scatter to get a jump on replacing baby boomers on the cusp of retirement. They lament the shortage of Latino talent in their industries.



Juxtapose those two scenarios with a final one: according to the National Academy of Sciences, China produced 500,000 engineering graduates last year, compared to 200,000 in India and

70,000 in the U.S..

On behalf of Erin and countless students and recent Hispanic graduates, please allow me to make a statement: Investment will take more than money and resources. I'll follow that assertion with an analogy. During the Gold Rush before the turn of the last century, the gold was always there but it wasn't valuable until it was found and then refined.

Fortunately, there is an abundance of undiscovered Latino talent heading into the STEM fields and, through a study by the Hispanic Heritage Foundation (HHF) and the National Research Center for Colleges & Universities (NRCCUA), a trend was found where Latino high school students over the past six years (graduating high school class of 2012) are increasingly more interested in math, science and engineering subjects. Sanguinely, it means the current bevy of Latinos I have encountered following a STEM path can be reinforced by younger students interested in the fields. However, the investment will need to be inspiration and vision.

The "need" by America's workforce and the "interest" by students and young professionals should serve as a call to action for Hispanic-serving organizations, educational institutions, and corporate America to collectively encourage and facilitate a systematic transition for Latinos into educational and career opportunities in these important fields. And no effort will work without providing the young students and professionals with the inspiration and a vision of the path and what can be accomplished.

After years of honoring top Latino high school students with the Hispanic Heritage Youth Awards for Math, Engineering,

Science and other subjects, I wanted to use our program to feed a more sustainable path to leadership through college and then in the workforce. HHF developed the LOFT (Latinos on Fast Track) workforce program with the Hispanic College Fund because of the incessant phone calls from talented Latinos such as Erin and concurrently from desperate companies in search of Erin. We created a sustainable and systematic program which not only prepared and placed vetted, talented candidates but moreover provided them with a vision of their career within an industry and inspiration of Hispanic executives with a company which might have been outside of their point of reference as Latinos.

Through another study with NRCCUA, we found Latinos are most likely to need guidance in the areas of education and the workforce outside of the home, which is a direct correlation to having the lowest high school graduation rate. This means, after beating the odds and graduating college, Latino young professionals are in need of guidance as they decide on majors, look for internships or enter the workforce.

In a further effort to put our LOFT Network of young

Inspiration plus vision equals emerging talent in the STEM fields.

leaders in a position to provide grade school, middle school and high school students with inspiration and vision of what can be accomplished HHF created a "Near-Peer" role model effort which includes a Youth Speakers' Bureau and the Mi Mentors program with AT&T, which will provide support through our network to outnumbered guidance counselors at the junior high and high school level. To compete with China, India and other nations, it's important to not be myopic in terms of preparing the next wave of our prospective workforce. And with the Pew Hispanic Center's findings that one in five of all students in America are Latino, it is clear which segment of the population should get our immediate attention.

But it will take a collective effort. And leadership. Hispanic-serving institutions need to leverage their resources and expertise and support each other. HHF has programmatic and outreach strengths while the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE) has been on the ground floor for years. In the public sector, prescient heroes such as Rep. Ruben Hinojosa (D-TX) has served as a champion in improving educational and workforce programs for minorities and low-income families and founded HESTEC, which emphasizes the importance of science literacy for Hispanics to educators, students and parents. And the corporate sector will need to follow the lead of ExxonMobil in their impressive support of STEM programs, well into the tens of millions.

It will take more than money. Especially when get a student as far along as majoring in the STEM subjects in college. That is when we need to go from the broad outreach approach to making

Continued on page 97

an impact individually. For example, we recently launched the LOFT Engineering Fellows program with ExxonMobil where college students who meet certain criteria are provided with an educational grant and an opportunity to be considered for a paid summer internship at several of their world-class facilities. Just as importantly, the LOFT Fellows will be assigned to a member of ExxonMobil's internal Latino group GOAL to provide that one-on-one inspiration and vision of a career in the company or industry. An "education of the heart" as Cesar Chavez put it so poignantly.

Chavez also said: Being of service is not enough. You must become a servant. And only then can you demand their commitment in return. It is our profound responsibility as "servants" to provide inspiration and vision along with the opportunities which are obviously abundant. Do the math, the numbers are in our favor.

José Antonio Tijerino is the president and CEO of the Hispanic Heritage Foundation which identifies, inspires, promotes and prepares Latino leaders in the classroom, community and workforce. Visit www.HispanicHeritage.org for more information.