

THE STATE OF THE STATE FOR WASHINGTON LATINOS: 2006

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A research project completed by Whitman College students

In partnership with state and community professionals

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Few issues seem more difficult to talk about in the United States today than racial inequality. Yet perhaps never before has there been a greater need for responsible public dialogue about this complicated subject. The people of the State of Washington feel this need especially acutely because the racial and ethnic composition of this state has been changing so dramatically in recent years, above all because of dynamic growth in the Latino population.

The process of public discussion is hampered, however, by the fact that Latinos systematically lack the advantages in education, employment, and political representation that would enable them to take full part in debate about these persistent and troubling inequalities. Indeed, as pervasive social and political disparities between Latinos and the population at large widen, we are tending more and more toward a situation where we are two societies, separate but unequal, with Latinos making up a mounting percentage of the less privileged and the disempowered.

In the fall of 2005, Whitman College undergraduates completed the initial report on *The State of the State for Washington Latinos*. This document was the first-ever widely inclusive account of social and political conditions for Latinos in Washington State. Spanning issue areas ranging from education to health insurance, from farm labor to housing, and from voting rights to domestic violence, the 2005 report showed graphically that the challenges and inequalities facing Washington Latinos are multiple, interwoven, and deeply entrenched. It also brought to light innovative efforts to solve these problems and sought to stimulate a new resolve by the people of Washington to address them through a comprehensive agenda for racial and social justice.

The State of the State for Washington Latinos: 2006 dramatically expands the scope of our inquiry, supplementing the earlier report with an entirely new array of research on pressing questions at stake in ensuring a better future for Latinos and all residents of this state. As before, a class of advanced and highly motivated undergraduates at Whitman College, located in Walla Walla, conducted inquiries with the following goals:

- Collecting original data, and synthesizing existing data, on an extensive range of social and political concerns affecting Latino communities in Washington State and the U.S.;
- Complementing a data-based picture of statewide conditions and the national context with local case studies;
- Performing personal interviews with ordinary people from among Washington's Latino communities, to reveal the "human face" of statistics and institutions; and

- Grounding all these inquiries and findings in a rigorous assessment of scholarly literature on the various topics.

Real solutions to public problems, however, demand more than research. They also require “public work” – people from different locations in our communities working together to identify the challenges we collectively face and to forge strategies for meeting them. *The State of the State 2006* is the product of just this kind of collaboration. Throughout their research investigations, the students relied on guidance from a public spirited and dedicated group of professionals from throughout Washington State. These Community-Professional Partners are people who operate migrant health services, work with juvenile detainees and their families, coordinate bilingual school curricula, advise Latino youth groups, train Spanish-speaking preschool teachers, litigate for Voting Rights Act enforcement, build support groups for domestic violence survivors, mentor first-generation college students, provide HIV/AIDS education, serve the homeless, and develop farm worker housing. Their partnership with Whitman students embodied the “public work” among citizens on which a vibrant democracy depends.

Among the highlights of *The State of the State for Washington Latinos: 2006* are the following:

- **K-12 Education:** While it is of deep concern that fewer than 50% of students graduate from high school, educational programs should also promote high academic achievement. Alternative public schools across the state show markedly greater racial equality in their student graduating populations in comparison to traditional high schools. High achievement, in turn, depends on programs that connect parents to their children’s school and to adult learning opportunities.
- **Early Childhood Education:** Effective preschool programs for Latino children accept and respect a child’s home culture and language, and also provide health and social services. Migrant Head Start has accomplished these things and merits strong support. Washington’s Building Bridges preschool teacher training program also offers a model approach to enhancing the capacities of teachers to provide culturally appropriate early childhood education.
- **Higher Education:** Latino families disproportionately feel the effects of college tuition fee increases that are outstripping incomes as well as the shift in college aid from grants to loans. While structural efforts to address this racial inequality are necessary, special programs such as TRiO-Educational Talent Search enhance the “cultural capital” enabling Latinos to access existing college aid resources. Community Colleges can also boost four-year college enrollments by creating more of a transfer culture on campus and recruiting Latino faculty role models.
- **Juvenile Delinquency:** Latino youth are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system and become further disadvantaged as they move through the system, as extralegal factors such as socioeconomic means and language barriers impact case processing. In several jurisdictions, the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative has led to successful responses to these problems including culturally competent detention alternatives and race-neutral screening criteria.

- **Health Care:** Latinos in general and Latino immigrants in particular, especially the undocumented, access health care at lower rates than the population at large. The State should insure more children through the Children’s Health Program and support “*promotoras*” community health worker programs through research and funding. Culturally knowledgeable outreach by *promotoras* also promotes the prevention of HIV, which disproportionately affects Latinos, by diminishing the inhibitory factors to HIV testing such as fears of social stigma.

- **Farm Worker Housing:** Lead poisoning, respiratory illness, and pesticide exposure are disturbingly common health issues stemming from the substandard housing where farm worker families often live. Along with residential instability and the geographical isolation of these dwellings, these factors adversely affect children’s ability to attend and succeed in school. New public investment to improve and develop farm worker housing is urgently needed.

- **Homeownership:** Latino homeownership rates lag behind those of the population at large, and income disparities and immigration-related problems help generate this situation. Community-based housing assistance agencies should offer Latino-specific programs on homeownership including bilingual workshops on debt and income management.

- **Domestic Violence:** The factors that lead to disproportionately high rates of domestic violence among Latinos gain force with post-immigrant generations born in the US. While domestic violence interventions typically offer after-the-fact services, successful prevention programs are both needed and possible: targeting youth; based in collaboration among schools, community organizations, and families; and building on cultural strengths inhibiting domestic violence.

- **Voting Rights:** Political jurisdictions abound in Washington where there is a stark mismatch between the Latino population and the proportion of Latino political representatives. Statistical evidence in this report shows the existence of structural barriers to Latino representation suggesting the need for court-ordered remedies under the federal Voting Rights Act.

- **Political Mobilization:** Latino youth surveyed both highly value and keenly desire greater political participation but are uncertain about what steps to take. The Secretary of State’s initiative to inspire youth voter mobilization should be expanded to include bilingual civics education and education in the history of minority voting rights.

César Chávez once said, “We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community.... Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own.”

The participants in this project on *The State of the State for Washington Latinos: 2006* urge all people in this State to consider the findings of this report and to join us in broadening our ambitions for racial, social, and political justice.