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Voices of Struggle and Success: Latinos in the Work Place in Cache Valley

Maria Luisa Spicer-Escalante

Specific historical, political, and economic reasons explain the presence of Hispanics in the United States. These factors must be understood to interpret the importance and impact of Hispanics in the workforce in the United States. Therefore, it is necessary to briefly review the circumstances and events that have created the social context in which the Hispanic population is now embedded. For example, in the case of the Mexican-American population, many families have been here since before the English arrived, settling in the former Mexican territories now known as New Mexico, Colorado, California, Arizona, and Texas. Other families, who immigrated to the United States during the 20th century, have already lived here for several generations (Peñalosa 1980, as cited in Spicer-Escalante 2002). Moreover, during the Second World War, the United States and the Mexican government instituted the *Bracero Program* (1942), which allowed Mexicans to work for short periods of time and for low wages in this country (Valdés, 2000). Although the *Bracero Program* ended in 1964, Mexican workers have continued coming to the United States. This historical context explains, to some extent, the Mexican presence in the United States – 63% of the total U.S. Hispanic population (U.S. Census Bureau 2011) – and particularly its presence in Utah, where 12.0% of the population is Hispanic compared to 16.3% of the nation’s total population (Pew Hispanic Center 2011).

Other Hispanic groups, such as Bolivians, Argentinians, Salvadorans, and Dominicans, were driven by the political, social, and economic challenges in their country of origin to come to the United States, looking for other options and for an alternative way of living. According to the most recent statistics available, more than 50 million Hispanics currently live legally in this country, representing approximately 16% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau

2011). The Hispanic population is projected to reach 132.8 million by the year 2050, which will represent approximately 30% of the nation's population (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2011), Hispanics comprised 15% of the United States labor force in 2010; by 2018 they will represent approximately 18% of the country's workforce. In light of this situation, we might ask ourselves: Where do these Latino/Latina people work? What are their experiences in the workplace? What are their dreams and their struggles with regard to working in this country? What are their expectations? And, most importantly, what are their plans for fully participating in the opportunities that this country has to offer, as well as contributing to the challenges it will face over the next few decades?

The following 16 interviews with Latinos and Latinas from different nationalities display a set of similar attitudes on how this population conceives of work. That is, for most Latinos and Latinas in Logan, Utah, working and providing for their families is considered a matter of pride, self-identification, and respect. Likewise, the interviews show common patterns in how Latinos and Latinas have adjusted their personal and professional skills, aptitudes, and preferences in order to be successful in the workplace in the United States. The interviews also illustrate how their diverse work experiences have opened new pathways and opportunities to achieve both current and future professional and personal endeavors.

Several common topics can be identified in these personal narratives. For example, although most of the interviewees explicitly express in various ways that education is one of the most important aspects of achievement, some of them consider working and providing for their families more important than having a college degree. According to national statistics, it is common among Latinos to drop out of school to support their family. According to the Utah State Office of Education, 26% of Hispanic students dropped out of high school in 2010 (Salt Lake

Tribune 2011). In this regard, the stories of Delina Carpio Amestoy, Enrique Mendoza, Ena Murillo, and Enrique Sotelo are examples of the challenges and struggles Hispanic people face in pursuing an education. It is noteworthy that, among Latinos and Latinas, education is understood not only in the strict sense of formal education at school but also as an extension of learning both the English language and how to adapt to the conventions and rules of a new culture. Both Ana Trujillo and César Hernández reflect on having learned to navigate the new culture to better fit into society in this country. Most of the interviewees agree that persistence, sacrifice, and consistent effort are necessary for success not only in the United States but elsewhere. Although the reader encounters these themes many times throughout the present conversations, the stories told by Clara Galeano, Ana Trujillo, and Gustavo Estrada make these points especially clear.

It is important to mention that despite the countless difficulties they have encountered while establishing themselves in the United States, most of the interviewees have been able to succeed and to achieve a high level of education (i.e., Germán Sabillón, Ariel E. Rosario, and Daniel Useche). As a matter of fact, some of them have continued to pursue professional goals, as mentioned by Ernesto de la Hoz, Eduardo Ortiz, and Elisaida Méndez. Similarly, in some cases, these Latino/Latinas have managed to expand their professional horizons and have found new pathways not only by using their previous expertise but also by learning new skills, as illustrated by both Héctor Mendiola and Carmen L. Yupanqui Zaa. In short, these interviews portray stories of the successes and struggles that Latino/Latinas have experienced in the workplace in the United States. They also describe their dreams, their hopes, and their potential as part of the workforce of this country.

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