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**THE ROLE OF RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP IN
ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF LIFE FOR
LATINOS ON THE GREAT PLAINS**

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Introduction

The preamble to The Convention on the Rights of the Child, “recalls the basic principles of the United Nations and specific provisions of certain relevant human rights treaties and proclamations; reaffirms the fact that children, because of their vulnerability, need special care and protection; and places special emphasis on the primary caring and protective responsibilities of the family, the need for legal and other protection of the child before and after birth, the importance of respect for the cultural values of the child’s community, and the vital role of international cooperation in achieving the realization of children’s rights” (UNICEF 2001).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children developed a document that could well apply to any human group that meets their definition of a child. For example, if we were to substitute the terms “child” or “children” for “ethnic minority” or “ethnic minorities,” we might envision a prosperous and moral society that would uphold and apply these basic human rights and standards of conduct towards all of its people. Ethnic minorities, are by definition, individuals who are vulnerable, need special care and protection, have needs for legal protection, and demand respect for their cultural values and traditions. The articles of the main provisions of this document call for non-discrimination, implementation of rights, survival and development, preservation of identity, freedom of expression, thought, conscience, and religion, access to quality health services, medical services, education, due process of justice and assistance in preparing and presenting their defense, and the right to practice their own culture and language, among many other provisions. This special issue on Latinos on the Great Plains is dedicated to ensuring the rights, freedom, and privileges to which all human beings are entitled.

TABLE 1
GROWTH AND PERCENTAGE CHANGE FOR TOTAL POPULATION
AND HISPANIC/LATINO POPULATION FOR
GREAT PLAINS STATES, 1990 AND 2000

State	1990		2000		% Change 1990-2000	
	Total Population	Hispanic/Latino Population	Total Population	Hispanic/Latino Population	Total Population	Hispanic/Latino Population
Colorado	3,284,394	424,977	4,301,261	735,601	30.6	73.1
Kansas	2,477,574	93,670	2,688,418	188,252	8.5	101.0
Montana	799,065	11,986	902,195	18,081	2.0	50.9
Nebraska	1,578,385	36,969	1,711,263	94,425	8.4	155.4
New Mexico	1,515,069	578,756	1,819,046	765,386	20.1	32.2
North Dakota	638,800	4,472	642,200	7,786	.5	74.1
Oklahoma	3,145,585	86,160	3,450,654	179,304	9.7	108.1
South Dakota	696,004	5,568	754,844	10,903	8.5	95.8
Texas	16,986,510	4,331,560	20,851,820	6,669,666	22.8	54.0
Wyoming	453,588	28,135	493,782	31,669	8.9	43.4

Source: US Census Bureau, Census 2000 Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171) Summary File, Matrices PL1 and PL2.

Despite the fact that Latinos have been present and have been a major economic force in the Great Plains region for many centuries, their political, social, and legal powers have remained relatively weak (see Rochin in this issue). As a result, many Latino families and children have been vulnerable to the difficulties of an underprivileged minority population. However, we are fast approaching the demographic projections of many decades ago that prophesied large increases in Latinos in this region. During the past decade Latinos have grown at a much faster rate than the rest of the country, and this holds true in the Great Plains region as well. Table 1 indicates the growth of the overall population contrasted with the Latino population for states in the

Great Plains. As an example, in Nebraska the Latino population increased over 155% while the entire state grew only 8.4 % (US Census Bureau 2001). It is clear the Latino population is a major reason for the population increases even in those states with minimal growth. We believe the timing of this issue marks a critical juncture in the growth and development of Latino families as a potential force in the political, economic, legal, and social ecology of the Great Plains. The gradual shift and transition in numbers and power will necessitate an understanding of the strengths and challenges this diverse population brings to the region. To gain this understanding, scholarly and systematic research is needed.

Prior Research on Latinos on the Great Plains

To examine the prior research on Latinos on the Great Plains, we conducted a search of the research literature in several databases including ERIC, PSYCLIT, Web of Science, Dissertation Abstracts, and PSYCINFO. The keywords used were combinations of the following terms: Hispanics, Latinos, Latinas, Chicanos, Chicanas, Great Plains, Plains, Southwest, and Midwest. In addition, reference sections of major books, reviews, and empirical articles were searched. The initial focus areas of the literature search were history, education, culture and language, physical and mental health, economy and labor, and politics. However, preliminary results showed that there were no research articles on politics of Latinos on the Great Plains; thus, this topic was dropped from further consideration. Furthermore, articles that overlapped on two topics were counted in both topics. However, articles that focused on more than two topics were included in a category labeled comprehensive (see Table 2).

On the basis of the initial search, we also examined the characteristics of the studies (see Table 2). We examined the type of study (book, book chapter, literature review, quantitative, or qualitative study), the date of publication (before 1970, 1970-1989, or 1990-present), the sample group (Mexican, non-Mexican, or other Latino), the origin of birth of the sample (foreign-born versus US-born), gender of the sample (males, females), and the demographic area of the sample (rural versus urban, local/state, regional, or national). Unless specified or broken down in the analyses, the article would not be given credit for analyzing a specific study characteristic. For example, if a study included both males and females but the researchers did not conduct analyses on gender, the study was not counted in the gender category. Thus, discrepancies in the number of studies across study characteristics are due to these inclusion rules.

TABLE 2
 FREQUENCY AND CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDIES
 FOCUSING ON LATINOS IN THE GREAT PLAINS

Study Characteristic	History	Education	Culture/ Language	Health	Economy/ Labor	Comprehensive
Study Type:						
Books/Chapters/ Reviews	2	1	1	2	5	1
Quantitative	3	13	7	15	10	2
Qualitative	2	2	0	2	3	0
Publication Date:						
Before 1970s	0	0	0	0	0	0
1970-1989	0	14	9	9	2	2
1990-Present	5	2	1	10	12	1
Latino Group:						
Mexican	2	8	5	13	7	3
Non-Mexican	0	0	0	2	3	0
Other Latinos	3	4	2	0	7	0
Birth Origin:						
Foreign-Born	4	9	2	2	4	1
US-Born	3	0	2	12	4	1
Gender:						
Females	0	2	3	5	5	3
Males	0	2	3	7	5	3
Demographic Region:						
Rural	5	8	2	2	5	0
Urban	4	9	6	11	6	2
Local/State	2	15	9	11	3	2
Regional	2	0	1	4	5	1
National	1	1	0	3	5	0

Note: The categories are not mutually exclusive; in some cases, studies received credit in multiple categories.

Table 2 presents the results of the search. Several overall patterns are evident from the results. First, the number of studies varies dramatically across the topics of interest. For example, there were only three studies that examine more than two topics. In contrast, there were 16 and 18 studies on

education and economy/labor issues respectively. Second, a number of studies in health and economy/labor issues were published in the last decade; whereas, studies on education and culture and language were published mostly from 1970-1989. Third, a number of studies have focused on urban Latinos and Mexicans rather than rural Latinos and non-Mexicans and other Latino groups. Fourth, except for education, most studies have been conducted with US-born Latinos. Fifth, of those studies examining Latino gender issues, there is a relatively equal distribution of studies across males and females. And sixth, there are few nationally representative studies on Latinos. The table clearly depicts the fact that there are gaps in the existing research literature on Latinos in our region. We will discuss some of these patterns of findings in the next few sections.

Education

Education is an important and essential component for the long-term success of Latinos in the United States. It has long been assumed that the growth picture painted above would alone contribute to the increased educational success of Latinos in the United States. There would be more Latinos at all levels gaining an education and the end result would be a decided step forward for this population. Although the Latino population has significantly increased, the corresponding educational successes and progress have not. Although we do have more Latinos graduate from high school that is mainly a function of greater numbers in the schools. The more important aspect is to look at the dropout rates. Dropout rates continue to remain the same and in some cases have increased. Latinos still lag far behind the rest of the United States in terms of educational success. Overall, 58% of Latinos are high school graduates compared with 88% of non-Hispanic Whites (Therrien and Ramirez 2000).

Several dimensions are important for the future success of the Latino population. Initial entry into the educational system is vitally important. There is a decided presence of Latinos in the educational system but especially in the K to 6 grades. It is not unusual for Latinos to comprise a significant minority or even the majority in K to 6 grade classrooms in schools. Latino children come to school (and pre-school) lagging behind their non-Latino counterparts and they rarely catch up. New and innovative approaches to effectively integrating Latino children into the educational system are desperately needed for there to be any long-term and sustained progress. Utilizing Latino children, and their families, as cultural assets in

the school would provide an important marker for them to continue to remain in and successfully perform in school. These families bring a tremendous corpus of cultural, linguistic and social strengths to the schools that most often are ignored or made invisible. Mentoring of Latino children remains an essential challenge for school systems to turn the tide. It becomes increasingly important to create and highlight pathways for success for Latino children and adolescents in schools and, more importantly, assist them in following these paths. Mentoring becomes a unique tool for creating and maintaining an active and positive relationship with Latino children, adolescents and their families. Finally, the educational pipeline is an important element for developing and sustaining success for the Latino population. The success enjoyed at one point of the pipeline is impacted by the successes or failures at other points in the same pipeline. More effective interventions at the pre-K to 6 grade levels are needed, but other points along the pipeline are also contributors to overall progress. For example, more attention is also needed on the recruitment *and* retention of Latino students once they make it to colleges and universities. Unfortunately, as Table 2 indicates, research on Latinos in the educational system has declined in the last decade. For Latinos to experience success in the educational system efforts must be systematic, comprehensive, consistent and persistent.

Language and Identity

Closely related to the educational status of Latinos is the language spoken by this population. The use and retention of Spanish continues to be a consistent pattern for Latinos, especially immigrants coming to the United States in the past decade. For many immigrants, Spanish becomes extremely relevant to their identity, particularly as they attempt to become immersed. Although Latinos are intent on learning English they also wish to retain their native language(s) as well. For Latino children, Spanish can be an essential strength for entering the educational system; however, in most instances, their non-English home language is often seen as a deterrent for their potential success. More innovative dual- and multi-language programs need to be created in elementary schools in order to utilize the 'native' assets children bring to the schools. In turn, this approach will greatly enhance the self-identity of non-English speaking and immigrant children and increase their chances for success. More and more schools are developing English as Second Language programs to address the needs of non-English or limited English speaking children. However, the next step is to create "language

enhancement” programs for *all* students, not just non-English speaking children. The use of two or more languages is a decided asset in this day and age, and schools should ensure, at an early age, that their students will be equipped with the multiple language speaking proficiency to enable them to live and work in the US as well as internationally.

Economy and Work/Employment

Table 2 shows that there have been several attempts to examine economic and labor issues relevant to Latinos in the Great Plains. The fact that many of these studies were conducted in the past decade might reflect the burgeoning interest in the economic impact of Latinos on the economy in this region (see Gouveia and Saenz, in this issue). Many industries, both at the national and local level, have been revitalized by the discovery of the Latino economic market. The obvious examples are the music and film industry, food industry, and print media industry (e.g., newspapers, magazines). However, other industries have benefited such as home selling and buying markets, service industries, and many small businesses. The impact of Latinos on local, national, and international economies cannot be underestimated and reflects both the consumer and production aspects of business and industries. For example, in Nebraska, Latinos help to sustain the social and economic viability of some rural communities—especially during the recent economic crisis in rural areas and the in-migration from rural to urban areas. However, a scarcity of resources plagues many of these rural communities and there are few incentives (e.g., quality education and social services) for Latino families to remain in these communities.

The growth of Latinos on the Great Plains has also changed the demographic characteristics of the work force in this region. Latinos have become a major contributor to the work force of many industries in the Great Plains (see Wahl, Gunkel, and Sanchez, in this issue). This growth has resulted in challenges to the region to address work safety issues and to provide support structures (e.g., training, language classes, child care facilities) to facilitate and support workers in these industries. Furthermore, some industries are faced with growing opposition to recruiting undocumented workers that compete with existing sources of potential employees (e.g., union workers). Recently, in Iowa, the governor was criticized for developing an explicit policy to address work shortages by recruiting workers from Mexico. In Nebraska, the governor’s office created a task force that created a Worker’s Bill of Rights to address work safety issues in their meatpacking

plants. These and other efforts will be needed to address the challenges of the changing demographics in this region.

Physical and Mental Health and Well-Being

A perusal of Table 2 presents the distribution of studies conducted on Latino health issues in the Great Plains. The table shows that research on health issues is somewhat prevalent, however, there are some gaps. For example, most studies have been conducted on Latinos (particularly Mexican Americans) who reside in urban areas. A critical and complex challenge for researchers is to obtain information about the needs of Latinos who reside in rural areas of the Great Plains and information about non-Mexicans who live in this region. As mentioned previously, information about Latinos who reside in the rural areas of the Great Plains is needed. The economic crisis of rural and agricultural areas of the Great Plains has taxed the available services and resources of these communities. There are several levels of complexity to this issue. First, there is an overall lack of available resources including health professionals in these areas (see pertinent articles in this special issue for more in-depth discussion of these issues). Relatedly, many areas suffer from a lack of culturally sensitive practitioners that can provide adequate services. Second, access to these service professionals is limited as a result of transportation, language, economic, or social mistrust issues. And third, lack of education surrounding healthcare and healthcare providers hinders prevention and treatment efforts. Many Latinos rely on church-related professionals or consider these matters to be family matters. Furthermore, there may be an overall lack of knowledge or motivation to gain knowledge concerning nutrition, family planning, alcohol and substance use, child abuse, and sex-related issues (see Boeckner, Jordan, and Schnepf and Blankenau, Boye-Beaman, and Mueller in this issue).

Conversely, health program developers, practitioners and service providers often lack knowledge about traditional Latino customs and beliefs surrounding health matters. For example, the use of folk remedies and superstitious beliefs is not uncommon among many Latino groups. Furthermore, there may be strong family or religious forces that supercede recommendations from healthcare providers. Thus, there is a need to understand the background and context of each Latino family to maximize treatment and prevention methods. Clearly, an effective service provider is one who considers, among other things, the particular Latino culture of origin, the SES (socio-economic status) of the family, the acculturative status, the

family structure, language abilities, and social support structure in each case.

Family and Child Issues

An understanding of Latino issues in the Great Plains would be incomplete without knowledge about their family environment. Familial interdependence is one of the hallmark characteristics of the Latino culture. Many Latino parents encourage and promote familial interdependence through various socialization practices and through the structuring of their families. For example, in many families, Latino parents assign childcare duties and responsibilities early in life to their older children. In turn, younger children are taught to respect their older siblings and relatives. Furthermore, blood relatives are assigned greater status within families than non-blood related members. Many Latinos view the family as the source of social, emotional, and financial support and there is frequent reliance on the family to address health and relationship crises. Moreover, the Latino family provides an infrastructure that transmits messages on the importance of maintaining strong family ties. For example, many families will restructure their household to accommodate temporary family members and frequent social gatherings with family rituals are encouraged and maintained. In addition, there is a strong preference to provide for the elderly rather than to place them in a retirement home.

Although the family is a strength and resource for Latinos, its relatively rigid infrastructure can also hamper efforts for intervention and change. For example, because the family is considered the appropriate context for addressing crises, efforts by outsiders to educate or intervene can be construed as “out of place.” Much care needs to be taken to consider each family member’s perspective on an issue. There is a strong belief system in family traditions and knowledge rather than scientific or research-based knowledge. Furthermore, family issues are emotionally laden and often nurture strong emotions of pride, shame, joy, or guilt. As mentioned earlier, each family has its own unique situation and traditions. Researchers and service practitioners need to carefully consider the particular family environment of their respective clientele.

Antisocial and Prosocial Attitudes and Behaviors

Latinos, like many other ethnic and racial minority groups, suffer from stigmas and stereotypes regarding their involvement in antisocial and dys-

functional behaviors. However, like any other ethnic and racial group, the overwhelming majority of Latinos are engaged in productive and normative behaviors. Most Latinos, like other ethnic and racial groups, are involved in community volunteerism, comforting behaviors, sharing, and money donations to charity. For example, a recent survey reported that 40% of Latino teenagers (ages 12 to 17 years) were involved in community volunteer activities in 1995 and this figure increased to 46% in 1998 (Independent Sector 1999). Furthermore, many Latinos consistently exhibit high levels of prosocial behaviors (i.e., behaviors that benefit others) towards families and community members. Indeed, many studies show that Latinos exhibit relatively higher levels of cooperative behaviors than European-Americans (Carlo et al. in press). So where do these negative stereotypes originate?

Unfortunately, negative stereotypes about Latinos (and other minority groups) is predominant both in the popular and professional media. Movies and television shows focus on Latinos as undocumented immigrants who often engage in gang and drug-related behaviors. Newspaper articles often depict and report on Latinos engaged in antisocial behaviors (although this is a criticism of journalism in general) and rarely report on Latinos engaged in positive social behaviors. The constant negative-sided depiction of Latinos results in fear and mistrust towards Latinos by other ethnic groups. However, even in professional publications, there is an overwhelming focus on Latinos (and other minorities) who engage or exhibit antisocial behaviors. For example, in developmental psychology research journals, the majority of studies on ethnic minorities focus on negative and antisocial behaviors among ethnic and racial minorities. In contrast, of the existing studies on prosocial behaviors, studies on ethnic and racial minorities are rare (Carlo et al. 1999). These publication trends are even more dramatic when examining ethnic and racial minority children and adolescents. The resulting consequences of these biased depictions are many, including distortions, misunderstandings, misperceptions, and self-fulfilling prophecies (e.g., "everyone is doing it") that have potential legal, educational, employment, and social relationship and community building implications.

Politics

Another major challenge to the Great Plains is the recognition of the growing political power of Latinos. Surprisingly, a search of the scholarly research literature failed to uncover a single research article on political

attitudes and behaviors among Latinos in the Great Plains. It is, of course, possible that such studies exist. Our guess is that much of what is known regarding these issues are reported in non-peer review and non-scientific outlets such as newspapers, television shows, and by political organizations. Although some of these surveys are conducted by legitimate and professional survey firms, it is important to note that such surveys are limited by the methods used and, because they are not subject to scholarly review, the findings may be misrepresentative and misleading. Clearly, this is an area that needs greater attention from research scholars.

Although Latinos have been a potential source of political power for many years, their power has not been recognized until recently. However, there have been concerted efforts to draw out Latinos to vote through voter registration drives, targeted campaign programs, and other efforts. Furthermore, a number of political issues (e.g., affirmative action, English only law movements) that are somewhat specific to Latinos have drawn attention from organized political groups and these issues have served to organize Latino organizations to lobby and encourage political engagement. No doubt, these and other future political issues and efforts will continue to garner attention and encourage more Latino involvement in the political system in the Great Plains.

Future Directions

It is apparent that this decade and beyond will bring about a multiplicity of challenges and issues revolving around the Latino *presencia* (presence) on the Great Plains. Whereas Mexicans, Chicanos, Mexican Americans and Hispanics have always seemingly had a presence in the Southern Great Plains (notably New Mexico and Texas), their existence in the Northern Plains region has been overlooked and debated. We hope this special issue highlights the longstanding existence, settlement and survival of Spanish origin peoples *throughout the Great Plains*. It is incumbent upon researchers from all walks of academic life to challenge current models and theories of explanation regarding people of Spanish origin. It is too convenient and altogether too limiting to rely on group stereotypes both within and between Latinos and non-Latinos. Researchers themselves must transform the academy to develop culturally relevant and sensitive instruments before the collection and measurement of data on Latinos will be meaningful and truly valuable contributions to this body of scholarship.

There is an urgent need for research that investigates the differences that exist *between* and *among* different Latino groups. This is particularly important given the new surge of immigrants from Central and even South America. Also, what similarities, as well as differences, are there between Latinos in the Southern Plains compared to Latinos in the Northern Plains region? Another highly relevant research dimension is the comparative experiences and relationships that exist between Latinos and other ethnic/racial groups, including the recent arrival of White European ethnics. Various Latino and non-Latino research centers, departments, and institutes have been created in the Midwest during the past decade. One daunting task is to create linkages by which these units work in unison with each other to advance scholarship on and by Latinos in the Great Plains. The articles by Gonzalez-Kruger et al. and Moreno et al. (in this issue) present creative approaches to establish collaborative "town and gown" partnerships and provide culturally sensitive human services for Latinos.

Finally, the research that now exists, is currently underway, or will be formulated in the future needs to be focused on its impact on public policy in Great Plains communities. Whether it be workers' rights, language issues in the school, or voter registration efforts, public policy and legislation can be greatly influenced by research that has a solid foundation and cultural relevance (see Moreno et al. in this issue). It will take effective and relevant policies to truly enhance the "quality of life" for Latinos and to integrate Latinos into the fabric of Great Plains communities.

We are especially pleased to publish the excellent research articles included in this special issue. It reflects the high quality of researchers who are conducting these ground breaking investigations. We were also fortunate to have additional high quality manuscripts submitted for publication in the special issue; however, due to page limitations these manuscripts will be published in the forthcoming issue of *Great Plains Research*, Volume 12 (1), Spring 2002. We look forward to sharing additional research and scholarship on Latinos on the Great Plains in this forthcoming issue. Finally, we would like to thank the manuscript and book reviewers and staff at the Center for Great Plains Studies for their invaluable cooperation and support.

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