

TOOLS FOR SCHOOLS

Postsecondary Access for Latino Middle-Grades Students

CASE STUDY

Missouri State University's
Hispanic Initiative



A publication of the PALMS Project

The PALMS Project seeks to improve the life chances of Latino youth by opening doors to postsecondary education. We communicate information about how to equip and support students and their families in the pursuit of education beyond high school. We aim to impact the work of secondary schools, college access programs, and community-based organizations that are committed to providing Latinos with an education of the highest quality.

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About the PALMS Case Studies

The PALMS case studies offer in-depth descriptions of programs that seek to increase the number of Latino students who enter postsecondary education. Though the programs' activities are oriented towards students' futures, they also pay close attention to how students are faring in their current educational settings. As such, they partner with schools to improve the quality of students' academic and social experiences in the secondary grades (6-12).

As part of the PALMS Tools for Schools collection, the case studies illustrate a variety of approaches that educational institutions can use to strengthen their outreach to the Latino families in their midst. We encourage our readers to use the case studies as discussion starters. To that end, each case includes a set of questions that facilitate analysis and application. It is our intent that these materials stimulate rich and productive conversations that will benefit both Latino students and the schools that serve them.

Suggested Format for Discussion of This Case Study

- Find a time and place where you and three to five colleagues can meet to discuss the case study. We recommend a 50- to 75-minute, uninterrupted segment.
- Agree to do the reading ahead of time and to jot down answers to the questions on page 3. Encourage everyone to mark up their copy of the case study. We provide wide margins so that readers can make notes.
- Before starting the meeting, decide on some ground rules for conducting the discussion (e.g., no side conversations, no one monopolizes the floor, all opinions are received with respect). It may help to have someone take on the role of facilitator.
- Begin the discussion by stating that the purpose of this time is to **explore ways in which your school or program can apply the lessons offered by this case study**.
- Make sure that someone is taking notes about the main points of your discussion.
- To conclude your discussion, try to agree on concrete action steps. For example, you may want to present your observations to a wider group of colleagues. Or you may be ready to begin implementing some of the ideas generated by your group.

We wish you the best in your efforts to promote postsecondary access among Latino students. Be sure to check the PALMS website regularly for new tools and materials to help you in your work.

Discussion Questions for Missouri State University's Hispanic Initiative

Please review the following questions prior to reading the case study:

1. What did the MSU College of Education faculty do to learn about the needs and characteristics of the Hispanic population in Monett and Springfield?
2. How does the Hispanic Initiative's partnership with the local schools result in a win-win situation for all concerned? Who are the stakeholders?
3. What resources did MSU mobilize in order to bridge the distance between Hispanic families and educational institutions?
4. How does the Hispanic Initiative regard students' cultural and linguistic identities?
5. How does the program motivate Hispanic students to stay in high school and pursue postsecondary education?
6. What strategies from the Hispanic Initiative could be adapted to your local context?

Missouri State University's Hispanic Initiative

The story of Missouri State University's Hispanic Initiative is one of vision, dedication, and, indeed, initiative. The following case study provides an example of how an educational institution can respond proactively to a growing Hispanic community. It highlights the importance of individuals who can serve as bridges between the English- and Spanish-speaking worlds, and how resources within the community can be mobilized to create win-win situations for schools and Hispanic families.

Understanding the need

In 2002, the southwest region of Missouri was experiencing a noticeable demographic shift as large numbers of predominantly Mexican immigrants were drawn to the area by employment opportunities in the poultry packing industry. As students with limited English proficiency entered the public schools, districts struggled to meet the needs of these newest learners. "We were aware that the Monett School District had a particularly pressing need for stronger support of their Hispanic students," recalls Regina Welch, a facilitator and one of the founders of the Hispanic Initiative. A rural community in the heart of southwest Missouri, Monett has about 8,100 residents. According to data published by the Missouri Department of Education, the district's Hispanic enrollment nearly doubled between 2000 and 2004. It now stands at 18 percent.

With 31 years of experience as a Spanish teacher, Welch has a strong affinity with the Hispanic culture and people. It was her concern for the well-being of Hispanic students that prompted her to initiate

meetings between Missouri State University's College of Education (COE) and the Monett school district, during which they explored potential partnerships to better serve the Hispanic community. Within months, Welch, who was teaching a practicum course at the time, arranged for her undergraduate students to begin tutoring Hispanic students in Monett's English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. "We see this as filling a need for the Monett students, and an equal need for the MSU students," says Chris Craig, associate dean of the COE. "We realized that if we want MSU graduates to be world-class teachers who can accommodate a diverse student population, we need to enjoy and get involved with the diversity that's already around us."

In addition to assisting in ESL classrooms, MSU students also have opportunities to participate in evening gatherings geared specifically toward Monett's Hispanic students and their families. These gatherings, which include food and music, were designed to help bridge the distance between these families and schools. The chance to interact with Hispanic parents is an invaluable experience for the pre-service teachers, says Craig. "The MSU students who participate in those events are the ones who benefit the most from their practicum. They get to see parents as real people."

Initiating the first gatherings took some legwork on the part of the school and the MSU staff. To get the word out to parents, Welch and her colleagues enlisted the help of a local community agency that provides

services for migrant workers. As part of the evening meetings, MSU staff and students encourage families to begin planning for their children to continue their education beyond high school. "We give a brief presentation on the opportunities that are available to young men and women who are interested in pursuing postsecondary studies, either at MSU, Crowder Community College, or another institution," says Craig. "Our objective is to help families see this as a reality for their children." The pre-service teachers at MSU are also involved in these presentations, answering questions about campus life. Families are particularly appreciative to learn of the strong support network that the COE can provide for Hispanic students, which includes access to bilingual staff and to student groups comprised primarily of Hispanic undergraduates. All of the information in the presentations is delivered either in Spanish or translated by bilingual individuals.

Valuing who students are

In addition to its work in the Monett area, MSU has also reached out to the Hispanic community in Springfield, the city in which one of the university's campuses is located. Specifically, the university has cultivated a partnership with Central High School, which has a large ESL program. MSU places several of their pre-service teachers in classrooms throughout Central. They have also collaborated with the school to offer a Spanish-for-Native-Speakers class. "Once they're in this country, we see that Hispanic kids stop speaking Spanish because they want to fit in

and feel ashamed about anything that makes them different,” explains Judith Martinez, who directs the Hispanic Initiative and teaches the class at Central. “This class shows kids that they don’t need to stop being who they are, and that the school values their language.” An evaluation shows that participation in the class has resulted in increased school attendance for the students, which bodes well for their remaining engaged in their schooling. Martinez attributes this change to students’ sense that the school cares about them.

In addition to the Spanish-for-Native-Speakers class, Martinez teaches two traditional Spanish-language courses. The time she spends at the school gives her many opportunities to interact with Hispanic families. Martinez believes that her experience learning English as an immigrant in the U.S. school system helps the Hispanic students and parents relate to her. “Once parents trust you,” she says, “they call and stop by all the time.” This day-to-day contact allows her to help Hispanic families navigate the U.S. school system and to give them much-needed information about educational opportunities for their children. She also helps organize more structured events, such as the annual spring picnic and soccer game that the university sponsors. The goal of this event is to provide families with information about how to help their children plan and prepare for postsecondary education.

Ensuring a good turnout at the picnic is a city-wide effort. “If it wasn’t for the school personnel and the community leaders helping us

get the word out, this event wouldn't happen," remarks Martinez. Yet, it's Martinez herself, with her bicultural and multilingual background, who cultivates the relationships that make such a collaborative effort possible. Having lived in Springfield for over three years, she knows the leaders of the city's Hispanic community well. To promote participation, "we call churches, cultural centers, and community groups, and we tell them, 'Send whoever you can to our event,'" she says. She also recruits local Mexican restaurants to donate the food for the picnic.

As a follow-up activity to the picnic and to the evening gatherings in Monett, the COE invites high school students and parents to tour the MSU campus, with Martinez on hand to translate information as needed. Once on campus, the group meets with Hispanic undergraduates who provide a first-hand account of university life. Martinez also looks for other opportunities to bring high school students to the MSU campus. When the university staged a Hispanic fashion show, she invited a group of girls from Central to participate. "We want the kids to know that coming to MSU won't mean leaving their culture behind," she says.

Looking Ahead

Though still in the formative stages, the program continues to gain momentum. "The more we're involved with the Hispanic community, the more we learn about it, and the more we understand what our collaboration should look like," says Craig. The program is currently grappling with how to help undocumented students enroll at MSU. "During

our family events, I've had mothers come up to me in tears and say, 'You're showing us that there are opportunities for our children, but our children can't access those opportunities because we don't have the documentation.'" he explains. In response to this need, the COE is planning to enroll five high-achieving students at MSU next fall, waive their tuition, and document the process by which those students can continue their studies. "If these kids don't have a social security number, but they have sufficient financial support, can they still study here? We're trying to figure out how it can be done," says Craig.

Craig and his colleagues have also learned that many of the Mexican immigrants in southwest Missouri are coming from Guadalajara. As a result, the COE has approached Mexican universities about starting a teacher exchange program that would bring Guadalajaran and other Mexican professionals to Springfield to get a teaching degree. "We want to bring in more people who can serve as bridges between the Hispanic community and the local schools. We want more Judiths," explains Craig, referring to Martinez.

As part of the exchange program, Mexican nationals would enroll in the university's MAT (Master of Arts in Teaching) degree program, and they would go to Monett and Central High for their pre-service experiences. In return, MSU teaching candidates would travel to Mexico to learn Spanish and gain a better understanding of the culture that their future students may bring to the classroom. Through a connection pro-

vided by Martinez' mother, who is a member of the Mexican national congress, MSU initiated meetings and signed preliminary agreements with the heads of two national universities. Says Craig, "The Mexican officials we spoke with are very enthusiastic about this collaboration, because they realize that this won't be like most exchange programs, where the main goal is to give students a cultural experience. Our goals are much broader. We want this to have a lasting impact on our community."

This bold vision, carried out by a group of resourceful and dedicated individuals, has brought the Hispanic Initiative a long way in only three years. Its future seems full of promise.

NOTES:

*The PALMS Project is a partnership between
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