

How can leaders cultivate more Latino talent?

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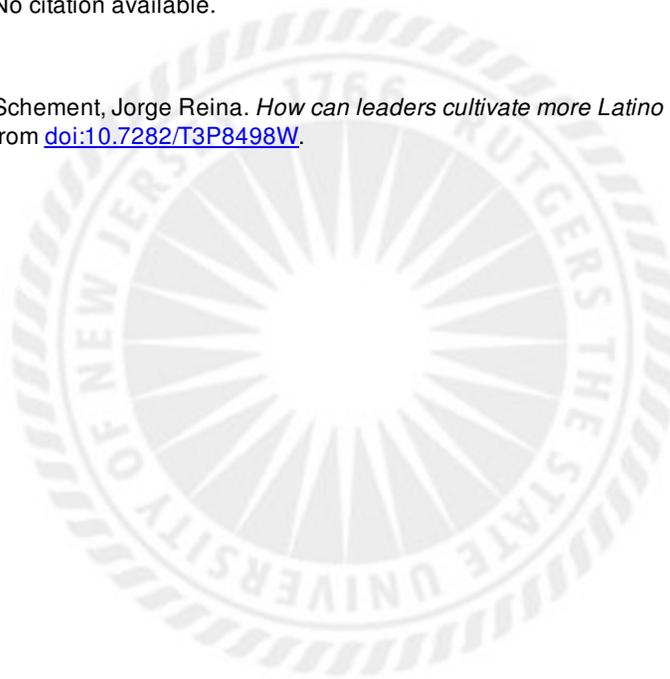
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Article begins on next page

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How Can Leaders Cultivate More Latino Talent?

By Jorge Reina Schement

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Access to information via telecommunications opens the door to economic, social and political success in the Digital Age. Our economic survival depends on it. Yet many of our political leaders stress policy issues such as housing or healthcare, but miss the significance of information policy.

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Now is the time to take notice, especially for Latinos who will reach their full potential as a community only if we embrace the Digital Age. To get there, we--and our leaders--need to pursue the following information-policy goals:

Connect every Latino household to the Internet.

From laptops to iPhones, technology is rapidly becoming indispensable for success. But those devices merely open the door; the key to maximum participation comes from Internet access. Yet Latinos continue to lag behind whites and Blacks when it comes to high-speed Internet service. According to a 2007 Pew report, just 29 percent of Latino households have broadband access, versus nearly 50 percent for whites.

When Latinos do connect to the Internet, however, they perform better in school, strengthen connections and start enterprises. Research also shows that Latinos with Internet access contribute content, and that in turn generates ideas that lead to innovation.

Going forward, we should maximize broadband Internet access across our community so our collective influence will grow. So urge your political leaders to press for universally distributed, low-cost broadband Internet access.

Expand Internet access centers in local public libraries.

Anyone visiting a public library lately will note the increased crowds. Along with students, parents and retirees, librarians are now assisting the unemployed seeking work. Although 99 percent of public libraries are connected to the Internet, thanks to an Education Rate program established in 1996, many are reporting an inability to serve everyone who needs help.

Moreover, while Latinos can jostle each other for computer access in urban public libraries, they can't do that in rural America, where only 40 percent of towns with 10,000 or fewer inhabitants boast a public library, according to 2002 U.S. Census Bureau data.

It's time to expand the E-Rate program to include public Internet access centers for Latinos and others residing in small towns.

Teach digital literacy in public schools.

High-school graduation rates for Latinos lag farther behind whites today than in the 1970s, the Census Bureau recently reported. But in our complex information economy, job success depends on the digital skills that Latinos often lack. As a result, young Latinos will find themselves at a disadvantage. In fact, as information technologies continually advance, everyone will need to constantly improve their digital-literacy skills.

We should face up to this invisible crisis by calling on Latino leaders to endorse digital-literacy programs for schools and adult education. To be most effective, these programs should be part of the public-school curricula beginning in the early grades.

Although Latinos face challenges in the Digital Age, we have elected a government interested in our issues. So speak up, because our future is now.

The opinions expressed herein are those of the writer and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of DiversityInc.