A moment with ... Marta Tienda

Marta Tienda, the Maurice P. During Professor in Demographic Studies and director of the Program in Latino Studies, was born in rural Texas but grew up outside Detroit after her father, who immigrated illegally from Mexico, took a job in a steel mill. When her father was laid off, Tienda spent two summers picking crops as a farm laborer in northern Michigan. She came to Princeton in 1997 and served for four years as director of the Office of Population Research before becoming the founding director of the Program in Latino Studies in 2009. In addition to writing and editing several books of her own, she is the subject of a biography aimed at young readers, People Person: The Story of Sociologist Marta Tienda, which has been published as part of the Women’s Adventures in Science series, underwritten by the National Academy of Sciences.

Hispanics in the United States come from such a wide range of countries. Is there such a thing as a Hispanic community?

There is a Hispanic community the same way there is a black community. But the nomenclature of “the Hispanic community” presumes that there is one voice, and there isn’t. Broadly speaking, Hispanics are young, they share a common language, they tend to have low levels of education, and many are undocumented. Together, this represents a profile that differs from other pan-ethnic groups.

How successful have Hispanics been at assimilating into American society?

The jury is still out. Many people judge the ability of Hispanics to assimilate based on the cross-section they see today, which includes a large share of immigrants. Upward mobility is occurring between the first and second generations, but there is mobility for most other groups, too, so the gaps between Hispanics and whites are widening, particularly in education. This is very problematic at a time when the returns to education are much higher than was the case in the 1960s or early 1970s. A high school education doesn’t get jobs that pay family wages today.

Is there still such a thing as an American melting pot?

I think the melting pot is changing. Over the last few decades, the Hispanic population has experienced an unprecedented geographic scattering. It is unclear whether moving to new areas is going to facilitate integration or whether the problems we have experienced before will follow. We have seen a bit of both. In some places, Hispanic laborers have been welcomed, but when they bring their families along and try to enter the school system there is resistance. Some people — mainly workers who feel that they are being displaced — feel very threatened by Hispanic migration and immigration. Those with more education and greater economic security tend to see the Hispanic dispersal as an opportunity for cultural enrichment.

How does Hispanic economic mobility compare to that of African-Americans?

Hispanics have always been intermediate between whites and African-Americans.
in social and economic status, but I see that as a vulnerability. African-Americans surpassed Hispanics in college completion in the 1990 census. It’s partly because of the ways that Hispanics are experiencing education in this country. One of my big concerns is that bilingual education programs hold them back. We need to ensure that everyone acquires proficiency in English. I’m all for multiple languages, but what we are now producing are quasi-linguals who are not proficient either in Spanish or English. If you don’t master English in the early grades, you will fall further and further behind. Hispanics already have the highest dropout rates of any group in the United States, and if they go to college, they are much more likely to go to two-year rather than four-year institutions.

Is bilingual education harmful?

If instruction is truly bilingual, where both languages are taught at the same level simultaneously so that proficiency is acquired from a very early age, I would support it. But that is not what we are getting. Total proficiency in English as early as possible is nonnegotiable, because without it you accumulate disadvantages. You fall further behind.

In trying to be accommodating to Hispanic kids, we have been creating divisions and reifying inequality. It’s all well-meaning, but there are also perverse incentives to keep kids in bilingual programs because school districts get extra state and federal money for bilingual education. Yet we either blame the kids and say that they can’t learn English, or blame the parents and say that they are isolating their kids by speaking Spanish at home.

Do you have concerns about the census this year?

The census has become increasingly political, particularly for Hispanics. What I find very troublesome is that a group of evangelical Hispanic churches is trying to orchestrate a boycott of the census by Hispanics unless an amnesty for the undocumented is approved. Using the census as a weapon is self-defeating. Congressional districts are going to be drawn around representation of all persons. If Hispanics boycott the census, this diminishes our ability to influence the political process. The effects of not being counted will reverberate for 10 years.

Do Hispanics have political influence equal to their numbers?

It’s probably not commensurate with their numbers, but that is partly because Hispanics are younger on average. Younger people either can’t yet vote or don’t vote. Immigration was the largest component of Hispanic growth through the 1990s, but in the current decade demographic growth has been driven by increased fertility among people who are already in this country. Even if immigration stopped altogether, the foundations of Hispanic population growth already are seeded.

Most people who think about immigration as a driver of Hispanic population growth are looking in the rearview mirror. The future impacts will be in the schools. We have an obligation to invest in that future generation because, as I like to say, the American population as a whole is aging. What language would you want that person who pushes your wheelchair to speak to you? Do you want to take another language so you can speak to that health-care worker?

The Hispanic vote has been increasingly important. What are some characteristics of Hispanic voters?

Hispanic political ideology is different from other groups’ in a couple of different ways. One is that, on average, Hispanics are more likely to support higher taxes if they can get better services and schools. But they are very conservative on family issues. The Bush administration won some Hispanic votes by emphasizing family values. Gay marriage, for example, is not something that gets a lot of support within the Hispanic community. But many Hispanics
have been turned away from the Republican Party because of the party’s stance on immigration.

What is the Princeton experience like for Hispanic students?

I worked with a team to start a Latino studies program at Princeton, but worried about being perceived as participating in identity politics. I did not want to be one of “them” doing work about “them.” If I had my way, I’d like to see the Program in American Studies broadened to include Asian-American studies, African-American studies, and Latino studies, so that programmatic content can evolve as our society changes. I will consider it a success when the Latino Studies program attracts a diverse group of students.

We have a lot to do yet. We have three Hispanic student organizations on campus (Acción Latina, the Chicano Caucus, and LUNA), and there has been inadequate coordination. I’m going to see if I can’t get them to come together and form a coalition. I’d like to build bridges to the Hispanic graduate students, as well.

Interview conducted and condensed by Mark F. Bernstein ’83.

Tell us what you think about

A moment with ... Marta Tienda

Name:
Princeton class/affiliation: E-mail:

Comments: Enter the word as it appears in the picture below

Send

By submitting a comment, you agree to PAW's comment posting policy.