

Stepping into the mainstream

Hispanic entrepreneurs are "growing at a much faster pace than other businesses. They are reaching out to a broader community." — Roberto Cornelio, Hispanic Entrepreneurship Center | Photo: Erik Unger
 From this week's Focus By: Kevin Davis August 03, 2009

A new generation of young executives is redefining what it means to be a Hispanic in business in Chicago. In the past, Hispanic professionals and business owners largely were concentrated in ethnic niches — Spanish-language marketing, for instance, or producing foods crafted to Hispanic tastes.

But today, a wave of mostly second-generation children of immigrants is stepping outside those old cultural roles. While their community and ethnic roots remain a large part of their identity, these young people are seeking a foothold in professions where Hispanics are underrepresented: technology, engineering, finance and law.

"We can do something beyond the taco stand or grocery store," says Rick Rivera, the son of Mexican and Guatemalan immigrants, who became a civil engineer and formed his own professional services company, R&G Engineering LLC, in Chicago. "This generation was given the opportunity to go to college and be exposed to the world."

Hispanics have made gains in many professional areas.

In 2003, for example, Hispanics made up 5.9% of all those employed in management, business and financial occupations, according to the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics. In 2008, they constituted 7.5%. The percentage of Hispanics in chief executive positions rose to 4.8% from 3.3% in the same five-year period.

BIG GROWTH

Signs of change also can be seen in the increasing membership in the Illinois Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, which has grown by 1,000% in the last several years. Roberto Cornelio, 51, director of the chamber's Hispanic Entrepreneurship Center, says it's not just mom-and-pop businesses, either.

"Traditionally, the Hispanic business community focused on providing goods and services to the Hispanic community," Mr. Cornelio says. "That's changing. It's still an important part of our community, but people have been exposed to many other opportunities. We're seeing people go into technology, and a number of Hispanics have opened professional services business."

Juan Rangel remembers a time when a Latino who joined a white-shoe Loop law firm or took a job with a multinational company rather than working "in the community" would have been quietly, or not-so-quietly, scorned.

"We used to hear the term 'sellout'; 'they went downtown and they left the community,'" recalls Mr. Rangel, 43, president of the Metropolitan Leadership Institute of Chicago, a professional networking, training and civic organization.

Those attitudes are shifting, he notes. "Assimilation is not a bad word," he says. "Now it's every parent's dream to see their children succeed."

Even so, Hispanic professionals have a way to go before seeing that dream fulfilled on a wide scale.

In Illinois, Hispanics number about 1.9 million, or 15% of the state's population. The number of Hispanic-owned businesses in Illinois has grown but still makes up only a sliver of the overall business count: In 2002, there were 39,539 Hispanic-owned businesses, about 4% of the 958,120 total businesses, according to the latest-available U.S. Census data.

Still, that growth is encouraging to people like Mr. Cornelio of the Hispanic Entrepreneurship Center, who believes that if the census were taken today, it would show that the number of Hispanic-owned businesses in Illinois topped 45,000. Hispanic entrepreneurs are "growing at a much faster pace than other businesses," he says. "They are reaching out to a broader community."

Meanwhile, more Hispanics are earning or seeking MBAs, as well. Freddy Flores, 38, president of the Chicago chapter of the National Hispanic MBA Assn., says membership in the chapter has grown to about 560 from a few hundred.

Mr. Flores, who came with his parents to the United States from Ecuador at age 10, has a management position with Otis Elevator Co. He pursued his MBA while working full time. "I thought it would open other doors for me," he says. Education has always been important to his family: His father was an engineer in Ecuador but worked in factories when he came to the United States.