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US colleges court Hispanic families using espanol

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PHILADELPHIA -- For some Hispanic students, navigating the college application process can be a double-whammy: Balancing high school coursework with essays and interviews, and then translating the whole system for their parents, who don't speak English.

Some venerable East Coast universities are trying to ease that burden - and tap the booming pool of Hispanic students - by offering Spanish translations of their admissions and financial aid material.

Bryn Mawr College, an elite women's liberal arts school near Philadelphia, recently launched a Spanish version of its Web site. And the Ivy League University of Pennsylvania has begun conducting some college admissions sessions in Spanish.

"These initiatives are really geared toward the families ... to take some of the pressure off the students," said Jennifer Rickard, Bryn Mawr's chief enrollment officer.

Family comfort level is extremely important in the Hispanic community, where parental ties are strong and many are wary of sending their children away to school, said Deborah Santiago, vice president for policy and research at Washington-based Excelencia in Education.

"The parents do play a critical role in at least the aspiration of college," Santiago said. "My parents hadn't gone to college but they told me I was going."

Nationwide, only 25 percent of Hispanics ages 18 to 24 were in college in 2006. That compares with 32 percent of blacks, 44 percent of whites and 61 percent of Asian-Americans, according to a report by the American Council on Education. But the same report found that Hispanic college enrollment increased 66 percent between 1995 and 2005.

The U.S. Latino population overall is expected to grow from 15 percent to 28 percent by 2050, according to Census Bureau figures released in December.

So it doesn't surprise Santiago that mainstream universities are starting to court Hispanic students and their families.

"What we're seeing across the country is a lot more attention than in the past on providing access to the Latino population," she said.

Smith College and Wesleyan University, both highly selective liberal arts schools in New England, posted Spanish-language Web pages a few years ago.

"I think it's very much appreciated," said Karen Kristof, senior associate director of marketing and admission at Smith. "We know that people go to the page."

Bryn Mawr decided to translate its site after watching its Latina population double over the past five years, Rickard said. Overall, about 10 percent of this year's freshman class is Hispanic.

Daisy Mateo, a 20-year-old Bryn Mawr junior from Los Angeles, is the daughter of Mexican immigrants and a first-generation college student.

Though her parents can speak English, Mateo said they feel more comfortable with Spanish; during her high school years, they attended Spanish college-access seminars even as Mateo went to ones in English.

Bryn Mawr's translated site "definitely would have helped" had it existed when Mateo was applying to schools, she said.

Penn gave its first Spanish recruiting seminars to parents last fall in Los Angeles and Miami, and last year printed its financial aid brochure in Spanish for the first time, said admissions dean Eric Furda. Both moves were in response to "the dramatic increase in the number of students coming from families of Latino heritage," Furda said.

Even some majority Hispanic schools that have targeted parents with bilingual recruiting sessions and material for years are just now making Web translations available.

The University of Texas-El Paso, with 74 percent Hispanic students, introduced its "Traducelo Ahora!" ("Translate Now!") feature on its home page only a couple of years ago, associate provost Craig Westman said.

The Web sites for Florida International University in Miami, with about 60 percent Hispanic enrollment, and the University of Texas at Brownsville, with 89 percent Latino students, are almost entirely in English.

Officials at all three schools said the combination of mostly commuter students, bilingual university staff and parents' familiarity with local campuses have made it less necessary to reach out online because so much business is conducted in person.

Brownsville plans to offer more Spanish Web content within the next six months, said Carlo Tamayo, director of new student relations. But at Florida International, limited resources make it hard enough to keep an English site up-to-date, so a Spanish version is unlikely, said Steve Kelly, interim associate vice president for enrollment services.

"It might be a nice thing, but I haven't heard of or sensed a crying need for it," Kelly said.

Still, Santiago noted that translations alone won't be enough to attract Latinos to a given college, because the service is mainly for parents, not students. Schools need to publicize their offerings to Hispanic high schoolers, because otherwise there may not be "that kitchen table conversation about college options," she said.

"If they don't know about you in the first place," Santiago said, "then translating isn't going to be helpful."

Bryn Mawr in Spanish:<http://www.brynmawr.edu/admissions/espanol/index.shtml>

Smith:<http://www.smith.edu/admission/esp/parents/>

Wesleyan:<http://www.wesleyan.edu/admission/en-espanol/index.html>

Florida International University:<http://www.fiu.edu>

Excelencia in Education:<http://www.edexcelencia.org/>

(This version CORRECTS SUBS 13th graf to correct to 10 percent of Bryn Mawr's freshman class is Hispanic, sted student body.)

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