



Seeing the Future in Latino Collegians

By Eduardo Díaz, director Smithsonian Latino Center
July 2012

Every year at this time I have a chance to see the future--the future of the Latino community. It is embodied in the 20 initiating college Latino/a freshmen who spend a week participating in our Young Ambassadors Program, immersed in the important work of the Smithsonian in the sciences, arts and humanities. As this column appears they are continuing their participation in the program by interning at various cultural and science institutions around the country and Puerto Rico. The brilliance, resiliency, skill and commitment of these young men and women are a source of great comfort and promise. As exhilarated as I am by their presence and the promise they embody, I worry and wonder about what the future has in store for them. I know, not very Buddhist of me--the worry part, I mean. Driving my angst were two articles I'd recently read: [The Flight from Conversation](#), by Sherry Turkle (*New York Times*, April 21, 2012), and [Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?](#), by Steven Marche (*The Atlantic*, May 2012).



One of the distinguishing characteristics of our community is its oral tradition, a conveyance for news, stories, myths and traditions, and a conduit for conversation. The usage of public spaces for this conveyance is still viable in our communities. And, it is still the case that Latinos, on average, rely on the radio as a principal source of information and entertainment more than other communities.

In her article, Turkle, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, describes how the abundance and overreliance on the latest information technology has taken a toll on modern society's ability to engage in real conversation. Turkle notes, "Human relationships are rich; they're messy and demanding. We have learned the habit of cleaning them up with technology. And the move from conversation to connection is part of this." It is this tendency to exchange in what Turkle calls "sips" that raises concerns about the future viability of our culture's oral tradition. At the conclusion of their week with us, the Young Ambassadors make team presentations on a mock project, usually a festival or other kind of public program. I marvel at the way they swing into action, IT tools ablaze, to assemble razzle-dazzle presentations that are spot-on with solid content and creative approaches, and, importantly, delivered with engaging, sometimes bilingual, articulation. During these presentations I find myself silently praying that, while they continue their IT mastery, they not lose their ability to effectively communicate, while connecting.

In his article, novelist Marche notes, "within this world of instant and absolute communication, unbounded by limits of time or space, we suffer from unprecedented alienation. We have never been more detached from one another, or lonelier. In a world consumed by ever more novel modes of socializing, we have less and less actual society." Every one of our Young Ambassadors is on Facebook, and I think that's a good thing. While I know very little of this world (I don't have a FB page), I do know that this network is important in keeping these future collegians connected. Through the alumni component of the Young Ambassadors Program, we remain connected to these young adults even after they graduate from college and embark upon their new careers. I believe that the connection afforded by Facebook, the Young Ambassadors blog and other IT-fueled mechanisms have helped them get through the college challenge. Importantly, our program includes regional face-to-face encounters among the Ambassadors, which may be the most meaningful connection vehicle. The Young Ambassadors Program has a 95% college graduation rate. For those who have made the passage we offer a post-graduate seminar that includes sessions on resume writing, job interviewing and other practical skills they'll need to successfully enter the workforce.

The Young Ambassadors Program is big on one-on-one and group interaction, the exploration of Latino identity and the creation of a platform for self-reflection, the latter of which can be shortchanged in a tech-heavy environment. It is comforting to know that there are companies out there that "get it" - organizations that understand the importance of supporting efforts to enable and sustain such exploration and reflection, like Ford Motor Company Fund, our principle funder of the program. Last week I heard from one of this year's participants, who will soon enter Penn State. In her email she states, "I was blessed to have met some extraordinary people that have touched my heart in a way I could have not imagined. This program has made a difference in me and I guarantee it has for everyone else." While the email connection is much appreciated, I will really look forward to conversing with this Ambassador during her internship at the National Museum of the American Indian. I'd like to think that we've created a balance between connection and conversation. Time will tell as she and her cohort continue their journey. For now, I'll look forward to sleeping soundly tonight.