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Raising Educational and Career Aspirations of Hispanic Girls and Their Mothers

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The statistics on educational achievement of Hispanics, particularly Hispanic females, present a serious challenge to all educational institutions—elementary and secondary schools as well as institutions of higher education. Hispanics, on average, obtain 7.1 years of schooling—a lower rate than either African Americans or Anglos—and have a higher dropout rate than either group. In some communities it is estimated that the dropout rate for Hispanics may be as high as 60%. Hispanic females have 2% to 3% lower retention rates in secondary

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school than males. Fewer Hispanic females attend college than both African American and Anglo females (Asher, 1984; McKay, 1988; Hodgkinson, 1988; Benanti, 1991).

Hispanic females have been described as the most at risk of all students. They are the poorest and most underrepresented in higher education. Too many of them drop out of school before graduating from high school, and of those who graduate, few attend universities. In 1987, fewer than 8% of adult Hispanic women had completed four or more years of college—the lowest percentage of any ethnic population in the country and lower than males in any ethnic group (McKay, 1988).

According to the 1990 Census, Hispanics will be the nation's largest minority in 20 years. Since 43% of the Hispanic population is currently under age 18, and the median age is 23 (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, WICHE, 1987), it is a critical and opportune time for educational institutions to develop strategies to address the challenge of the underachievement and underrepresentation of Hispanics in higher education, particularly women. As the WICHE report concluded, changing the existing pattern of minority education is vital to the future of our nation. "It is vital for reasons of fairness and justice. It is also vital for continued economic growth and social stability" (WICHE, 1987, p. 1). Women will be helping to shape the nation, and their education is important.

Many factors have been identified as contributing to the high dropout rate and low educational achievement of Hispanics. The factors are many, and they are complex, often interwoven in ways that cannot be disentangled in research (WICHE, 1987). Nonetheless, many of the factors that contribute to minority underrepresentation and underachievement in education can be identified. According to Johnston, Markle, and Harshbarger (1986), the pattern of school failure and alienation begins as early as the elementary grades. Some of the factors which contribute to this failure and alienation include (a) eradicating students' native language, thus denying them the use of their own reality and the opportunity to construct their history and their culture (Macedo, 1991); (b) disenchantment with school; (c) low grades and disciplinary sanctions which convince potential dropouts that they are not wanted in school (Damico, 1989); (d) lack of Hispanic role models in the schools (teachers, counselors, administrators, college and university faculty); (e) low expectations for Hispanics by school personnel; (f) lack of adequate vocational and career counseling for Hispanic women; and (g) stereotypical portrayal of Hispanic women in the curriculum (Andrade, 1982).

Income level and other aspects of socioeconomic status compound the

problems. The minority groups who are underrepresented in education are disproportionately from lower-income strata. They have fewer study aides in the home and fewer opportunities for nonschool related learning activities. They come from families with limited exposure to formal education and, thus, their parents may or may not fully appreciate the long-term value of education. Often, their parents do not model professional careers for their children. These, and other related factors, limit the motivation of many minority students. Coming into education with certain identifiable disadvantages, they too frequently do not succeed in education (WICHE, 1987).

In the traditionally close-knit Hispanic family, however, mothers have been found to exert a powerful influence on their children, particularly on their daughters (Fleming, 1982). These mothers, then, have the potential for influencing their daughters' educational and career choices. However, due to their own low educational attainment, they may not model educational and career aspirations for their daughters. They may also have limited knowledge concerning educational access for their children (Soto, 1990). Changing these patterns requires early intervention in the academic and developmental lives of these girls. Systematic action aimed at all sectors of education—elementary and secondary schools and college and universities—is also necessary, as well as a greater coordination among these sectors. Institutions of higher education, in particular, must be actively involved in the development of systematic approaches to the problems and opportunities of minority education (WICHE, 1987).

The Mother-Daughter Program at the University of Texas at El Paso is one of many efforts by the institution to address the challenge of low educational attainment by Hispanic females. The Program's overall objective is to intervene early at a stage of young girls' educational development when difficulties can be more readily identified and corrected. Because of the importance of maternal expectations (the Educational Testing Service named low educational expectations of mothers as the single most common factor among Hispanic female dropouts), a crucial aspect of the program is the inclusion of mothers in curriculum and activities. The program also employs a comprehensive approach involving a coalition of institutions, including the University, the El Paso, Ysleta, and Socorro Independent School Districts, the YWCA, and numerous professional women in the community who serve as role models.

In the six years since its inception, the Mother-Daughter Program has proven to be a successful means of introducing girls to professional and educational alternatives to dropping out of school. Before they enter the program, the girls are uncertain about their future. After their year in the program, they know the direction their education is taking them, talk about careers and college, and are

closer to their mothers. And most importantly, these girls, who were identified as being in at-risk situations by their fifth grade teachers and thus recommended to participate in the program, have remained in school. And by all indications, they are college bound. For example, 98% of the girls who participated in the first two years of the program (1986-1988) have remained in school. The majority of them are currently enrolled in college-preparatory courses and honors courses, and almost three-fourths of them have an overall grade point average of 80 or above.

Purpose of the Mother-Daughter Program

Six years ago, a group of concerned educational professionals from UTEP, three El Paso school districts, and the local YWCA formed a coalition to address the widespread problem of high dropout rates among Hispanic females and their subsequent underrepresentation in higher education. This coalition formed the Mother-Daughter Program, a special project that provides academic intervention for 6th grade Hispanic girls identified as being in at-risk situations of dropping out of school. Girls (along with their mothers) from low socioeconomic low educational backgrounds in which no family member has graduated from college are recommended by their teachers and principals to participate in the program. The girls are then guided toward careers requiring higher education.

One hundred and fifty mother-daughter teams from the Ysleta, El Paso, and Socorro school districts participate in the program every year. The girls are selected by teachers and principals in the participating schools based on their potential for academic success and on their increased risk of becoming dropouts. Scores on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) and grades from the previous year are also used as part of the criteria for selection and participation in the program.

The program targets sixth grade girls because program organizers feel that it is important to intervene in the academic careers of Hispanic girls at a time when they are still open to an array of options. By the time they reach high school, many Hispanic girls have already made choices that preclude them from pursuing post-secondary education or reduce their chances for success if they do go on to college. The Mother-Daughter Program reaches these girls before they make uninformed choices and provides them with information about university life, academic skills, and personal development. Furthermore, by involving mothers directly in the educational process, they have been found to be better informed of their potential. They are also better able to assist their daughters in

making those important decisions which will maximize their daughters' future career and academic opportunities. A support network of university faculty, community leaders, classroom teachers, and professional role-models talk to the girls about the benefits of staying in school and of completing a college degree. They share information about their own high school and college preparation, their school and work experiences, as well as their trials, tribulations, and successes. Through visits to the university and participation in numerous community activities and classroom exercises, both mothers and daughters learn about university life and gain an understanding of the expectations placed upon university students as well as the preparation needed to succeed.

Program Objectives

The activities of the Mother-Daughter Program at the University of Texas at El Paso are designed to fulfill the following objectives:

1. To encourage Hispanic girls to complete their high school education and to raise their expectations of attending college.
2. To orient, each year, 150 Hispanic mother-daughter teams to higher education and professional careers.
3. To improve the quality of preparation for higher education of young Hispanic women by providing academic and life skills training.
4. To increase Hispanic parental commitment to higher education by involving both mothers and daughters in the educational process.
5. To motivate girls to successfully complete their high school and college education through activities which promote positive self-esteem, self-efficacy, and study skills.

Program Activities

The 150 mother-daughter teams meet one Saturday each month for a year. Sessions are held at the University, in the schools, at the YWCA, or in the local community. All activities are planned around four important areas in the development of both mothers and daughters: Career Development, Academic Development, Community Life Development, and Personal Development. A series of activity modules for both the mothers and the daughters has been designed for each of these four areas.

Calendar of Events

The calendar of events varies slightly from year to year. What follows is a sample calendar for one program year:

September	Orientation for all Participants and their Families (held at one of the schools)
October	Open House and Tour of the University
November	School District Activity—Introduction to Computers
December	Christmas Program and Luncheon for all Participants and their Families (held at one of the schools)
January	Career Day at the University
February	School District Activity—Visit to the Texas Tech School of Medicine
March	Leadership Conference at the University
April	School District Activity—Visit to Junior High schools; workshop on study skills, note taking, and time management
June	Awards Luncheon and Summer Camp on Campus
June-August	YWCA Summer Activities (In addition to Y-Teen Club activities held throughout the year)

Activities at the University

The girls and their mothers participate in four important activities at the University of Texas at El Paso during the course of the school year: Open House and Tour of the University, Career Day, the Leadership Conference, and the Summer Camp on Campus and Awards Ceremony. The remainder of the activities take place either at the YWCA, the schools, or in the community.

Campus Open House and Tour. This activity familiarizes the girls and their mothers with the campus and with university life. For the majority of the participants, this is their first visit to a university campus. While there, the girls and their mothers learn about the academic preparation required for admission to UTEP and about the scholarships and financial assistance available. During the campus open house and tour, they also meet university students, such as members of the Society of Women Engineers and other successful Hispanic

university students who discuss their career goals and experiences as university students. They also encourage the girls to stay in school and provide them with advice concerning high school preparation and course work for those planning to major in engineering. This initial experience is important because, for the first time in their lives many of the girls begin to think and talk about the possibility of attending college. The mothers, too, become enthusiastic about the possibility of their daughters, of even themselves, attending college.

Career Day. In addition to various activities which involve the girls in planning their school courses and getting them to think about their futures, Career Day introduces them to an array of career options and Hispanic role models. This event brings in panels of Hispanic professional women to talk about experiences and preparation regarding their careers. These professional women make the girls aware of the advantages of pursuing a college education, and they talk about the obstacles they faced while going to college. But most importantly, they tell the girls about career options and about the successes they have had. During the course of the program, this event has included 25 to 30 professional women—chemists, teachers, doctors, lawyers, judges, as well as women in banking and engineering.

Leadership Conference. The annual conference focuses on the development of leadership skills. It begins with a general session keynoted by a nationally recognized speaker who specializes in leadership and youth. One year, for example, the speaker was an Hispanic female, an assistant vice president for academic affairs at a major university in Texas. Later, the girls participated in small groups conducted by professional workshop facilitators. The small group activities focused on the development of leadership skills such as how to effectively conduct a meeting, how to organize a school or community activity, or how to run for office or start a club.

Awards Ceremony and Summer Camp on Campus. The awards ceremony honors program graduates at the end of the school year with a luncheon and the presentation of certificates. The ceremony reinforces the concept that the participants have accomplished something important in planning for a successful and independent future.

When funds have been available, the awards ceremony has also been combined with a summer camp. The Summer Camp on Campus is designed to round out and complete the yearly objectives of the program. Held in June, this event is an intensive two day immersion of the girls into the full range of

university living. The girls are exposed to the dorm atmosphere and to college students who are living in the dorms during the summer session. The camp is planned during the summer semester so that the girls can see the campus in full operation, attend selected classes with University students, and participate in some classroom activities. This provides the girls with an opportunity to appreciate and view campus life. On the second day, mothers join their daughters for the Awards Luncheon, where each receives a certificate attesting to her successful participation in the program for one year. The two-day Summer Camp allows the program participants to confirm and reaffirm the academic and life skills learned during the year.

Beginning in June of 1992, the program was expanded to include activities through the girls' first year of college. The expanded Mother-Daughter Program provides continuous positive reinforcement for academic success from grades 6 through the first year of college. University personnel provide academic guidance in addition to the strong social nurturing and leadership development provided through the YWCA's Y-Teen clubs. In addition to a variety of seminars at the University, the program employs three graduate students who work with the girls in the schools. The graduate students provide information about educational prerequisites for college, assist in selecting a college and applying for admission and financial aid, and provide tutoring in academic subjects when needed. The graduate students also work with teachers and counselors to ensure that the girls take advantage of the support systems available to them in the schools. They visit the girls' homes to talk with the mothers about problems the girls may be having at home. Mothers are brought together to share experiences and to explore strategies that will continue to support the daughters' personal and academic aspirations.

Off Campus Activities

In the months when major events are not scheduled at the University, the girls and their mothers participate in other activities which take place in the schools, the YWCA, or at various sites in the community. Using the curriculum modules, the planning committee selects various activities to be carried out by the individual school districts or the YWCA. Some activities are structured separately for the mothers and daughters, while others are designed for them to work together. Some sessions are planned to enhance the self-concept of the participants by focusing on their identities as individuals, as members of Hispanic cultures, and as parts of families. Through lectures and group discussions, participants

explore cultural and familial issues related to Hispanic women. Activities are also planned throughout the community. Program participants visit the symphony, City Hall, the missions, the public library, and the El Paso Museum of Art.

The girls and their mothers also participate in activities that take place at the YWCA or are planned by the YWCA during the school year. In addition, in cooperation with the University and school districts, the YWCA plans three summer activities—one a month from June through August. The activities have ranged from attending the “Viva El Paso” pageant, to touring the courthouse with a family court judge, to making field observations at the Wilderness Museum. In the years following major program participation, the YWCA organizes the alumni into teen clubs with the mothers as sponsors and advisors. The girls meet after school or on weekends and participate in a variety of activities. The YWCA also plans workshops for the mothers on issues important to their roles as women and mothers.

Big Sisters

The girls’ link with UTEP is strengthened by the participation in the program of “Big Sisters”—Hispanic University students who live in the same neighborhoods as the program participants. The Big Sisters are a vital component of the Mother-Daughter Program. They serve as role models, demonstrating to the younger girls that young Hispanic women can attend the university. They are current, relevant models because they are achieving what the program encourages the preteens to strive for: university attendance. The big sisters are caring, helpful, young Hispanic women who represent the values that can change the lives of their “little sisters.”

A Comprehensive Approach

It is hypothesized that the approach used by the Mother-Daughter Program significantly enhances the likelihood that participants will graduate from high school and attend college. First of all, the program reaches a population in at-risk situations at an early age. Sixth-grade is a particularly crucial year for these girls since it is often their last year in elementary school before the transition to middle school, where they have the opportunity to make choices that will determine their educational future.

Second, the approach is a comprehensive one involving the University, the

public schools, and the YWCA. The big sisters and community leaders involved in the program become mentors to the girls. The girls participating in the program cannot help but realize that key people in the schools and the community want them to succeed.

Finally, the approach involves parents. As the profiles of dropouts make clear, the parents of dropouts usually are not involved in their children's school activities. The mothers of the girls in the UTEP Mother-Daughter Program, however, become intimately involved in their daughters' education. They know their daughters have legitimate aspirations to higher education, and so by working side-by-side with them, they directly and indirectly support and encourage their daughters to succeed in school. The program also helps the mothers become better role models for their children. Some of the mothers decide to go back to school, in some cases to get their high school diplomas and in others to take courses at El Paso Community College or at UTEP. Through the mothers, the influence of the program extends far beyond the girls who are formally involved. The motivation and knowledge the mothers and the daughters gain is passed on to other children in the family and eventually to the neighborhood and community at large.

Outcomes

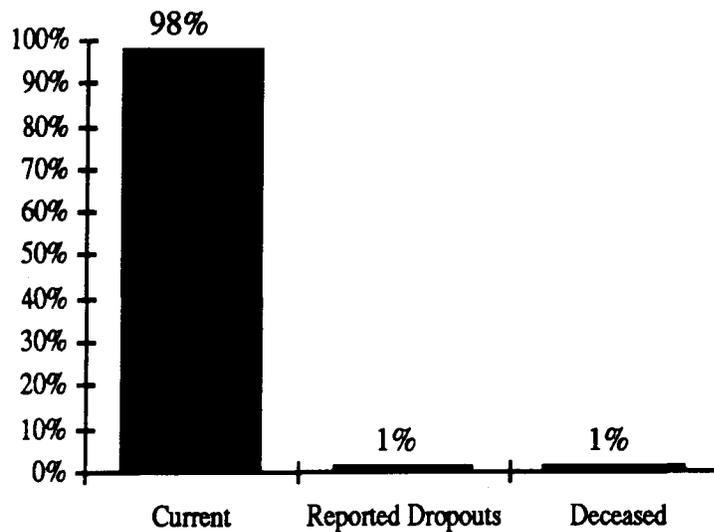
Although it is too early to document how successful the Mother-Daughter Program will be in increasing Hispanic representation in higher education and the professions, program organizers are encouraged by the results so far and believe that the program will have an impact beyond its present scope. Surveys of attitudinal changes find that the UTEP Mother-Daughter Program has had a major impact on both mothers and daughters. In the six years since its inception, the program has proven to be a successful means of introducing girls to professional and educational alternatives to dropping out of school.

Data collected from surveys, school records, and in-depth interviews indicate a marked improvement in educational expectations, academic achievement, and self-concept for daughters participating in the program. The girls have indicated that their participation in the 6th grade program has helped them learn about different academic fields. Campus visits and classroom exercises have given them a flavor of university life, a better understanding of what is expected of college students, and the preparation needed to succeed. Girls have also reported that they have learned about the importance of staying in school, the value of education, and the importance of studying and earning good grades.

Mothers have reported that the program has given them higher expectations for their daughters and their other children, and they they now take a more active role in their daughters' education. They have come to recognize their responsibility for helping their daughters enhance their opportunities by studying and making informed decisions about courses of study. Mothers now talk of their daughters' attending college as a reality: it's no longer "if my daughter goes to college," it's "when my daughter goes to college." Participation in the program has made them realize that higher education is a genuine possibility for their daughters and that their daughters can enhance their opportunities by studying and by making informed decisions concerning courses of study. And according to their teachers, the Mother-Daughter participants who are now freshmen, sophomores, and juniors in high school, have much more self-confidence and ability to express themselves than do their counterparts who did not participate in the program. Most important, Mother-Daughter alumni have remained in school, making attending college a realistic option for them.

Data collected for the first two groups of girls who participated in the program show that of the 233 girls who participated in the first two years of the program, 229, or 98% of them are still enrolled in school; attending college is a realistic option for them. (See Figure 1.) This represents a 1.5% dropout rate among Mother-Daughter participants compared to the 7% reported among Hispanic girls attending the same high schools where the Mother-Daughter participants are enrolled.

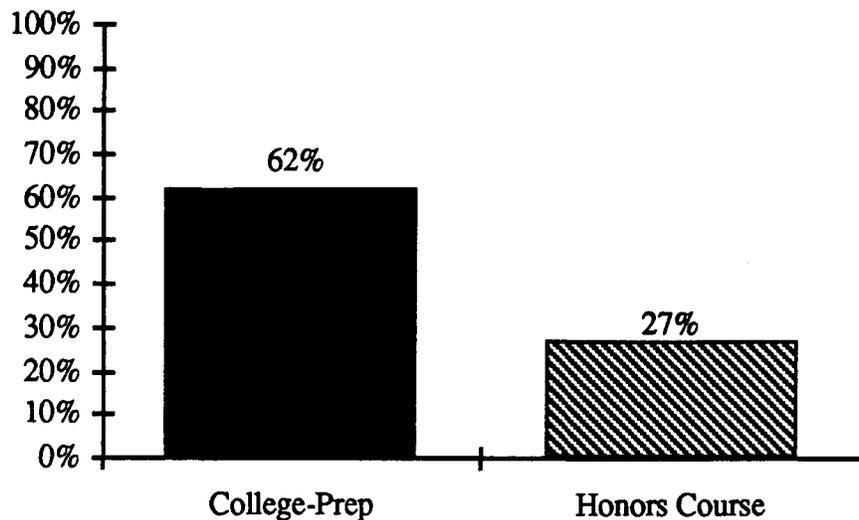
Figure 1. 1986-1988 Mother Daughter Participants Currently Enrolled.



Freshmen, Sophomores, and Juniors, n=233

The introduction they receive to university life has made them realize that higher education is a genuine possibility for them and that they can enhance their opportunities by studying and by making informed decisions concerning courses of study. Participating in the program has encouraged the girls to choose courses of study—advanced English, mathematics, and science—and honors courses that will prepare them for college. Of the girls who participated in the first two years of the program, and who have remained in the same school districts since their initial participation in the program, 143 out of the 229 (or 62%) reenrolled in college preparatory courses, with almost half of these enrolled in honors courses. (See Figure 2.)

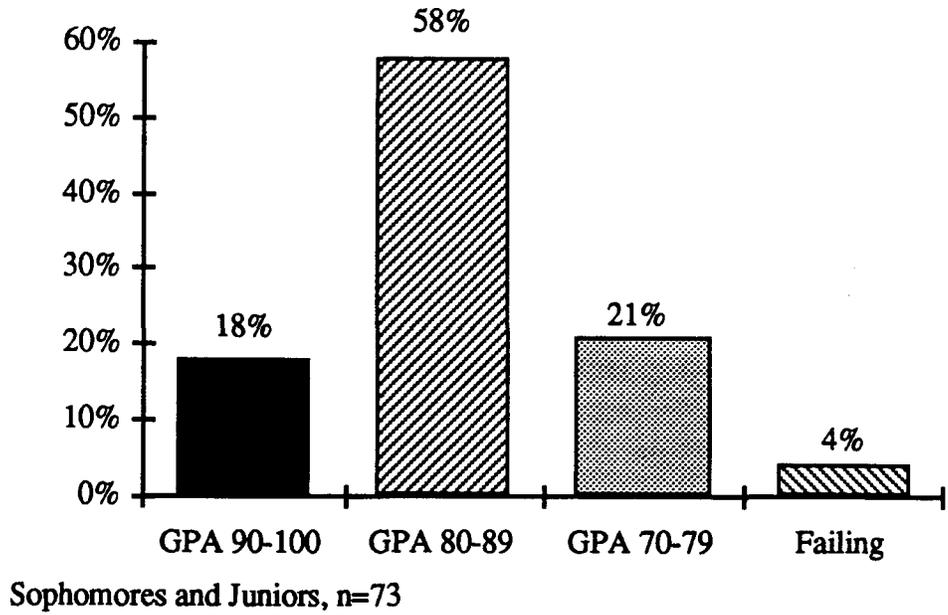
Figure 2. 1986-1988 Mother-Daughter Participants, College-Prep and Honors Courses.



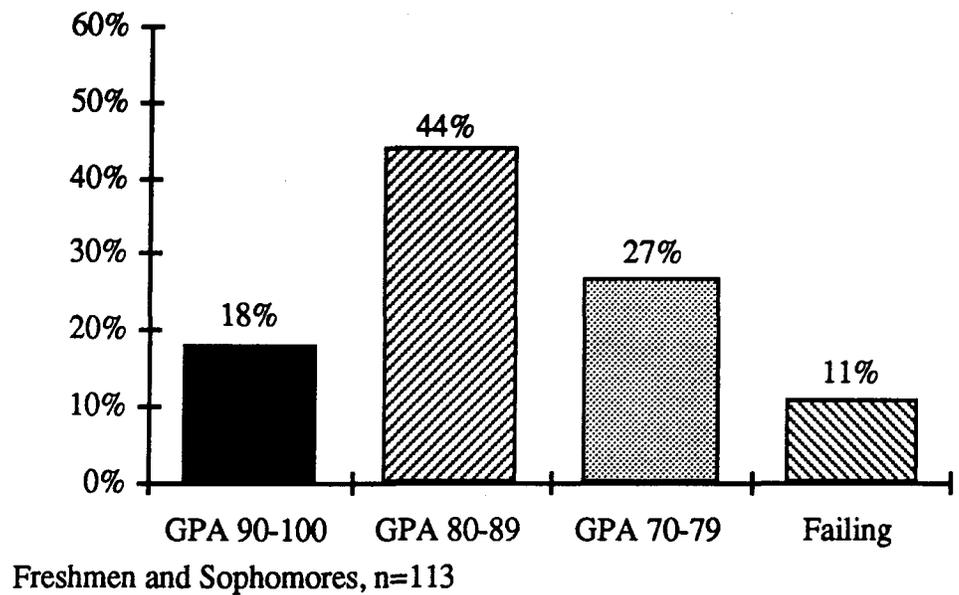
Freshmen, Sophomores, and Juniors, n=229

Furthermore, of the first two groups of girls who participated in the program, over half of them are A and B students.

Figure 3. 1986-1987 Mother-Daughter Participants' Grade Point Average (GPA).



1987-1988 Mother-Daughter Participants' Grade Point Average (GPA)



In addition, data for the first two cohorts show that Mother-Daughter participants achieved complete mastery on the Texas Achievement Assessment Skills test at higher rates than district averages.

A Collection of Strengths

Six years ago, representatives from UTEP, the El Paso YWCA, and local school districts were inspired to develop a possible solution to high dropout rates among the El Paso's Hispanic females. That fledgling idea has grown into the increasingly successful El Paso Mother-Daughter Program. A beneficial partnership has emerged between UTEP and the El Paso YWCA as a side effect of that program. El Paso, Socorro, and Ysleta school systems form the final brace in the Mother-Daughter organizational triad.

UTEP has nurtured the Mother-Daughter Program from its very inception. The university is critical to the administration of the program, and it serves as a source of inspiration to the girls and their mothers. Visits to the campus give the girls a realistic view of college, and interactions with faculty, staff, and students from a wide range of university departments help whet their intellectual appetites. Programs in such areas as physics, anthropology, psychology, engineering, and education introduce the girls to subjects to which they might not otherwise be exposed. In addition, the Library, the UTEP Centennial Museum, and campus media (radio station KTEP and UTEP's newspaper, the *Prospector*) provide programs that also increase the appeal of a college education.

The participation of the YWCA provides many benefits to the Mother-Daughter Program, including a conduit for dissemination of the program to cities and communities throughout the country. National YWCA officials are currently planning for distribution of educational materials developed for the 6th grade program and will include materials from the 7th grade through the first year in college in that distribution once the curriculum is developed through the El Paso program.

Without the participation of the El Paso's public school systems, the Mother-Daughter Program would not be possible. It is through the schools that the girls who need academic intervention are identified, and it is through the schools that their progress is monitored.

The success of the Mother-Daughter Program is already apparent in the academic improvement of the participants. In order to ensure the long-term success of this intervention, the joint work of UTEP, the YWCA, and the

participating school districts has been expanded to provide support to at-risk girls and their families throughout high school and into college.

And so the efforts of the University of Texas at El Paso and its collaborators continue. Despite the length of time required to see the outcomes, the Mother-Daughter Program appears to be on target. The program is regarded by the university and the community as an important tool in the fight against school dropout rates and as vehicle for raising educational and career aspirations of young Hispanic girls and their mothers.

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