Hispanic Leadership Program in Agriculture and Natural Resources—Lessons Learned

Manuel Piña, Jr., Texas A&M University, 149 Scoates Hall, 2116 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843-2116; m-pina@tamu.edu

The purpose of the Hispanic Leadership Program in Agriculture and Natural Resources (HLPANR) is to improve participation of Hispanic Americans in assessment, design, delivery, and evaluation of programs related to food, agriculture, and natural resources. It is a collaborative effort between Texas A&M University (TAMU) and the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA). The HLPANR was founded in 2002 through a joint venture agreement with the U.S. Forest Service and a special research grant (earmark) through the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES).

Program activities include: graduate research fellowships, research with Hispanic communities, policy development, professional improvement for employers, and leadership development (Figure 1).

Key accomplishments

HLPANR has sponsored 46 graduate students (5 cohorts) at TAMU and UTSA; 17 have graduated. Of the 46 students, 28 have enrolled at TAMU (14 M.S. and 14 Ph.D.) and 18 have enrolled at UTSA (11 M.S. and 7 Ph.D.) At TAMU:

- Twenty-three students are Hispanic, 4 are white, and 1 is African American;
- Thirteen are female and 15 are male;

Figure 1. Program activities of HLPANR.

- Twelve have graduated (3 employed by the U.S. Forest Service, 5 by universities, 2 by state natural resource agencies, and 2 by private industry); and
- Monthly stipends of the students are cost-shared equally by respective academic departments.

At UTSA:

- Fourteen students are Hispanic and 4 are white;
- Eleven are female and 7 are male; and
- Five have graduated (2 employed by the U.S. Forest Service, 1 by a university, 1 by a state natural resource agency, and 1 by private industry)

All students have conducted or are conducting research on topics of importance to the U.S. Hispanic community, have participated in field trips to south Texas and northeastern Mexico to understand the land tenure and natural resources of the border region, and have participated in workshops on policy, professional and leadership development.

Funding for the HLPANR has come from the U.S. Forest Service and CSREES to UTSA, then to TAMU. At TAMU, additional funds are contributed by the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Office of Graduate Studies, and the participating academic departments.

Ten lessons learned

1. **Develop a sound concept and highlight its distinctiveness**. It is important that we develop a concept that is pedagogically and sequentially sound, and with the input from as many stakeholders as possible, e.g., potential employers, academics, students, ultimate recipients of services, political leaders, and leaders from possible funding agencies. It is equally important that we develop programs that are distinguishable from others with similar sounding names, i.e., to highlight that our program is much more than a fellowship-managing enterprise, where graduates will be prepared well in their academic disciplines but also be able to exercise effective leadership as professionals in their careers.
2. **Select partners carefully**. It is important to select institutional partners carefully. In doing this, we must recognize differences in size; infrastructural support, management style, leadership history and capacity for programs of this type; academic and research programs and facilities; overall culture; and previous history of collaboration.
3. **Engage with the long term in mind**. It is important to enter into this kind of program and related process with the long term in mind. We cannot expect to have the impact that we need in a three- to five-year period. As such, programmatically and financially, from the onset, we must be thinking ahead for a longer period of time. In doing this, we must be able to continually evaluate our progress and process, make necessary adjustments, and, most importantly, expand our funding support base, always anticipating that current funding sources may disappear.
4. **Get faculty involvement**. It is important to recognize those faculties who teach and conduct research in academic departments are key to the success of a project of this

type. They are the ones who advise, teach, mentor, and conduct research. But, they are also volunteers; they don't have to do this. Our job as project directors is to enable them to do their jobs by providing them with funds to support students and, sometimes, suggesting to them students that we would like to see in the programs. We must also invite and involve the faculty in all project activities and recognize them for their participation and support of programs of this type.

5. **Be prepared to defend the program**. It is important to know that not all faculty and administrators will automatically be supportive of efforts of this type. We must be prepared to not only defend why we are concentrating on increasing the number of minority or under-represented students but also, and more importantly, continually gain support for these programs. We must have data and a process for defending and have lucrative and innovative opportunities for engaging, e.g., support for research.

6. **Mainstream the effort**. It is important to accept that most institutions will allow us to do anything that is legal, that we want to do, and that we find the funding to do from external sources. However, it is too often the case that when external funding ends, our projects also end. Therefore, from the onset, every effort should be made to make programs of this type a part of the core activities of the institution in such a way that when external funding ends, chances of the project continuing are increased. One way of doing this is for the receiving academic departments to cost-share the monthly stipends of students in their departments. Another is to get complementary institutional funding support from the onset.

7. **Showcase the students**. It is important to showcase the students at every opportunity. Let the students sell programs of this type, e.g., presentations to donors, paper and panel presentations at professional association meetings, receptions with policy-makers, interactions with potential employers, etc.

8. **Maintain communication with donors, supporters, and partners**. It is important to establish and maintain communication with all stakeholders, especially donors, supporters, and partners. This can be done through personal contact with the students or periodic newsletters, updated websites, special and annual reports, and office courtesy visits, always highlighting the progress and successes of the students.

9. **Monitor progress**. It is important to establish systematic ways for monitoring the progress of the students. Students and faculty must be held accountable for progress. Periodic progress reports are essential not only to monitor progress but also for external reporting purposes. Students should also be encouraged to submit interim reports that include successes they may have had, e.g., awards, internships, additional funding for their research, submission of proposals for additional funding, etc.

10. **Diversify the funding base**. It is of paramount importance to diversify your funding base as soon as possible after receiving any amount of funding for programs of this type. Most funding sources are not perpetual and programs of this type must be sustainable for longer periods of time than most grants allow.

Insight to the future

Our vision is to continue adding cohorts of students each year, secure sustained fund-

ing, expand our funding base to include other sources, and share this model with other universities that may have similar interests.