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UPFRONT

WOMEN TAKE THE LEAD

Women are doing something very interesting across the country. Instead of sporadic pockets of protest or the publication of new feminist tracts, they are slowly taking over the means to the end. They are surpassing men at the game that men invented. Women are taking over higher education.

Eduardo Padrón

More specifically, more female students are pursuing college degrees than men. Whereas in 1970 men earned the majority of bachelor's degrees, by 2007 the situation had reversed to the point where women were earning 57 percent and men only 43 percent of degrees, and this discrepancy holds for Hispanic Americans as well. Today, men are more likely to earn degrees in only three out of 10 major fields of study: business, history and engineering. Women outnumber them in the rest.

The workplace has yet to be transformed to this level, but the foreshadowing is there. In a competitive marketplace, the more educated candidate wins. Right?

The cold reality remains, however, that women with credentials equivalent to men still earn less money. In fact, men in the U.S. with only a high school diploma earn more than women with an associate degree. In 2006, the mean earnings for men with a college degree were \$77,868, whereas women at the same level earned only \$54,398. Something is wrong with this picture.

The marketplace has not yet corrected this error, but women are getting the education necessary to make the correction themselves. And as last year's presidential race indicates, it is only a matter of time before we witness the ultimate achievement of a woman leading the most powerful country in the world.

What about the first Latina president? It could happen in our lifetime. This month Sonia Sotomayor became a household name as President Barack Obama nominated her for the Supreme Court. She is just one of many Hispanic women who, through education and persistence, have risen to the top. The trends in

education tell us that there are many, many more Sotomayors waiting in the wings.

For example, take Hilda Solis, the current U.S. Secretary of Labor, who addressed the recent commencement of Miami Dade College in both English and Spanish. The first Latina elected to the California State Senate in 1994, she became a U.S. Representative and a leader in environmental policy. The foundation for her success was laid with degrees from California State Polytechnic University and USC.

Speaking of the U.S. House of Representatives, what about my friend U.S. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), who became its first Latina Congresswoman in 1989? She has served for 20 years now, but before that breakthrough she was a leader in education, having earned an associate degree from Miami Dade College and a doctorate from the University of Miami.

Certainly women are breaking through barriers, but a paucity of women remains in certain fields, such as engineering. The percentage of Latinas majoring in science and engineering has not increased since the 1980s. Only 1 percent of employed scientists and engineers are Latinas. These fields often require advanced degrees, and Hispanic women do not earn graduate degrees at the same level as non-Hispanic women.

More Latinas should consider studying science and technology, and they should also consider earning the highest degree possible. Need some inspiration? How about a real rocket scientist, France Córdova, the first female Chief Scientist of NASA, who is now the president of Purdue University. Or look to Ellen Ochoa, the first Latina astronaut.

The door is open for both women and men. Although men have traditionally earned more money than women, the marketplace is demanding more educated workers, and that is where women are wisely honing their expertise. Women can do anything they set their minds to do, and today's woman has her mind set on learning it all.

Dr. Eduardo J. Padrón is president of Miami Dade College, the largest institution of higher education in the nation, and chair of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.