INSIDE

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WHY LATINOS MATTER: How Latinos Will Significantly Impact America in the 21st Century

LYLC TURNS 20: Since 1994, over 1,000 students have attended the leadership conference

UNLV A Great Education Partner
An interview with Dr. Neal Smatresk, President of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas
UNLV president stresses diversity

Smatresk stresses access, opportunity for all residents

EDITOR’S NOTE: On May 20, Tom Rodriguez, co-editor of Latin Chamber Magazine, met with Dr. Neal Smatresk, president of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. For the past 28 years, the Latin Chamber of Commerce and UNLV have partnered to give scholarships to Hispanic students and, for the past 20 years, have partnered to put on the Latino Youth Leadership Conference. The Latin Chamber of Commerce greatly values this relationship and wishes to express its gratitude to the university for its long-standing support of Hispanic students and educational programs.

LATIN CHAMBER: Let’s start with the first question. Why is diversity important to you as president of UNLV?

PRESIDENT SMATRESK: Well, we live in an increasingly diverse society. Our country is made up of many different peoples. Our university system and higher education should provide access and opportunity to everyone who lives here. It is important if we are going to have a productive workforce for tomorrow. I also think it is important that faculty and staff, who represent the university to our students, are equally diverse. That is a slower process because there are pipeline challenges there, but if we do not start working on these issues today, we won’t solve them tomorrow.

LATIN CHAMBER: Why do you seem to get it and so many other leaders don’t? Why do you think people don’t understand the connection between education and having a strong economy? For example, if Hispanic students are dropping out of school because they have not acquired strong English language skills, they are obviously not going to attend college and they are not going to be able to compete for the highly technical jobs our economy will need in the future.

PRESIDENT SMATRESK: One of the things we know is that you have to engage people where they are now. You can’t wait and somehow magically hope that they will have more comprehension than the education that they’ve been given. So, if you walk into a room where no one can speak English when you begin instruction, you are not going to actually be delivering an education. It’s our accountability then, to teach them how to communicate, whether it is written or verbal communication.

So, I think that maybe there is some denial that there are people in our country who are in essence foreign students from a language perspective, or people who have not mastered English. We need to deliver, especially in ELL classes in Clark County. I think it is critical and we have to be very clear-headed about what we need to achieve by the time they get ready for college so that we don’t continue to have challenges with college students around reading, comprehension, writing and language.

LATIN CHAMBER: What about UNLV? Who are the key players in terms of diversity? And, who are some of the key Hispanic staff at UNLV?

PRESIDENT SMATRESK: Well, let me first do diversity, and then we can do the Hispanic players in campus. We have several organizations that help all of us to better understand the challenges of diverse faculty and staff populations, as well as the student population. In Student Affairs, for example, we have a variety of constituency groups that are focused on different ethnicities, so there are Asian students, Hispanic students and African-American student groups.

We also have a Presidential Advisory Committee, which is one of the most useful groups that I’ve ever worked with, who are specifically representing groups that may feel marginalized and that feel that they don’t have a voice. LATIN CHAMBER: Are these faculty or people from the community?

PRESIDENT SMATRESK: They are faculty, staff and students. It is called the Presidential Advisory Committee, or PAC, and it has representatives from all the ethnicities, it also has GLBTA representatives, classified staff, undergrads, grad students, and professional staff representatives and they are the ones who bring to me voices that may be marginalized and so I get to hear it, and I get to hear the challenges from these groups.

LATIN CHAMBER: Did you create the Presidential Advisory Committee or did it already exist before you took over as president?

PRESIDENT SMATRESK: Yeah, I started it years ago, and actually started it as a suggestion to President (David) Ashley. I use it in a pretty different way I believe than he did, but the facts are it’s a great group for getting
ground information or ground truth, and they keep me honest. So they bring the problems to me, and we deal with them openly and plainly. It is where our campus diversity and inclusion questionnaires have come from, where we are looking at things like climate, and we look at a variety of issues.

In addition, we have our office of diversity initiatives, headed up by Luis Valera, and that office with Luis, Jose Melendez and Harriet Barlow is well-managed and has a good academic focus. It is squarely focused on, for example, Title V, IX issues.

LATIN CHAMBER: And you are a Minority Serving Organization?

PRESIDENT SMATRESK: We are now a Minority Serving Institution; we are not yet an Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), but we hope to be in the near future. And so, we are doing great work, and you can see numbers shift. But another really important focus for diversity on campus is the provost office and John White takes diversity very seriously and the leadership office and John White takes diversity right now on requiring departments to have diversity plans for faculty. And it is a little bit challenging, because not everyone likes to think of things that way, but we do.

LATIN CHAMBER: I’m curious, how did you get John White, the head of the law school, to become your provost?

PRESIDENT SMATRESK: Well, John is an incredibly gifted scholar, he is really articulate and he is passionate about education. I am so happy he came on board. I didn’t think at one point we would be able to land him, because it is almost like a demotion.

John has really done well. He has asked the departments to write their diversity engagement plans and he’s also launched diversity leadership training so that we will be able to take people from different affinity groups and bring them into the fold by offering them some specific training, some leadership training, maybe letting them go to things like the ACE Institute or other things that are well known in higher education, so that our diversity pipeline from the leadership perspective is growing. Finally, of course, the Cabinet, which is where the majority of decisions around the university are made, is itself diverse. It is approximately 50 percent diverse — there are 10 Cabinet members and 50 percent of them are diverse.

LATIN CHAMBER: It seems to me that the chances for increasing diversity are tied to the growth of the university. Do you agree?

PRESIDENT SMATRESK: That is part of it, but as you know, we have kind of gone in the opposite direction. We’ve gone through serious budget reductions and that has been painful and one of the things we’ve noted is that when you have very talented faculty and staff who are diverse, that adds value to that individual and they are easy to lose to other institutions. So, we definitely need to get our budget straight and we need to get our pay cuts rescinded so that we are able to hold on to people and be more competitive. Around the country, pay is on the uptick again and higher education, so we are now competing with a lot of other colleges and universities.

LATIN CHAMBER: What challenges do you see ahead to having greater employment and student diversity at UNLV?

PRESIDENT SMATRESK: Well, the budget is one of the biggest ones. The other one kind of comes from two ends of the spectrum. One is that the numbers coming out of the Clark County School District are still strong but they are not too good for diverse populations. We look hard at those numbers and the first thing you see is that there is just a tremendous difference in ethnicities with graduation stats, but overall the graduation stats are really low, and they are so low that we are not sure how much room for growth there is in the Clark County School District numbers right now. Until those numbers start to pick up, it is doubtful that our numbers will pick up significantly. So, the first problem is what can we do in Clark County to get students college ready? We definitely need to do more than what we are doing now.

The second problem is almost the opposite. There are some terrific minority students in Clark County and they are highly desirable to colleges and universities nationwide. So, we find that some of the best and brightest students are getting scholarships and are not staying in Nevada. So we need to counteract that by making sure we have great scholarships, and one of the best things we do in that regard is working in collaboration with the Latin Chamber of Commerce and other community groups.

LATIN CHAMBER: Let’s hope that doesn’t happen soon because each year we see more and more Hispanic students who want to go to college. It would be a real shame if we weren’t able to help make their dreams come true.

PRESIDENT SMATRESK: One of our big challenges right now is finding scholarships for students. With the Latin Chamber scholarships, certainly, we are growing and the more help we can get from the public the better. The Latin Chamber and some of the other groups that I meet with help to keep us honest. When you can have a great dialogue and when you can just sit down and talk with people, I think that creates a platform for opportunity and success in what we all do together.

So, we listen, and in listening, we’ve heard that we might not be doing everything we can and I think that keeps a good honest pressure on us to improve. But, I think that you would agree that in the past four or five years we’ve made some really nice changes and that we continually try to walk the walk, instead of just talk the talk.

▶ SEE SMATRESK PAGE 15
State needs top-tier institution
This year, for instance, we are giving scholarships to keep our best and brightest in Nevada. We are doing this for our Hispanic students! We are increasing their four years. This reduces the number of minorities who might not have thought about going to college, to actually go to college. We have to grow and we will have to more than double the funding in Southern Nevada is not adequate for the number of students who are going to have to train. Only about 21 percent of our population has a higher education degree. To be nationally competitive, you want that number between 40 or 50 percent. If you just calculate what it will take to get there, we will have to more than double the number of students who are graduating with degrees from higher ed, and in order to that we have to grow and we need to have a much larger budget than we have now. We've been living with budget cuts for years and our budget is flat now.

LATIN CHAMBER: Given current budget realities, what do you see ahead for UNLV?
PRESIDENT SMATRESK: What I see ahead is that the Clark County School District and UNLV need to work better to make sure that students come to us college-ready. Yet, I don't know how we can deliver the number of degrees this region needs if we can’t expand our funding, but in a state where higher education is viewed as a cost rather than an investment for the future, I think that's a hard sale.

Right now, we generate about $1.5 billion in economic impact for the $123 million of state general funds that are given to us. That is a huge return on investment. Even in direct dollars, we generate $919 million. So every single dollar that is invested here will bring $2 to $3 from out of state, which is a big return. So we think that the state needs to realize that we can improve our economy and improve our tax base by investing in higher education.

LATIN CHAMBER: Everyone is upset about our educational system. Nevada is last in almost everything having to do with achievement, yet every year virtually nothing is done to do anything about it. Why is that?
PRESIDENT SMATRESK: Well, every state around us is making deep investments in higher education. So we need to specifically set up for minority students but they were set up to serve first-generation students and in this region, first generation will typically be strongly minority oriented in terms of the makeup of the students we are recruiting. We are also just trying to promote the university and to expand our brand in the community. We want to get people to think of UNLV as a first-choice institution, not a place you go to because you have to. And, we think that as our brand improves, more students from Clark County will enter UNLV.

LATIN CHAMBER: Are those two programs where we either adopt schools or go out into schools, like the Center for Academic Enrichment and Outreach. Our adopted school projects are designed to persuade students who might not have thought about going to college, to actually go to college.

There is also the Rebel Reading Challenge, which brings in fourth grade students that fill the Thomas & Mack. I think we had 7,000 kids at the last one. They bring out the athletes and the cheerleaders and they play rock music, and the kids have a ball. It also makes them think “I want to go to college” and that is the message.

LATIN CHAMBER: I didn’t know about that program.
PRESIDENT SMATRESK: We want kids to believe that they can go to college because if you don’t believe you can go, then your very likely won’t go. We are also offering more and better scholarship support for high ability students. Support like the Englestad Scholars Program and the Collins Scholars, which are strongly minority in terms of the makeup of kids we are recruiting. So, we are doing a lot of things around recruiting.

LATIN CHAMBER: Are those two scholarships set up specifically to help minorities?
PRESIDENT SMATRESK: They weren’t specifically set up for minority students but they were set up to serve first-generation students and in this region, first generation will typically be strongly minority oriented in terms of the makeup of the students we are recruiting. We are also just trying to promote the university and to expand our brand in the community. We want to get people to think of UNLV as a first-choice institution, not a place you go to because you have to. And, we think that as our brand improves, more students from Clark County will enter UNLV.

LATIN CHAMBER: What about funding? What is UNLV not doing because of a lack of funds?
PRESIDENT SMATRESK: Well, the overall funding in Southern Nevada is not adequate for the number of students we are going to have to train. Only about 21 percent of our population has a higher education degree. To be nationally competitive, you want that number between 40 or 50 percent. If you just calculate what it will take to get there, we will have to more than double the number of students who are graduating with degrees from higher ed, and in order to that we have to grow and we need to have a much larger budget than we have now. We’ve been living with budget cuts for years and our budget is flat now.

LATIN CHAMBER: What is your administration doing to helping UNLV become an HSI?
PRESIDENT SMATRESK: An important part of becoming an HSI is recruitment. In that area, we have a number of programs where we either adopt schools or go out into schools, like the Center for Academic Enrichment and Outreach. Our adopted school projects are designed to persuade students who might not have thought about going to college, to actually go to college.

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