



# Hector Garcia, Executive Director of Minnesota Chicano Latino Affairs Council

## Immigrants are key to Minnesota's economic future

A Civic Caucus Focus on Competitiveness Interview

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### Present

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### Summary

According to Minnesota Chicano Latino Affairs Council (CLAC) Executive Director Hector Garcia, the Latino population in Minnesota has grown rapidly over the past decade and now numbers nearly 300,000, of which 40 to 50 percent are immigrants. He notes that the Latino population in the state grew by 74.5 percent between 2000 and 2010. In comparison, Minnesota's more rapidly aging and retiring European American community grew by only 1.6 percent during that period.

In the foreseeable future, Garcia points out, 70 percent of the jobs in Minnesota will require some kind of postsecondary education. Further, demographers predict a workforce shortage in Minnesota by 2020. Garcia wonders who will fill those jobs, given the current educational disparities that afflict the Latino and other non-majority communities.

The solution to both challenges, he believes, is changing society's view of Latino and other immigrants. Too often, immigrants are funneled into the social service system, which might help to address past injustices, but is not as good at building for the future. Although some immigrants may need the social service system for a short time, Garcia asserts that immigrants and society will be better served longer term if we find ways to harness immigrants' energy, diverse cultural perspectives, youth, hard work and ambition. As with past waves of immigration in the U.S., newer immigrants, under this paradigm shift, could again serve as the engine of economic growth.

While there are significant differences between 20th and 21st century demographics that will affect immigrants' success in making economic headway today, Garcia is optimistic about their prospects. He wants society generally and the educational systems in particular to understand that Latino students' countries of origin increasingly play a pivotal role in Minnesota's globalized economy. If that connection were fully grasped, those students might no longer be burdened by low expectations, but, instead, be empowered to be bridges of culture, language and economic interests. Speaking a second language, he cites as an example, should be viewed as an asset in a global economy, not a deficit, as it often is now.

## Biography

Hector Garcia is executive director of the Minnesota Chicano Latino Affairs Council (CLAC), a state agency created in 1978 that advises the government on matters of interest to Latinos who live in Minnesota. He has served in that position since 2009. Garcia leads the Council staff and its integral units: legislative affairs, community affairs, research and administrative. He also engages Minnesota's governor and Legislature on Latino-specific issues and policy recommendations and builds bridges of communication and collaboration with local and federal government, private and nonprofit sectors.

On matters related to Latin America, immigrants and minority communities in Minnesota, since the 1980s, Garcia has advised a number of local public officials, governors; the mayors of Saint Paul, Minneapolis and other Minnesota cities; state commissioners; state legislators; and others, including U.S. Senator Dave Durenberger and INS Director Curt Aljets.

More recently, Garcia served as President of MEX-US Global, a consulting firm on international investment, market growth, and trade and intercultural relations. He served as Vice President of International and Domestic Emerging Markets at Wells Fargo Bank, cofounder and executive director of Minnesotans for NAFTA, Executive Director of the Minnesota/Dakotas District of the National Conference for Community and Justice, and cofounder of the Twin Cities Immigrant Community Roundtable.

Garcia is a graduate of the Instituto Tecnológico de México in Mexico City, with a degree in Business Administration. He studied Psychology and Philosophy at the University of Minnesota, Project Management at the University of St. Thomas, and the French language in France, Canada, and Mexico.

## Background

As part of its emphasis on the importance of human capital in Minnesota's future, the Civic Caucus invited Hector Garcia to discuss the work of the Chicano Latino Affairs Council (CLAC) and issues in education, workforce development and employment in the Latino community in Minnesota.

## Discussion

**The Chicano Latino Affairs Council (CLAC) is one of four state councils in Minnesota representing designated communities of color.** The other three councils are the Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans, Council on Black Minnesotans and Minnesota Indian Affairs Council. According

to Hector Garcia of CLAC, the councils work to collaborate with state, local and federal governments; nonprofit organizations; and the private sector to improve the socio-economic conditions of their communities.

**CLAC makes recommendations for the introduction of new bills, advises the governor and the legislature, issues reports and holds community visioning forums in Latino communities around the state.** Garcia said access to state officials could be improved, but CLAC reports fill that gap to some degree. The reports deal with issues such as economic development, housing, education, health, and immigration. In the visioning forums, CLAC asks each community about its situation and what help and services the Council can provide. CLAC also promotes voter registration and furthers Latinos' understanding of government systems.

**The Latino population in Minnesota has grown rapidly over the past decade and now numbers nearly 300,000; 40 percent to 50 percent of Latinos in the state are immigrants.** Garcia said the Latino population in the state grew by 74.5 percent between 2000 and 2010. In comparison, he said, the European American community in Minnesota grew by 1.6 percent during that period and is aging and retiring. The Latino population nationally, he said, grew by 43 percent during that time period and is now 50 million, making Latinos the largest minority group in the country. He said some states have growth rates of over 100 percent. He acknowledged that some of these numbers might include undocumented immigrants, but it's hard to know their numbers with certainty.

**Moving forward, 70 percent of the jobs in Minnesota will require some kind of postsecondary education.** "Who's going to fill those jobs?" Garcia asked. "Given the current educational disparities that afflict the Latino community and other communities, it doesn't look like we're focusing on the right approach and strategies. What are we going to do about it?"

**The solution put forward by some economists of getting people not to retire and to continue working seems like a poor strategy.** "It speaks very loudly to the fact that people are not thinking about young immigrants and refugees, who should be an obvious answer," Garcia said.

**The current flow of immigrants is different from that of European immigrants at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.** Six percent of Americans had a high school education at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Garcia said. Some European immigrants at that time might have been as educated or better educated than Minnesotans.

Today, Garcia said, 90 percent of Minnesotans of age have a high school education. Many immigrants from Latin America and some from Asia have very low levels of education, he noted. "If you look at the villages in Mexico and Central America where some of these people come from, it's like coming from a different planet," he said. "Not realizing that enormous difference is complicating things."

"Europe had centuries of tradition holding education as a high value," Garcia continued. "In the villages from which many of today's immigrants are coming, education is not a priority. Kids go to school for a few years and then their parents tell them they have to start working in the fields."

He said people of European origin say they pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, but he doesn't believe that's true. There were strong support systems in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, including official

documents being translated into German, Norwegian or Swedish. "People are under the impression that immigrants should come and automatically understand everything," he said. "I'm an immigrant. I came here with three languages, a college education and having traveled to many countries. I was still baffled by many things."

**For the last 30 years, we have funneled immigrants and refugees into the system designed for "minorities," without taking into account that historically, immigrants have been the engine of economic growth in this country.** Garcia said new immigrants' ambition, diverse cultural perspectives, hard work and youth have always been key factors as the engine of American economic growth. "That historical formula was put aside," he said. "For some reason, people thought, 'These people are not European. Let's put them into the 'minorities box.' And that was a disaster."

"The social service system is great for correcting the injustices of the past, but not for building a new future," he continued. "Why put the engine of economic growth into a system that promotes co-dependency? For people who've suffered injustice or marginalization, it's fine. But why put into the system people who are arriving here, don't have that history, and are full of ambition and youth?"

**With the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, there was a huge inflow of immigrants.** "The governments and the corporations didn't do what they were supposed to do and the small farmers and small business people in Mexico got creamed," Garcia said. "They were desperate and couldn't find a job anywhere, so they started flocking to the U.S."

He said most of the immigrants arrived in Arizona, Texas and California. "There were too many of them in those states already, but they heard about opportunities here, so they moved here," he said.

**Some educators have low expectations of "minority" students, both those born here and immigrants.** "The kids will hear this loud and clear," Garcia said. "If that's the message, you're not going to get people to achieve levels of distinction. It's not inspirational. That's probably one of the greatest flaws." The way society sees people will define their futures, Garcia added. Society's continuing low expectations of Latino immigrants has the effect of limiting their futures.

He pointed out that in today's global economy, a second language should be an asset, not a deficit. Yet, he said, many Spanish-speaking kids are placed in special education because they speak a foreign language and they might remain there forever.

But teachers, schools and other programs are not the only ones that need to do a paradigm shift, he acknowledged. "It's also the responsibility of the immigrants to do a great deal of change, to learn about the system," he said. "Many of our people come from environments where they've been oppressed and exploited. They don't trust institutions; they don't trust government. That needs to be addressed."

**If society and the educational systems understood that Latino students' countries of origin increasingly play a pivotal role in Minnesota's globalized economy, the students might no longer be burdened by low expectations, but empowered to be bridgers of culture, language and economies.** Garcia said the students, along with older immigrants, would be able to provide a

new perspective that contributes to Minnesota's enhanced innovation and synergism. They would enhance our response to the challenges that have developed along the 2000-mile land border between emerging economies and the world's largest market.

**The private sector has become a bit disengaged from education.** "That shouldn't be the case," Garcia said, "because they're the ones who are going to be needing the workforce of the future."

**Minnesota's growing Mexican and other Latino communities represent a significant potential asset to the state's economy.** Garcia said that in 2000, he proposed an office that would harness the energy of immigration and channel it into the state's economy, but the idea was not implemented fully.

**Austin, Minn., has created a Welcome Center for immigrants.** The center was funded by Hormel Foods. "We need something that makes immigrants feel welcome," Garcia said. "And they should be welcomed, because they're bringing what we need: youth and ambition."

**The way to reduce the predicted workforce shortage in Minnesota is to make a paradigm shift in how society views immigrants.** An interviewer asked how the rapid growth in the influx of Latino immigrants might affect the projected decline of 100,000 people in the 25-to-64 age group in Minnesota between 2017 and 2030.

"If we start with the numbers, we won't get to the solution," Garcia responded. "We must start with the paradigm shift, because it's the root of the problem. As long as we keep looking at the immigrants the way we do now, the workforce shortage is going to grow, regardless of what we do."

**Some international corporations in Minnesota *have* made a paradigm shift in how they view immigrants.** Garcia noted that 20 years ago, he was doing consulting on his theory of Cultural Complementarity, which he described as a process of awareness that leads people from the traditional mindset of fear of cultural differences to one that perceives enrichment and synergism through those same differences. He would talk to CEOs about paradigm shifting and how they could create synergies through their minority immigrant employees. "They said, 'We have a yearly celebration of our differences and are filling our quotas in hiring. We're doing our job.'" Garcia responded that they wouldn't create synergies that way.

He asserted that rather than representing costs and threats, diversity and uncertainty can become assets through Cultural Complementarity. "Governments and corporations," he said, "can generate creativity, open new markets, develop new products and services, and greatly energize their workforces. Governments can realize new economic development opportunities, enhance civic engagement, and revitalize social capital; corporations can increase teamwork and innovation."

"Today," he said, "companies like 3M and Ecolab are doing it. They have people from other countries leading large numbers of employees throughout the world. The companies recognize that there's a treasure in knowing that foreign language and in being familiar with other cultures in a global economy. Immigrants can open markets, grow markets. It needs to be planned, intentional and well designed. It can't be deferring to political correctness. That's not going to accomplish much."

**Understanding cultural differences will be an important element of any new approach.**

Strong family structures and friendships are virtues of Latino culture. Latinos have a great deal of trust in friends and family, Garcia said. That trust is not directed to government, though, because government in their countries of origin has not been very responsive in addressing the needs of the people. "Cultivating that attitude of strong family structures and friendships is what's needed in this country," he said. "But you need to be interested and you need to know that it's possible."

He mentioned that the concept of time is one of the flaws of Mexican culture. "We must tell new immigrants that they must change their concept of time," he said. "It's not going to happen magically."

Understanding Latino culture could be tied to real economic benefits as well. Mexico alone buys twice as many products and services from the U.S. as China. "Nobody knows that," Garcia said. Mexico is the second largest purchaser of U.S. goods and services behind Canada, he said. "These are our best clients. We should want to get to know them better." Since the 1990s, he's been promoting the creation of a Latin America Center in Minnesota.

**In November 2012, U.S. Department of Education reports ranked Minnesota last among all states in Latino four-year high school graduation rates, as well as in the gap between Latino and majority graduation rates.** "That's what's going to lead people to do something," Garcia said. He commented on a number of positive attempts to deal with those and other disparities: the Minnesota Interagency Council on Homelessness has brought together various agencies of state government to try to address the problem; the state Department of Health issued an equity report, which has brought together multiple agencies to work toward a solution for health problems; Greater MSP, which promotes job creation, provides regional marketing and assists in business recruitment and expansion in the Twin Cities, offers "a very constructive and healthy direction to move in"; Rochester is "an inspiring example of how we should be looking towards the future and not lamenting how bad the situation is today."

"But If we don't give up the notions of 'winning is everything' and 'looking out for number one,' nothing will go very far," Garcia asserted.

**In Northfield, the whole community has decided to do something constructive towards harnessing the force of immigrants.** Garcia explained that the city's TORCH program took the graduation rate of Latinos from 37 percent to 100 percent in seven years. "Programs like this must be brought up to scale," he said.

**Society must both provide access to social services for immigrants *and* harness immigrants' positive force and resources, not either/or.** "The driving concept should be engaging immigrants," Garcia said. "They may need social services at some time, but they shouldn't exclusively be funneled toward those services. We must also harness their creative and constructive resources."

An interviewer commented that we can't ignore thousands of immigrants coming into Minnesota when we're assessing the state's human capital situation. He asked how to get established organizations working with immigrants to harness the newcomers' positive resources and get them into the economy and how to get the agencies to resist their first instinct to direct immigrants into the social services system.

"There must be joint conversations between social service organizations and business," Garcia said. He noted that some social service organizations "think we're adversaries. They think we'll take grants away from them. It's a highly competitive system we have created."

**The potential is huge for a transition in society's view of immigrants to bring about an American renaissance.** An interviewer asked how we can encourage the transition from immigrant status to successful integration into society. He suggested as one possibility the **Cristo Rey High School model**, where students' working at responsible jobs one day a week is integrated into the curriculum. "I think Cristo Rey has the right perception of what Latinos can accomplish," Garcia responded. "But, if there's no replication of the model, it's not going to go anywhere. We need a renaissance of true American values."

**Going from owning small businesses to owning larger ones is a big challenge, because the people in the secondary migration that came to Minnesota don't have the management capacity and the capital to reach that level.** This disparity must also be addressed.

**Immigration reform is urgent and we can do something about it at the state level.** Garcia said he will be convening a group of state and national leaders to discuss a program Iowa's governor put in place in 2000. The program was ultimately quashed, because there was too much opposition to foreign workers. The program called for an immigrant enterprise zone and providing state legal status to immigrants here, so they don't have to live in the shadows. He said it would not be citizenship, but it would include, for example, the ability of people who are here to get a driver's license. "Having hundreds of thousands of people living in the shadows is a huge threat to society," he said.

**There must be interdisciplinary, inter-sector dialogue, so people understand why the system is not working.** For example, Garcia said, despite having laws on the books for 30 years, offering funding and programs to help disadvantaged construction businesses owned by minorities and women, not one Latino company, that he knows of, has benefited from those laws and programs. "We need an intentional effort so what we're intending to have happen does indeed happen," Garcia emphasized.