



21st Century Competitiveness in Latin America: The Role of Education?

**Given by Mark B. Rosenberg
on November 17, 2009**

This speech was presented to attendees of the Miami Consortium for Latin American and Caribbean Studies lecture “21st Century Competitiveness in Latin America: The Role of Education?” on November 17, 2009.

For the last four years, I have been deeply engaged in a search for answers to many questions that are critical to Florida’s well-being:

- How to get stable and predictable education funding?
- How to improve learning and the measurement of learning and what works?
- How to enhance access to learning while maintaining quality?
- How to put learning to the task of 21st century quality of life issues?
- How to assure lawmakers that universities are valuable assets that should be understood as investments rather than as commodities?

I also played a difficult game with lawmakers over control of our universities. Since they are public, you might expect such. But in Florida, we raise this struggle for control to a high art—even when the constitution of the state is clear about this.

Much of what I am engaged in reminds me of the theme of my research in some Latin American countries: the struggle over position and place being far more intense and deadly than the struggle over purpose.

What is my point?

My co-author and I worked on our book for nearly seven years. We had hours and hours of heated arguments. We have an entire book focused on the region, much of it about Central America’s options and its future, and we have two paragraphs focused on education and the gaps. Two paragraphs!

I spent a few months at Vanderbilt, where there is a great emphasis on Latin American public opinion. Yet I am not sure if I review the data that I can find anything that will help me to understand the educational challenges that the region has. Without a higher education standard, living conditions will not improve, no matter the commitment to democracy or the rule of law.

I submit—we need to spend equal or more time studying education in the region. We need greater information on education structure, purpose and resources as much as we have debated dependency, globalization, US-Latin American affairs, migration, democracy.

We should focus on trends, case studies, and what works and does not work! We should force policy-makers to hear the cold, hard facts – repeatedly – until they have a sense of urgency about the millions in the region who are marginalized and excluded – about the millions who will need meaningful jobs in the knowledge economy of the 21st century.

One example: The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a system of international assessments that focus on 15-year-olds' capabilities in reading literacy, mathematics literacy, and science literacy.

Let's compare Chile to Finland on reading: In 2003, 23% of Chilean 15-year-olds were at Level 3 or higher. In Finland, it was 80%. For every Chilean in Level 5 reading, there were 15 Fins. For every 20 Chileans at the bottom of the reading level, there was only one Fin! Illiteracy continues to plague the region.

A recent article from the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (October 2007) points out the following: "In the most recent PISA exam, around half of 15-year-olds in the participating countries (Mexico, Brazil and Uruguay) had trouble applying basic reading and math skills to real-world situations." Even the best Latin American students tested at or below the OECD average, and well below the OECD top performers."

As the bar goes up with globalization, we will need to provide new definitions of functional literacy. So even those countries in the region and elsewhere who thought they had transcended basic standards of functional literacy will find themselves not able to keep up.

We ought to consider a major initiative on education; it ought to be multi-year, multi-generational and policy-oriented. We can do a great deal of good with a serious and sustained focus on education in the Americas, bringing our unique global perspectives and issue orientation methodologies to the table. These issues will not go away.

Without sustained attention to education, however, our sons and daughters will be having nearly exactly our same conversation in less than a generation. These have been great conversations, but we have a responsibility to change things for the better. Focusing our talents on education, I believe, is one way to do this!