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Dropout, leadership and the future of Latino youth

Lattie Coor doesn't see\the
Center for the Future of Arizona
as a "think tank." He calls it a
"do tank." The ex president of
Arizona State University and
now chairman/CEO of the
Center understands that what

we label something determines
how we look and act on it.

Take the phrase "Latino
dropout," for example. The
perennial reality of high
numbers of Latinos leaving
school before they graduate
generally evokes fear, anger
and helplessness in educators,
parents, and the business
community. Arizona lawmakers
seem to be paralyzed by the
phrase, for years shunning a
lead role in a situation that
affects the state at all levels.

Coor, and the Center's
executive director Dr. Sybil
Francis, are tackling an bid
problem withfa new approach,
The Center was formed this

year to address some of
Arizona's most serious social
and economic dilemmas. After

a period of study, they selected
the dropout situation as the first
they would confront head-on.
They and their staff have
formulated a blueprint and a
timeline to reduce dropout,
particularly among Latino
students. Historically, Latino
students have the highest rates
of dropout among all students.

As part of the plan Coor and
his Center associates have
formed a coalition that includes
some of the brightest Latino
minds in education, including
Dr. Eugene Garcia of ASU.
They have teamed Mary Jo
Waits, a researcher at ASU's
Morrison Institute for Public

Policy, who in 2001 woke up
the mainsteam and Latino

community to the dire present
and future costs of dropout with
her trailblazing policy study,
"Five Shoes Waiting to Drop."
For the next year she will work
on improving Latino graduation
rates as a fellow at the Center.
They have forged links with the
movers and shakers in the
business community. They have
the ear of Gov. Janet
Napolitano. Yet they admit that
the hardest sell has been to the

state legislators, our state's
main policy makers. But they
are working on the seemingly
comatose legislative body, and
that's encouraging news,
because it will take a united,
strong effort to redesign a
school system that so far has
failed Latino students.
The bold folks at the Center

for the Future of Arizona begin
with offering new definitions.
They are calling the elimination
of dropout "a huge
opportunity" to dramatically
improve our state's economic
base. They see an educated,
vibrant Latino workforce as a
potent factor in raising income
and lifestyle levels of all of us,
not as a threat. They see
diversity in all sectors in our
state as a strength, not a
weakness.
Coor's Center for the Future

of Arizona could be seen by
some as another "think'tank"
research center. A "White
Tower of Research" that will
compile stacks of public policy
reports that will sit gathering
dust after they are released.
Many in our Latino community
may be skeptical, and they
would have the right to be after
so many years of frustration and
disappointment.
I prefer to label Coor and
his aptly named Center for the
Future of Arizona a "feel tank."

When I asked him his.personal
motivation for getting involved
in such a complex dilemma, he
replied, "I grew up in Avondale
(a farmworker community in its
early days.). I watched what an
education did for youngsters
who came to school without
shoes. It's even more important
today. If we don't improve the
numbers of young people
graduating, we are failing them

and our state."
I call Coor a true leader. A
true leader builds consensus.

That's what Coor is doing. He's
teaming up with other leaders
like Bruce and Diane Halle,
owners of Discount Tire Co.
This couple donated $1.5
million to the Center attack the
dropout problem. Why? "We
have a chance to move an entire
generation forward. Why would
we not take that opportunity
and do that?" Diane Halle told
The Arizona Republic.
I also call Coor and his
partners "amigos de la
comunidad Latino." Teaming
up with non-Hispanic
community leaders who truly
care about Latino kids is key to
confronting the tremendous
education and economic

challenge of low graduation
rates. Arizona Hispanic is
committed to being a part of
this historic effort to eradicate
high dropout. We consider the
topic high on our agenda as
news. We will present these
stories in the in-depth fashion
such an important and complex
issue deserves. And we say "mil
gracias" to visionaries like
Lattie Coor.

Ruben Hernandez is Executive

Editor of Arizona Hispanic.