In an article titled “The Odds vs. The Realities of the American Dream” (Nov. 15, 2013) author Jody Brannon asserts that “despite facing the greatest barriers to reaching the middle class, Hispanics are the most fervent believers in the American Dream”. Brannon cites information gathered through a poll conduced by the College Board and National Journal as the support for this assertion; however, repeated attempts to locate the actual data collected failed, and a review of the article failed to reveal specific proof of Brannon’s assertion. Instead, it appears as though the author has strung together a series of responses from the poll as proof of an overarching theme. Additionally, information about the Next America Poll itself reveals potentially problematic issues regarding data collection and sampling that cause the strength of the assertions made in the article to be diminished.

Firstly, Brannon chooses to provide a large amount of data throughout her article, with little synthesis of the information presented. She begins by discussing the challenges Hispanics face regarding completing secondary and post secondary schooling, but then goes on to assert that “ as a group, [Hispanics] are noticeably more optimistic about the effect of a four-year-degree on their livelihoods than Asians (61 percent), blacks (55 percent), and whites (47 percent)” (The National Journal, 2013). This pattern is repeated when Brannon states that “More than 70 percent of Hispanics and 60 percent of nonwhites believe that a college degree will have a positive impact on their careers, compared with 44 percent of whites with a diploma and 49 percent of those without.” (The National Journal, 2013) and then focuses, once again, on the challenges facing Hispanics as they attempt to take part in education. In constructing her argument Brannon places information from 2012 Census figures, an Urban Institute Research project, College Board figures, 2011 Census figures and then finally, once again, The Next America Survey side by side as an attempt to suggest that despite challenges to their receiving an education, Hispanics remain optimistic; however, the lack of tangible connection is problematic.

Despite the preponderance of data included, Brannon also does not clearly explore or explain the connection between post-secondary education and ‘The American Dream’. Her inclusion of the statics that more Hispanics believe children of all backgrounds have an adequate opportunity to succeed (The National Journal, 2013) does seem more clearly connected to the spirit of ‘The American Dream” but besides this quote, little of what Brannon includes directly speaks to either the odds or the realities of ‘The American Dream’. Brannon rather seems to rely heavily on a quote from just one respondent, Felipe Sepulveda, to make her point for her. He is quoted at the end of her article as saying "I think it's important for first-generation students to set a college-bound trend of succeeding so that the second generation and so on can follow this trend. In that sense, I feel like we can play a vital role in the Next America, as opposed to occupying low-paying jobs. I feel that being educated, there is a lot we can contribute to this great country." (The National Journal, 2013) but otherwise Brannon relies on group data, and a lot of it, to convince her reader of the central idea of her article.

In the article data collection is summarized in a statement that says the poll “surveyed 1,272 adults ages 18 and older from Oct. 14-24, in English and Spanish, through landlines and cell phones.” (The National Journal, 2013). Information about sampling reveals that “oversamples of 245 African-Americans, 229 Hispanics, and 107 Asian-Americans” (The National Journal, 2013) were included and that “the poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.9 percentage points for the overall sample, with larger error margins for the subgroups.” (The National Journal, 2013).

Attempts to find the actual College Board/National Journal Next America Poll results came up empty. However, it was revealed that the poll was carried out by a company called Princeton Survey Research Associates International and their website explains that they “[employ] methodologically sound procedures, [and produce] reliable, valid results using a variety of research technologies” (Princeton Survey Research Associates International, 2013). They also assert that they “have created innovative sampling designs to facilitate surveys of hard-to-reach populations” (Princeton Survey Research Associates International, 2013) and that they “conduct more than 100,000 telephone interviews per year for [their] clients” (Princeton Survey Research Associates International, 2013). The Princeton Survey Research Associates International also explained that much of their polling is done by sub companies such as the Princeton Data Source and somewhat more information about their use of telephone polling as data collection was available. They explain that “for general public surveys using RDD samples. The Quancept dialer provides an efficient means of weeding through the many disconnected and non-working numbers to find the respondents.” (Princeton Data Source, 2013).

When attempting to analyze the methodology of the College Board/National Journal Next America Poll the most pressing concern is the validity of telephone interviews as a form of data collection. Despite the assertions made by the data collection company, telephone interviews seem fraught with issues. Firstly the randomness of the sample seems to be at risk when relying upon a technology that not all individuals possess. Additionally, it seems likely that a certain subset of the population would be more willing to engage in telephone interviews than others, which could skew the data. Finally, the restriction of the poll to only English and Spanish excludes a large section of the population and may, once again, skew the data collected.

An additional methodological concern regarding this poll relates to sampling. The decision to report specific figures about the number of participants indicates a degree of transparency with regards to the data collected. However, the article goes on to explain that oversampling was used in the Next America Poll, and this is where the data becomes less specific. The use of oversampling is explained by The Pew Research Center as a method of “ensuring that there are enough members of a certain subgroup in the population so that more reliable estimates can be reported for that group.” (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2013). They explain that increasing the sample size through oversampling “allows for estimates to be made with a smaller margin of error” (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2013). The decision of the College Board/National Journal Next America Poll to oversample African American, Hispanic and Asian American populations seems to be in the interest of reducing sampling error but despite reporting that “the poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.9 percentage points for the overall sample, with larger error margins for the subgroups.” (The National Journal, 2013), they neglect to report what this margin of error actually is. The absence of this information makes it impossible to determine whether the data collected from subgroups in the poll is reliable.

While both the College Board/National Journal Next America Poll and Jody Brannon’s article “The Odds vs. The Realities of the American Dream” (Nov. 15, 2013) may present relevant and reliable data, the lack of information available regarding the poll, questions regarding data collection and sampling, and issues with the relationship between assertions made and evidence to support them are problematic. Taken together, these issues undermine the credibility of Brannon’s article and the research conducted, and raise more questions than they answer in the reader’s mind.

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