People work on their laptops while attending a lecture. **Photo by Martin Adolfsson/Gallery Stock**

Why there aren't more Latinos in the tech industry

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By Maria Teresa Kumar

Last week, Apple was the latest in a string of Silicon Valley titans to release data that continues to prove how white, male, and Asian the tech industry really is. It's not exactly a shock. Before Google released its own data in May — leading other companies to follow suit — there was already a growing belief that the tech industry needed to diversify. This need has never been more imperative.

Of course, this issue extends beyond Apple and Google. Currently only 6% of all U.S. tech workers are African-American and 7% are Latino. This is contrast to the 16% of tech workers who are Asian Americans and 71% who are white.

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At my organization, the national nonprofit Voto Latino, we have leveraged technology to engage and empower Latino Millennials to find solutions to the most pressing issues facing Latino communities. Voto Latino's experience tells us that the dismal number of Latinos in high-paying science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) careers exists not because of a lack of interest, but a lack of access to tech tools, training, and mentors — and that lack of access starts long before this demographic gets to college.

Although Latino high school graduates entered college in 2012 at a higher rate than their white counterparts, Latinos made up less than 9% of computer science and engineering college graduates in 2013. Nationally, Latinos are also less likely to take Advanced Placement (AP) math, science, and computer science exams than their white and Asian peers. And in California, the hub for American tech companies and the state with the largest Latino population, Latino students represented less than 1.3% of computer science AP test takers in 2013. Latinos are simply not enrolled in the classes that set them up for careers in STEM, which puts them at a disadvantage in today's competitive job market.

To understand why this is the case, we have to look back. In the 1990s and 2000s, when American households increasingly gained access to home computers and the internet, Latinos lagged far behind largely because both were luxuries their families could not afford. While Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg and Napster's Sean Parker were learning to code in middle school, too many Latinos their age did not even have access to a home computer.

Access and exposure to tech tools at an early age is a major factor in driving creativity and sparking interest in STEM. Along with that, it's important for Latino kids to see others who look like them succeeding in these fields. When our kids are not exposed to these opportunities, they are less likely to pursue careers in the competitive — and highly lucrative — tech world.

Although the effects of this gap are most visible today with the release of employee demographic data, studies show Latinos are some of the fastest adopters of new technologies. Latinos over-index on the use of smart phones and social media, and they're more likely than their peers to own the latest smartphone or tech gadget. Latinos' increasing interest in tech and lagging numbers in the tech workforce were two of the reasons the South by Southwest Interactive conference in Austin, Texas, this year featured a three-day program about Latinos in tech.

The lack of resources to pursue tech fields is one of the reasons Voto Latino, in partnership with the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, HASTAC and Google, launched the VL Innovators Challenge. It is a tech competition that will regrant $500,000 to 10 to 15 Millennial-led tech projects. Each idea must propose an innovative tech solution to a problem in the Latino community.

Applications will be accepted through October 15, the last day of Hispanic Heritage Month. The VL Innovators Challenge does not require previous technological experience or a college degree. Winners of the VL Innovators Challenge will receive access to mentors, training, and other resources to develop their tech project and learn new skills along the way. What we value most are the ideas we know this group has.

The long-term goal is to contribute to a pipeline of young, Latino innovators who can help tech companies reimagine what it means to "think different." Doing so will not only benefit the tech industry and the Latino community, but the nation as a whole. That is because today, the average Latino worker makes $34,000 annually, about $40,000 less than the average U.S. tech worker. With the Census projecting that minorities currently make up at least half of all children younger than 5, in the coming decades, America's workforce will be made up of the very people who need the training, mentorship, and resources to pursue high-paying careers in tech. Their future success in STEM will fuel American innovation and sustain an economy that will benefit us all.

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