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# Hispanic Financial Planning Majors in High Demand

by Marilyn Gilroy

**H**ispanic students majoring in financial planning are in demand at banks, brokerage firms, real estate groups, insurance companies and just about any organization that needs individuals who are experts in managing and investing money.

The reason is simple. The financial planning industry has a low rate of minority representation in its professional ranks and client base and recognizes that diversity is a key to its growth. A study by the Certified Financial Planner (CFP) Board of Standards showed that only about 5 percent of CFPs are minorities. The Financial Planning Association (FPA), through its annual Diversity Summit, has called for the industry to better reflect the general population.

The most encouraging results on this front are coming at the university level, at which successful financial planning programs are recruiting and



graduating more Hispanics. Firms are responding by hiring these students, bringing a slow but steady change to the profession.

“A large number of employers seek to hire our Hispanic financial planning majors, and they really value those who have bilingual abilities,” said Lukas Dean, assistant professor and director for the financial planning program in the Cotsakos College of Business at William Paterson University (WPU) in Wayne, N.J.

As Dean tells his students, it’s a good time to enter the field. His blog carries links to several articles predicting a positive outlook for careers in financial planning. *U.S. News & World Report* named financial advising one of the best jobs of 2012 and said the profession should see significant growth, 32.1 percent, over the next decade.

## Learning to Create Financial Road Maps

What do financial planners do? Essentially, says *U.S. News*, “they tell other people what to do with their money,” through research and the development of sound financial plans. It can be a very rewarding career

because it involves helping individuals and families achieve their goals.

That’s exactly why the job attracted Andrea Vintimilla, a 2010 graduate of the WPU program who works as a financial planning associate at Quadrant Capital Management in Montclair, N.J.

“I am able to help people make some of the most important decisions of their lives, from establishing themselves financially to planning how they will fund their children’s education to how they will live their lives in retirement” she said. “I get to learn about their current life and financial goals, and help them achieve those goals.”

Vintimilla, 24, is a first-generation American in a family that emigrated from Ecuador. She always wanted to be a businesswoman, but never could envision herself sitting behind a desk all day just crunching numbers.

“I do like to crunch numbers and use my analytical skills, but most importantly – I wanted to help individuals,” she said.

Students such as Vintimilla have chosen a career that can be both personally and financially rewarding. According to an article on Monster.com, one of the largest employment websites in the world, the median salary for a certified financial planner with five to seven years experience is \$89,000.

But it is not an easy ride because completing the degree requirements is very challenging. The curriculum includes courses in finance, macro and micro economics, statistics, tax analysis, and estate and retirement planning, along with other classes in business and management. At WPU, students get the advantage of real-time experience in the Global Financial Services Learning Center, which has one of the largest trading rooms on the East Coast. As a sophisticated technology-equipped learning facility, the center provides hands-on training with software, databases, and data feeds that form the backbone of trading floor information analysis. Students get an opportunity to turn theoretical knowledge into practical experience through an internship component in the curriculum. As Dean says: “We want our students to be ‘shovel-ready’ when they hit the workforce.”

Although only three years old, the WPU financial planning program has made its mark in the industry and was recently rated among the top 10 programs in the United States by *Financial Planning Magazine*. Other schools on the list include Texas Tech University, Virginia Tech, Georgia Tech, Kansas State University and Boston University.

The program has managed to raise its profile based in part on the performance of WPU students, under Dean’s guidance, at national financial planning competitions. WPU student teams have won or placed in the Financial Planning Association’s National Financial Planning Challenge in 2010 and 2011.

The challenge consists of three phases: 1) creating a financial plan for a sample client; 2) the Knowledge Bowl; and 3) after a “life-changing event” occurs in the life of the sample client, the team is given 36 hours to adjust the plan, and then present it to the judges in front of professionals and professors at the conference.

In addition to their impressive performance in the annual challenge, a team of WPU students placed third in the 2012 Financial Services National

Industry Issues Competition for their work on using social media in the financial planning industry

These co-curricular activities add strength and depth to the WPU program, which recently became the site for the first officially registered student chapter of the Financial Planning Association. At association meetings, students get a chance to network with professionals and hear presentations from financial planners representing firms such as Baron Financial Group, Ameriprise Financial and Wells Fargo.

Cindy Mota, a 2012 WPU graduate, believes the financial planning program does an excellent job of preparing its students. She was recently hired as a High Net Worth (\$1 million) Client Service Specialist for Vanguard, the largest mutual fund company in the U.S.

Mota said her college courses were very demanding, but she also spoke enthusiastically about the many opportunities to meet with professionals in the field through workshops and conferences she attended as an undergraduate.

For Mota, the road to becoming a financial planner has entailed a lot of hard work, sacrifice and dedication. Born in the Dominican Republic, she remembers having to find her own way to her educational goals.

"I didn't have anyone in my family who went to college and could give me academic or professional guidance," she said. "I was clearly overwhelmed by the many options and opportunities that presented themselves. As I looked into the subject of finance, I became more interested in the field."

To help meet tuition bills, Mota worked full time (35 hours per week) at a local Bank of America office, while taking five or six courses per semester.

But the investment of time and money has paid off. She is clearly excited about her new job and the role she will play in working with clients.

"It is very rewarding when I am able to teach people and inspire them to reach their ultimate financial objectives," said Mota.

Dean is understandably proud of students such as Mota. He says the first-generation students are amazing, and he knows their accomplishments are highly valued by their families.

"I have noticed that with our first-generation college students who graduate and get a job with a big national name company, like Fidelity or TD Ameritrade – their parents are so proud," said Dean. "They worked hard to get their families to the U.S. in hopes of a better life for their children and grandchildren, and they are so proud when they see a Fidelity commercial on TV or drive by a Fidelity branch and say, 'My son/daughter works there!'"

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### Diversifying Pays Dividends

Financial planners such as Vintimilla and Mota are changing the face of the industry. They are following in the steps of Louis Barajas, founder of Louis Barajas Wealth Planning in Los Angeles and the first Latino in the United States to receive the Certified Financial Planner designation. He has spent much of his career helping underserved communities benefit from financial advice and planning. Barajas, the first CFP professional from an ethnic minority to serve on the Financial Planning Association's national board, thinks it is essential to make minorities feel comfortable in the profession.



In an interview about the FPA's diversity initiative, Barajas discussed the importance of role models by citing the example of a Peruvian woman attending her first national conference who burst into tears when she finally tracked down Barajas and his colleagues.

"She was one of the few Hispanics there. She felt so excluded," he said. "We need a mechanism to bring in more diversity. We need to go out of our way to make people feel comfortable."

Diversity is just as important in helping the bottom line. Several experts, including consultant Francisco Valle, author of *How to Win the Hispanic Gold Rush*, say financial services firms, banks and insurance companies need to give more attention to offering customer service that includes knowledge and understanding of Hispanic culture. If businesses want to attract this market, which will drive the economy in the years to come, they need bilingual personnel and sensitivity to what Hispanics want from a financial advisor. For example, Valle says Hispanics might not be responsive to promotional literature that encourages saving for travel and other retirement dreams but would be more receptive to investing to take care of their family and help relatives in other countries. With Hispanics now the fastest-growing segment of the middle class, Valle says it will be important for financial planners who are familiar with these differences to add their expertise to the market mix.

Vintimilla says she is happy to enter the field at a time when she can make a unique contribution.

"I find that going into a field that is not very diverse is actually extremely empowering. It gives me a chance to make a difference, to not be the same as everyone else," she said. "I think being part of a minority separates me from the rest in a positive way, and I strongly believe that being bilingual is a powerful asset."

The ability to communicate with clients and gain their trust is one of the most important aspects to being a financial planner. Vintimilla says it isn't just a matter of knowing the process and tools available, but also when to listen to people.

"Every client, every case, is completely different," she said. "You have to be willing to listen to people, and be willing to help them achieve their life and financial goals."

Both Vintimilla and Mota speak of loving their work but acknowledge that it demands a commitment to continuing education due to the constant legal and regulatory changes in this field. Those who want to be successful must stay motivated and have the self-discipline to use their time and energy to stay on top of their game. It's all about maintaining a competitive edge.

"It is important to keep up with finance related news, whether it is listening to Bloomberg radio in the car or keeping up with current events through the various websites and phone applications," said Mota. "It's also very important to be self-driven and never set limits for yourself."

