

April 2026

## **Un Plan Educativo: Strengthening HSIs to Advance Latino Scholars**

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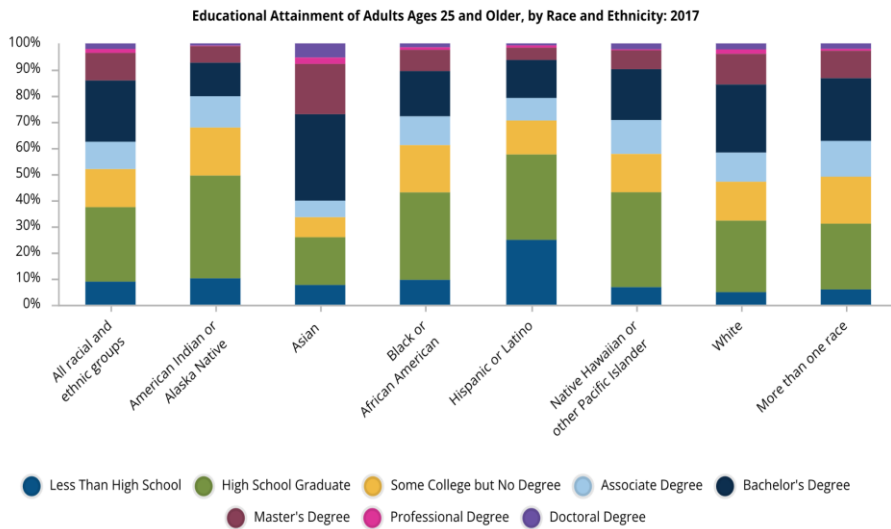
### **Executive Summary:**

Although Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) were established to improve Latino student success, their designation is based solely on enrollment thresholds rather than an explicit mission to serve Latino populations, placing them at a structural disadvantage relative to mission-driven Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs). Effective policy reform requires both a deeper understanding of the diversity within HSIs, and a shift from enrollment-based designation to mission-driven commitments. Strengthening HSIs will require intentional, culturally grounded practices that foster belonging, support ethnic identity, integrate culturally relevant curricula, and empower institutional agents who champion Latino student success. By analyzing institutional demographics and recognizing institutional diversity, policymakers and educators should use these resources to write and advocate for policies that change HSIs mission from merely meeting a quota to actually serving the community they benefit from.

### **Background:**

Following federal policy changes in 2025 that eliminated \$350 million in grants to MSIs, nonprofit higher education institutions have been left to serve disadvantaged communities with an extremely limited budget. Of all the MSIs, over 70% of institutions are HSIs. The Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) reported that in 2024 there were a total of 615 HSIs nationally. In 2023-24, HSIs enrolled 67.3% of all Hispanic undergraduates and 33% of all undergraduate students in nonprofit postsecondary education.<sup>1</sup> In other words, HSIs are responsible for educating about 67% of all Latino students in higher education. They also educate a third of all undergraduate students in nonprofit higher education. The elimination of HSI grants puts various groups, predominately Latinos, at a disadvantage.

HACU argues that MSI grants strengthened entire campuses, creating opportunities and resources that benefit all students, especially those pursuing STEM fields, as well as enhancing the communities where these colleges and universities are located.<sup>2</sup> The American Council on Education used Census data from 2017 to determine that only 14.5% of Latinos 25 years old and older have a bachelor's degree (Figure 1). Latinos have the lowest rates of educational attainment compared to any other ethnic group in the country.<sup>3</sup>



HSIs were created to help Latinos break glass ceilings. The rescission of these educational grants disproportionately affects Latino and other minority communities. By analyzing and assessing data already collected, policymakers and educators can prepare to once again serve Latinos and other minorities seeking higher education.

HSIs were established in 1992 with the purpose to enhance opportunities and improve

the academic achievement of Latino students. The DHSI Program provides grants to assist HSIs with expanding educational opportunities for, and improving the academic attainment of, Hispanic students. The grant enables HSIs to expand and enhance the academic offerings, program quality, faculty quality, and institutional stability of colleges and universities that are educating the largest enrollment of Hispanic college students and help large numbers of Hispanic students and other low-income individuals complete postsecondary degrees.<sup>4</sup> Any nonprofit college or university can be designated as an HSI if its full-time undergraduate student body is 25% Latinx, and at least half of its students are from households that earn less than 150 percent of the federal poverty level.<sup>5</sup> Since HSIs also serve other minorities, HSIs also decreased inequities for racially and economically minoritized groups.<sup>6</sup>

## Problem Analysis:

There is a lack of intentionality and purpose when it comes to designating an institution with an HSI status. Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) do not have to meet a certain enrollment percentage to receive federal grants like HSIs do. For instance, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs) were erected with the mission to serve their target communities. This leaves HSIs at a disadvantage compared to other MSIs. HSIs receive funding eligibility based on Latino enrollment, yet many lack explicit mission commitments to serving Latino students. Having an enrollment percentage with no mission statement that aligns the institution to serving the Latino community has taken a toll on the kind of education Latino students have been receiving.

In order to receive funding, HSIs should have it in their mission that their purpose is to serve and advance their Latino population through curriculum and programming that reflects the composition of the Latino student body. Before writing policy about HSIs, policymakers must understand two different concepts in relation to these institutions. The first being that the institutional diversity of HSIs varies significantly.

By analyzing factors like systematic, environmental, programmatic, constituent, and resource diversity, researchers identified that in the United States, there were six different kinds of HSIs. This includes Urban Enclave Community Colleges, Rural Dispersed Community Colleges, Big Systems Four-Years, Small Communities Four-Years, Puerto Rican Institutions, and Health Sciences Schools.<sup>7</sup> Grants should be direct in their mission statement, but moldable to the unique needs of each community. With six different kinds of HSIs, it must be

recognized at the federal level that the needs for CUNY, a Big System Four-Year, are very different from the needs of American University of Puerto Rico, a Puerto Rican Institution. This is why grants should have the purpose to serve Latinos in their mission, while allowing flexibility based on the institution type so the grant can still help the institution serve Latinos to its fullest extent.

Secondly, there needs to be a reframing from enrollment quotas to a commitment to serve Latinos. HSIs must not only assume the title, but work toward developing their Latino community. As other MSIs have done, HSIs must adopt a mission that is Latino-driven, not only leading to academic growth, but cultural growth as well. Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), as they teach cultures and languages of Indian nations, preserve and revitalize Native culture, and respond to and empower Native communities. Decolonized HSIs should do the same, centering the experiences of Latinos within the curriculum, with the goal of fulfilling the purpose of promoting racial and cultural understanding.<sup>8</sup> A culture-based HSI identity is one in which the organization's social order, norms, and values serve four different components for their Latino students. The institution should give Latino students a sense of belonging in the campus community. It should develop and reinforce a positive and self-affirming ethnic identity among Latino students. Lastly, it should connect Latino students with administrators, faculty and staff who will serve both as positive role models and as their advocates in the institution.<sup>9</sup> Until change occurs on the federal level, it should begin on an institutional level.

At the City University of New York's John Jay College of Criminal Justice, there has been a movement led by Latino professors, Latino students, and their allies for the institution to fully embrace the identity of a Hispanic Serving Institution. In 2017, professors of the Latinx Studies Department issued a nineteen page position paper proposing ways the institution could truly serve their Latino student population. None of their recommendations were implemented even though the Latino student population slowly rose from 41.3% in 2017 to 44% in 2025,<sup>10</sup> even though the school faced a major decline in enrollment due to the pandemic.

In 2023, after having minimal to no representation on campus due to the pandemic, Latino students organized and revived two different Latino clubs including The Latin American Student Organization and La Voz. Both groups struggled to find a faculty advisor for their clubs. There was a scarcity of Latino full time faculty to oversee the organizations. This was an issue that professors had recognized back in 2017 when they advocated for the hiring and retention of Latino Faculty.

In November of 2024, the primary governing body of John Jay, College Council, met to revise courses, be updated with any institutional-wide changes, and hear from student government to get a pulse on the student body. It is composed of 50 different members, 28 academic departments, ranging from administration, full-time faculty, and student leaders. Elected members of Student Council presented their state of affairs, with an emphasis on the changes students were requesting. One of those changes was the support of Latino students on campus. The student shared the struggles of receiving funding as a Latino organizer on campus, finding Latino full-time faculty, and finding bilingual Latino full-time faculty to oversee their graduating research project. While the student found a faculty mentor for the project, the institutional change never happened. I was that student.

In contrast, The University of California, Los Angeles has a Latino student population of 24.5%, yet they have taken significant steps to work towards an HSI designation and uplift their Latino community. UCLA developed a Hispanic-Serving Institution Task Force that has worked to produce an evidence-based report with key recommendations for how UCLA can reach and maintain HSI status, including directing efforts and resources toward improving admission, yield, and retention rates for Latinx students and making UCLA a more affordable option for Latinx individuals and those from low-income backgrounds. Their goal is to partner with units across campus to help achieve their goal of serving the community.<sup>11</sup> Colleges must become committed to serving the population if they truly want to contribute to the advancement of the Latino community. Latino students and faculty should not be put in the position where they have to repeatedly advocate for curriculum, representation, and program. It becomes a burden that takes away from their educational experience. The initiative can be sparked by students and faculty, but having students advocate for their needs repeatedly, even after faculty had

communicated the same failures not only takes away from their college experience, but forces students to either dedicate their time to continuous advocacy or withdraw from the institution they feel does not represent them. Neither option falls in line with being a “Hispanic-Serving Institution”.

### **Institutional Policy Recommendations:**

It must be recognized that while grants have been rescinded, there are steps institution administration could take to propel their students toward success. Institutional changes are the first step to maintaining Latino educational attainment while HSI grants have been rescinded.

1. **Establishing a culture-based identity:** Cultural competence is a set of values, behaviors, attitudes, and practices within a system, organization, program, or among individuals that enables people to work effectively across cultures.<sup>12</sup> There would be less of an emphasis on institutional cultural competency if institutions already were culturally driven by their student demographics. Institutions for instance should be aware of the racial and ethnic diversity of the Latinos they serve. Different types of Hispanic students have very distinctive identities and cultural competency is not enough.
2. **Institutional Representation:** Educational institutions should continue hiring and retaining Latino professors and staff. Not only is it crucial for students to have role models with similar backgrounds, but now more than ever Latino students need advice on navigating the current political climate of the country. Having faculty that understand and empathize with the struggle validates the emotions of the students, encouraging them to continue working toward their degree. It was found that the presence of Latino faculty had a direct impact on students’ feelings of possibility, motivation, and support whereas the absence of Latino faculty led to feelings of alienation, cultural dissonance, and sense of belonging deteriorating.<sup>13</sup>
3. **Student Organizations:** Student organizations on campus must always be encouraged and emphasized. As some clubs are deemed essential to campus life or have certain funds earmarked in the budget for their operations, Latino clubs at HSIs should also be afforded the same essential status for contributing to the development of Latino culture on campus. Funds should be put aside for clubs that are directly building the Latino identity of students on campus. And while clubs are student-led, the importance of having willing professors mentor student leaders becomes crucial in situations like these. The willingness of the student can only go so far if they do not have direction from an experienced faculty member that knows how to serve the community.
4. **Institutional Proactivity:** There needs to be a level of proactivity from institutional administration to understand and protect the Latino community. Students should not have to ask for action from the administration when it comes to advocating for the community. This level of proactivity should manifest in college-wide statements, Latino-centered programming, and even a board of advisors to help administration make thoughtful decisions in regards to their student body.

### **Conclusion**

The rescission of federal MSI grants highlights an urgent need for systemic reform in how Hispanic-Serving Institutions are defined and supported at both the state and federal level. Policymakers and institutional leaders must recognize that enrollment-based HSI designation is insufficient and disregards inequities in mission, resources, and student outcomes. To maintain and improve Latino educational attainment in the absence of federal funding, institutions must adopt intentional, mission-driven approaches that center cultural competence, strengthen the Latino-serving capacity of faculty and staff, and build resource structures that directly support Latino student success. Policy should ensure that HSIs are not only enrolling Latino students but meaningfully

serving them. Without these strategic investments and policy shifts, the progress made over decades to advance Latino higher education will continue to fall short.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup>Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU), “*Hispanic-Serving Institutions Across the Nation (Total: 615)*,” accessed December 22, 2025, <https://hacu.net/hispanic-serving-institutions-across-the-nation-total-615/>.

<sup>2</sup> David Mendez, “Cutting \$350M in Federal Grants to Hispanic-Serving Institutions Erases Decades of Progress and Hurts Millions of Students,” *Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities*, September 10, 2025, <https://hacu.net/cutting-350m-in-federal-grants-to-hispanic-serving-institutions-erases-decades-of-progress-and-hurts-millions-of-students-says-latinojustice/>.

<sup>3</sup> American Council on Education, “Educational Attainment by Race and Ethnicity,” *Equity in Higher Education*, accessed November 9, 2025, <https://www.equityinhighered.org/indicators/u-s-population-trends-and-educational-attainment/educational-attainment-by-race-and-ethnicity/>.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Education, “Applications for New Awards; Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions Program,” *Federal Register* 88, no. 72 (April 14, 2023), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2023/04/14/2023-07904/applications-for-new-awards-developing-hispanic-serving-institutions-program>.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Vargas and Julio Villa-Palomino. “Racing to Serve or Race-ing for Money? Hispanic-serving Institutions and the Colorblind Allocation of Racialized Federal Funding.” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 5 (2019): 401 - 415. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649218769409>.

<sup>6</sup> Gina A. Garcia, Anne-Marie Núñez, and Victor A. Sansone, “Toward a Multidimensional Conceptual Framework for Understanding ‘Servingness’ in Hispanic-Serving Institutions: A Synthesis of the Research,” *Review of Educational Research* 89, no. 5 (2019): 745–84.

<sup>7</sup> Anne-Marie Núñez, Gloria Crisp, and Diane Elizondo, “Mapping Hispanic-Serving Institutions: A Typology of Institutional Diversity,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 87, no. 1 (2016): 55–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2016.11777394>.

<sup>8</sup>Garcia, Gina Ann. “Decolonizing Hispanic-Serving Institutions: A Framework for Organizing.” *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 17, no. 2 (2018): 132–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192717734289>.

<sup>9</sup> Lisandro Pérez, Jose Luis Morín, and Isabel Martínez, *John Jay as a Hispanic-Serving Institution: Meeting the Challenges and Opportunities. A Position Paper* (New York: John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2017), [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/jj\\_arch\\_pubs/28/](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/jj_arch_pubs/28/).

<sup>10</sup>John Jay College of Criminal Justice, “Diversity Facts & Figures,” <https://www.jjay.cuny.edu/about/senior-leadership/legal-counsel/compliance/diversity-facts-figures>.

<sup>11</sup> Hispanic Serving Institute, “Meet the Change Agents,” *Hispanic Serving Institute*, n.d., <https://24833-hispanic-serving-institute.pantheonsite.io/about/meet-the-change-agents/>.

<sup>12</sup> Marc A. Kaplan and Amalia Zavaleta, “Cultural Competency: The Key to Latino Health Policy,” *HKS Student Policy Review*, March 23, 2017, <https://hksspr.org/cultural-competency-the-key-to-latino-health-policy-a-commentary/>

<sup>13</sup> Noriega, S. (2025). *The Impact of Latino Faculty on Latino Students*. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.