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Achieving First in the World: Hispanic Serving Institutions and Closing the Attainment Gap

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Abstract

Latino degree attainment plays a critical role in meeting national degree completion goals. In 2012, Hispanic students outnumbered their White counterparts in postsecondary enrollment. However, even with increased enrollment, Latinos still lag behind other racial and ethnic groups in degree completion. With over 50% of Latino postsecondary undergraduate enrollment at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), increasing institutional capacity to address barriers in Latino college retention and completion is necessary to propel students from access to success. Research shows barriers for Latino completion consist of limited financial resources, a demanding work schedule and limited academic advising. Emerging models for Latino postsecondary success employ community coalitions or "Collective Impact Models" to address the barriers to degree completion. The Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act provides an opportunity for Congress to improve capacity building at Hispanic Serving Institutions. Strategies include requesting a longitudinal study that measures effectiveness of support systems for Latino completion, prioritizing Collective Impact Models and creating bonus grants for institutions that meet degree completion goals.

Introduction

Latino student college enrollment is necessary in meeting President Obama's ambitious "First in the World" goal to have the highest proportion of college graduates by 2020¹. In 2012, Latinos outnumbered their White counterparts in higher education enrollment². The federal government supports capacity building at institutions of higher education as support systems for Hispanic Students. Established in 1992 under the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA), the federal government defined Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) as institutions with over 25% enrollment of Hispanic students and recognized HSIs as a means to support Latino students in postsecondary education. Even with the growing number of Hispanic Serving Institutions³, Hispanics still lag behind other racial/ ethnic groups in degree attainment. Data from the 2013 Current Population Survey cites Hispanics with an 8% completion rate for Bachelor's degrees compared to 14.6% of Whites and 9.8% of Blacks⁴. Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) enroll over half of all Latino undergraduate students and consequently are essential in targeting this growing population of degree-seeking students. Improving these programs are essential in promoting Latino college completion and making sure the United States is First in the World.

Title V Part A, of the Higher Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1101–1101d; 1103–1103g) known as "Developing Hispanic Serving Institutions", creates a competitive grant program to expand educational opportunities for Latino students⁵. In order for institutions of higher education to qualify for this capacity building funding stream, they must meet the 25% enrollment of Hispanic students in addition to having a 50% enrollment of needy students (Pell grant eligible). Moreover, this program aims to expand and enhance academic offerings, program quality and stability for institutions that are helping Hispanic students complete postsecondary degrees. The grant can be used for one or more combination of allowable activities including the purchase of books, tutoring, and establishing an endowment fund.

Hispanic National Trends in Higher Education

Between 2011- 2012 Latinos attended college at higher rates than their White counterparts⁶. A report by the Pew Center on Hispanic Trends states: "According to the Census Bureau, 49% of young Hispanic high school graduates were enrolled in college. By comparison, 47% of White non-Hispanic high school graduates were enrolled in college."⁷ Even though enrollment overall for Latinos increased, forecasts show that this growth in college enrollment proves inadequate. At current rates,

“Only 50 percent of students enrolled in the first year of college in 2006 had completed a degree by the year 2012.”⁶

the US is predicted to produce around 39 million two- and four- year college degrees by 2025, leaving a gap of 23 million.⁸

Latinos lag behind other racial and ethnic counterparts in degree completion. A study by McGlynn (2013) problematizes the fact that Latinos are increasingly enrolling in institutions of higher education, but not necessarily completing their degrees. The researcher cites: “Only 50 percent of students enrolled in the first year of college in 2006 had completed a degree by the year 2012.”⁹ Facilitating individuals to help complete postsecondary education will benefit society and the economy overall.¹⁰ A focus on improving college success for the growing number of Latinos can aid in closing the college degree gap and promote economic mobility through increased job opportunities. Targeting Hispanic Serving Institutions that enroll large numbers of students can be a strategy in closing degree attainment gaps.

Hispanic Serving Institutions and Targeted Degree Completion

Hispanic Serving Institutions face a number of challenges in graduating their students. A study by Gastic and Nieto (2010) looked at degree completion at Hispanic Serving Institutions. They found that four- year HSIs had graduation rates comparable to their campus representations whereas two- year HSIs showed Latinos were significantly underrepresented in earners of Associate’s degrees¹¹. As Nunez, Sparks, and Hernandez (2011) point out, HSIs admit more students at higher academic risk than other 2-year colleges because of student non-traditional characteristics. These include students that are academically under-prepared, work part-time, have family responsibilities, and have few role models in

their families that have college degrees¹². Research by the Department of Education, Higher Education Gaps and Persistence study (2012) cites financial and personal reasons for Hispanic attrition in higher education. Hispanic students also had the lowest rates of meeting with an advisor than other racial/ ethnic groups¹³. These factors impede students from successfully completing their programs. Addressing barriers to Latino student completion through concerted efforts and strong investments in support systems can remedy the challenges students face in completing their degrees.

Investments in Latino college completion have addressed some of these obstacles. The 2013 cohort of Excelencia in Education award recipients profiled universities that offer promising practices in leading Latino student success. In *What’s Working for Latino Students*, Santiago (2013) recognized universities that are increasing their efforts for Latino student success in enrollment, performance and graduation rates. Common strategies of these four-year universities include: paid on campus opportunities, involve faculty and staff in guiding students, connect students with peer leaders and have consistent evidence-based success in serving migrant students. Practices that increased retention were those that incorporated a holistic approach to increase the number of Latinos in STEM fields and summer developmental academies to academically prepare students¹⁴. Sharing these practices with other similar universities and scaling up best practices can increase support services for Latino students and promote graduation. Providing a space for facilitating the exchange of best practices amongst similar institutions of higher education can also aid institutions in better targeting the needs of their students.

Although Hispanic Serving Institution grantees lack longitudinal data on Latino college success, other studies look at promising practices for Latino postsecondary success. Researchers Gloria and Castellanos (2012), suggest that culturally sensitive, emotional, social and informational support is vital to the success of Hispanic first-generation college students. In addition a cradle to career model is important to instituting this support. Santiago (2009) adds the importance of family involvement in support services can also be an important strategy in meeting the needs of Hispanic first-generation college students¹⁵. To this extent, emerging models in postsecondary success address the comprehensive supports needed to aid students in degree attainment.

Emerging Models in Latino Postsecondary Success

Collective Impact Models bridge various stakeholders to come together for a common cause of postsecondary degree attainment. *Partners for Postsecondary Success*, a project funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, builds on community partnerships to engage leaders to implement a multisector strategy to improve postsecondary completion outcomes for students. These initiatives leverage resources from different stakeholders in order to have a holistic model for postsecondary success. Central tenets of Collective Impact Models as cited by Kania & Kramer (2011) include the following:

- 1. Common Agenda**— All participants have a shared vision for change, a joint understanding of the problem and a common approach for a solution.
- 2. Shared Measurement Systems**— Collecting data and reporting it will make sure that reporting is aligned and that all participants hold each other accountable.

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3. Mutually Reinforcing Activities—

Groups work together, but do not necessarily do the same things, however they encourage participants to undertake activities to support the collective action of others.

4. Continuous Communication— Groups share resources and communicate to help develop trust and provide the best possible solution to the problem.

5. Backbone Support Organizations— Creating and managing collective impact requires a separate organization and staff with a specific set of skills to serve as the backbone to the entire initiative¹⁶.

These models for postsecondary success focus on community coalitions and a shared responsibility in meeting the needs of students in higher education. Engaging leaders in the community that focus on providing the supports students need, like academic counseling and engaging parents can reduce the barriers to college retention and completion.

Policy Recommendations

As Congress moves forward with the Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, it is important to prioritize Latino college completion as a necessary means to meet the United States' goal of being First in the World. In meeting said goal, the following recommendations create a foundation for improving Title V and making completion a national priority:

1. Conduct a longitudinal study through the Government Accountability Office on Hispanic Serving Institution grantees on the use of funds and outcomes. Although data does exist at local institutions, longitudinal data can aid in aligning allowable activities that lead to Latino student success. More research in

this field can promote better decision-making and inform mechanisms for sustainability.

2. Prioritize direct support services for students by adding preference points for HSI grants that employ Collective Impact Models. Research on Latino student completion suggests a holistic approach is necessary to promoting degree completion. Engaging other members of the community provides opportunities to directly target students at the local level and leverage financial resources during times of budgetary constraints.

3. Create a new section in Title V, Part A that incentivizes degree completion by providing additional bonus grants for institutions that meet reasonable degree attainment goals. This can be calculated through a formula by factoring in number of students enrolled and disaggregating that information by credential/degree sought and completion rates. Once schools meet a small threshold, (i.e. 5% of degree attainment) they will receive an additional grant to further support completion efforts.

Conclusion

A targeted effort to support Hispanic Serving Institutions is necessary in meeting the First in the World degree attainment goal. By promoting better data collection for evidence-based decision making, prioritizing local community impact models and incentivizing institutions through an additional funding stream, Congress can support Latino postsecondary completion. With Latinos growing in enrollment numbers in postsecondary education and also concentrated at Hispanic Serving Institutions, supporting institutional capacity is necessary to address barriers to degree completion.

Endnotes

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