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Reaching for 2020: The Role of Latino Community College Success in National College Completion Goals

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Introduction

During a joint session of Congress on February 24, 2009, President Obama set forth a goal that by 2020 the United States “will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world”. Since President Obama’s announcement, there has been prompt dialogue around unmet workforce demands, educational equity and the role of Latino college completion. The only way to reach national college completion goals will be to focus our attention and resources on underserved students, specifically Latinos who are the fastest growing U.S demographic, but whose access and retention are the lowest. Although representing a significant portion of the American mosaic, educational attainment for Latinos remains relatively low, as Latinos continue to face barriers towards college completion. In 2012, it is estimated that 21.3 percent of Latino adults had earned an associate degree or higher compared to a 40.1 percent of adults in the country². To increase college completion among Latinos federal policy must play a central role by ensuring funding towards Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) and by advocating for more efficient streamlining of students from community college to four-year institutions through clear articulation pathways. This paper presents recommendations for reauthorization of the Higher Education Act that advances the country’s push towards once again becoming the most educated

country in the world and while addressing equity concerns for Latino students in higher education.

Reaching for 2020

In 2012, the Organization for Education and Cultural Development (OECD) ranked the United States as 12th in the world in postsecondary attainment among OECD countries, a dramatic drop from its top ranking in 1990³. Concerns around the country’s ability to remain competitive in an increasingly global economy, spurred a national movement focused on increasing student success and educational attainment. Various organizations including the Lumina Foundation, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation are undertaking various activities aimed at a common goal: increase the number of adults in the United States who have earned a post secondary credential. They suggest that by increasing the number of college graduates, the United States will not only begin to reinforce our economy by filling job gaps, but also strengthen communities as more individuals actively participate in our nation’s democracy. Studies have continuously indicated that the majority of jobs of the future will demand high-level knowledge and skills requiring some postsecondary education⁴. A high school diploma is simply not enough any more. By 2025, it is estimated that 63 percent of all jobs will require some post-secondary

education⁵. In addition to work force competitiveness, research studies suggest increased educational attainment improves health, lowers crime rates, and yields citizens who are both globally aware and participate in civic and democratic processes such as voting and volunteering⁶. While often these social and cultural reasons for increasing educational attainment are, at times, undervalued they remain pivotal in ensuring issues of equity and strengthening our democracy. Yet higher education research consistently highlights a long-standing reality that educational achievement gaps exist in the United States where low-income and first-generation students, racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, and adults have traditionally been underrepresented among college students and graduates. With changing demographics, it is important to realize the severe consequences of disproportionate access and retention of underrepresented minorities in postsecondary education. Within this context, we turn our attention to policy strategies needed to ensure racial ethnic minorities; Latinos in particular excel academically and complete a post secondary degree.

Falling Behind

What will it take to reach national college completion goals? The metrics and strategies proposed vary across the board yet the generous consensus is America will

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not reach its national college completion goals with the current postsecondary rates. According Lumina Foundation whose proposed national completion goal of 60 percent college attainment by 2025—the nation must produce 62 million high-quality postsecondary credentials. At current rates, the U.S. will produce around 39 million two- and four-year college degrees between now and 2025, leaving a gap of 23 million. Producing the remaining 23 million degrees depends on closing the education attainment gap, particularly that of Latino students. In 2012, only 13.1 percent of Hispanics age 25–29 had earned a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared with 17.8 percent of Blacks, 31.1 percent of Whites, and 50.4 percent of Asians⁷. Yet it is estimated that by 2020 at least 5.5 million degrees must be awarded to Latino students to meet President Obama’s goal of having the highest rate of degree completion worldwide⁸. While Latinos are enrolled in college in growing numbers, their completion rates continue to lag behind those of other student groups. Slightly over half (51.9%) of all Latino students complete bachelor’s degrees within six years, which is less than the completion rates in the same time period for Asian/Pacific Islanders (70.1%) and Whites (62.5%)⁹. At the same time, Latinos are less likely to be enrolled at four-year institutions.

The majority (45.2%) of Latinos enrolled in a postsecondary institution attend public two-year community colleges. Public four-year universities account for 17.1 percent of Latino enrollment followed by private for-profit college with 14% of this population¹⁰. Increasing national completion rates requires we commit to the academic success and college completion of Latino students attending community college.

The Landscape of Community Colleges

According to the American Association of Community College, community colleges account for approximately 40 percent of all enrollments in American higher education¹¹. Community colleges are charged with several missions, including (a) preparing students to transfer to 4-year institutions; (b) vocational education to prepare students for jobs; (c) developmental education to help students develop basic academic skills; (d) community and multicultural education to serves members of the local community¹². Students who enroll in community colleges are more likely to be low-income, the first in their families to go to college, and members of underrepresented racial or ethnic groups¹³. Enrollment and income show that 44 percent of low-income students (those with family incomes of less than \$25,000 per year) attend community colleges as their first college after high school. In contrast, only 15 percent of high-income students go to community colleges initially. Similarly, 38 percent of students whose parents did not graduate from college choose community colleges as their first institution, compared with 20 percent of students whose parents graduated from a four-year college. Nationally, 50 percent of Latino students start at a community college, in comparison, 28 percent of white students begin at community colleges¹⁴. In California, the state with the largest community college system, seven in ten (69%) Latino students begin their postsecondary education in community colleges¹⁵. Community colleges are a particularly attractive option for many Latinos upon graduation from high school, largely because colleges are located in their immediate communities, are open-access, offer more flexible scheduling than four-year institutions, and offer part-time attendance opportunities, which are particularly suitable for students who work¹⁶.

Moreover, these institutions’ lower tuition are fees are particular appealing to Latinos, who because of their lower-economic status are more reluctant than other groups to take out loans for postsecondary education¹⁷. The average cost of tuition and fees at a community college in 2012–2013 was \$3,130 as compared to an average of \$8,660 at a traditional four-year institution¹⁸. In many ways, community college serves as a critical stepping-stone in providing access to higher education for a large sector of the Latino community.

The Community College Transfer Gap

Despite the opportunity community colleges may provide, few Latino students transfer from community colleges onto four-year colleges and universities. Latino community college students face several academic, financial, and cultural barriers to transfer. Barriers include financial stresses of helping support their families, living off campus, being the first in their family to pursue higher education, working and commuting significant hours, delayed enrollment in college-level courses, and developmental education, among others, all correlating with lower rates of college completion. Factors are discussed in greater detail in other sources (e.g Solórzano (2005); Martinez-Wenzl, & Marquez, (2012); Dowd, A. C., Bensimon, E.M. (2006)). Solórzano and colleagues (2005) found a 10% transfer rate for beginning community college Latino students, and concluded that transfer is one of the most, if not the most, critical “leakage point in the educational pipeline for Latino students”¹⁹. In 2010, the Latino degree attainment rate was only 16 percent²⁰. In sum, these low transfer rates have significantly contributed to Latinos’ low postsecondary educational attainment. Given the importance of higher education in today’s competitive job

Since November 8, 1965 when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEA) into law, HEA has dictated the nation's higher education laws, and established a federal government role for providing need-based grants, work-study opportunities, loans to students and outreach for the most economically disadvantaged students³¹.

market and a growing global economy, it is extremely problematic that such a large number of Latino students who have initial intentions to complete college never do.

Hispanic Serving Institutions

Accordingly, about half of Hispanic Serving Institutions (48%) in the country are community colleges (178)²¹. According to Title V of the Higher Education Act (HEA), as amended in 2008, HSIs are degree-granting public or private nonprofit institutions of higher education with 25 percent or more total undergraduate Latino full-time equivalent student enrollment. Hispanic-Serving institutions are a fairly new phenomenon within the larger landscape of higher education. In 1992, the federal government formally recognized Hispanic-serving institutions and included them in the funding provisions previously reserved for Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Tribal Colleges and Universities under Title III of the HEA²². New appropriations were intended to begin closing the funding gap between HSIs and other post-secondary institutions. Late in 1998, Congress authorized the *Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions Program* under its own title of the HEA known as Title V. Title V serves multiple purposes, as it makes competitive funds available to two-year and four-year HSIs to build their own instructional capacity, ensure institutional stability and overall assist HSIs “expand educational opportunities for, and improve the attainment of, Hispanics students”. In more recent years, additional funding has been made available to HSIs. For example the Promoting Post-baccalaureate Opportunities for Hispanic Americans Program, which was established to grant HSIs to increase Latinos’ post-baccalaureate educational opportunity and attainment. Some HSIs also received funds through the College Cost Reduction and Access Act, which seek

to improve access and degree completion for Latino students. Given recent efforts, it is evident policymakers have recognized the need to provide currently underfunded HSIs with additional resources, enabling them to perform at their implied mission of serving Latino students²³.

Since their inception HSIs have played a key role in Latino academic success, enrolling over half (59%) of Latino undergraduates²⁴. In 2012–2013, there were 370 HSIs across the country, the majority of which are two-year institutions.²⁵ Although there are some debates as to the extent at which HSIs are promoting the success of Latino students²⁶ research suggest HSIs have the potential to play unique and vital role in serving Latino students. There are some indicators that Latino students attending HSIs have more positive experiences and outcomes than those attending non-HSIs institutions. For example, in California, Latino students who attend 2-year HSIs transfer to 4-year institutions at higher rates than those not enrolled in HSIs²⁷. They also graduate a disproportionate percentage of Latino students in Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics fields and the teaching profession²⁸. Also, data shows that HSIs act as important pathways to graduate degrees for many Latino students. It is estimated that between 2003 and 2007, nearly 40% of Latino STEM Ph.D. recipients completed their undergraduate degree at an HSI²⁹. Little research has been able to explain the reasons behind such success, but some suggest the higher proportion of Latino faculty, who can offer enhanced understanding of students’ cultural background and serve as mentors, may be a significant contributor³⁰. Yet while holding the potential to serve as important drivers of Latino academic success, HSIs have limited financial resources. Given their responsibility to effectively educate large numbers of low-income, high-need students, attention

should be given to the ways in which upcoming HEA reauthorization can not only support but also incentivize HSIs to graduate Latinos.

The Higher Education Act

Since November 8, 1965 when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEA) into law, HEA has dictated the nation’s higher education laws, and established a federal government role for providing need-based grants, work-study opportunities, loans to students and outreach for the most economically disadvantaged students³¹. Since its inception each reauthorization has attempted to address the issue and challenges of the day, while trying to move closer to President Johnson’s goal of keeping the doors to higher education open for all academically qualified students regardless of their financial circumstances³². The most recent reauthorization in 2008, authored primarily by Chairman of the U.S Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, Tom Harkin of Iowa, focused primarily on four main goals: increasing college affordability, helping struggling borrowers, strengthening accountability, and improving transparency. It also proposed new programs relating to students with disabilities and measures to assist minority-serving institutions. This year as Congress considers a reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, a guiding principle should be Latino college completion, with an eye forward looking to anticipate and meet national needs through 2020 and beyond.

Higher Education Act Reauthorization

During HEA reauthorization, amendments made should include language from the Transferring Credits for College Completion Act of 2014. In April of 2014 Representa-

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tive George Miller (D-CA) introduced the Transferring Credits for College Completion Act, a bill that would increase transparency and reduce students' burdens related to transferring credits between institutions of higher education. Currently in the absence of comprehensive, integrated statewide transfer policies, many students will find that credits they have accumulated at a community college will not count toward their bachelor's degree at a four-year institution³³. Studies demonstrate that overall completion rates among students who lose significant credits in the transfer process are low. Students are often required to re-take courses, resulting in additional costs and time delays. From a student perspective, seamless articulation guarantees students, who successfully complete defined transfer pathways, a smooth transition to a public four-year institution by automatically transferring their courses toward a standardized general education curriculum. While from an institutional perspective, clear articulation enables transparency and efficiency, another important benefit. Therefore, in an effort to reduce institutional barriers that hinder the academic success and completion, there must be an amendment of Amend P.L. 110.315.TittleV. Section 501. (a) (6) with tenants of the Transferring Credits for College Completion Act of 2014.

- P.L. 4348 Sec 3. (a) (2) (A) "A common general education core curriculum consisting of not less than 30 credit hours or the equivalent coursework, which are fully acceptable in transfer at any such public institution of higher education in the State toward meeting specific degree or certificate requirements.
- Require public institutions of higher learning to enter articulation agreements with the other schools in its state and create a 30-credit hour common general education core curriculum that is fully transferrable.

- P.L. 4348 Sec 3. (a) (1) (B) (III) "A description of each associate degree program at a public institution of higher education in the State that is acceptable in transfer and will provide credit toward the first 2 years of a related baccalaureate program at a public institution of higher education in such State, including each such associate degree program that is fully acceptable in transfer and will be credited as the first 2 years of a baccalaureate program;

Require statewide, standardized lower-division transfer core curriculum and transfer associate's degrees with courses accepted by all public two- and four-year institutions (and private institutions that choose to participate) for general education and prerequisite courses for majors. P.L. 4348 Sec 3. (a) (2) (B) Common course numbering for substantially similar courses in such common general education core curriculum.

Require common course numbering system across two-and four-year institutions for the designated transfer curriculum should also be in place. Common course numbering ensures that all institutions recognize credits from courses that cover the same material.

P.L. 4348 Sec 3. (a) (2) (C) A guarantee that an associate degree in an academic major in the arts or sciences that is awarded by a public institution of higher education in the State on or after July 1, 2017, shall be fully acceptable in transfer and credited as the first 2 years of a related baccalaureate program at a public institution of higher education in such State.

Guarantee admission with junior status for students who have met the designated lower-division transfer requirements and earned an associate's degrees.

In fact, several of the recommendations discussed above are already in progress or under discussion among various states, and most are supported, at least in part, by community college faculty and administrative leaders, signaling the possible widespread acceptance of each solution may be achievable. For example, California created a transfer degree and guarantees junior status to those transferring between the community college system and the state college system³⁴. In addition to implementing the Course Identification Numbering System (C-ID) project, which aims to simplify articulation among all postsecondary segments and institutions by "developing a process that identifies course commonalities while respecting local variations in courses that commonly transfer"³⁵. Rather than forcing faculty to agree on common course numbers, the C-ID project involves faculty from all three segments in developing C-ID descriptors that—once approved as meeting university requirements—can be the standards against which community college courses are articulated³⁶. In theory, any community college course that is articulated to a C-ID descriptor will be automatically accepted at participating four-year institutions, saving time and money, and making the transfer process easier and more transparent for students, faculty, and advisers³⁷. All while leveraging online systems—Articulation System Stimulating Inter-Institutional Student Transfer (ASSIST)—that provide students, faculty, and advisers with up-to-date information about transfer requirements and articulation agreements. As of 2011 a number of states across the country have moved towards establishing a more efficient and seamless student transfer system, including Florida, New Jersey, Washington, Texas and Rhode Island. And while some state have begun to recognize and address the need for clear articulation, given the cur-

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rent demand, federal government must incentivize all states to begin to implement clear articulation.

Title III

In addition to creating articulation pathways from community colleges to four-year institutions, HEA reauthorization can support Latino academic success and college completion through institutional support authorized by Titles III. Title III provides grants and other financial support to institutions that serve high concentrations of minority and/or needy students to help strengthen the institutions’ academic, financial, and administrative capabilities. Funds are typically utilized to develop, scale up, and implement programs that address students’ needs on campus and to improve overall student success. More specifically, Title III-A programs include faculty development, curriculum development and student services. When thinking about supporting Latino community college students, Title III serves as a perfect window of an opportunity to channel funding towards efforts that have the potential to streamline students towards transferring. Student services may include academic counseling, career counseling, research programs, bridge programs, learning communities, and culturally relevant support centers. In supporting vital student services, we begin to address retention barriers by not only *throwing money at the problem*, but also enhancing and transforming institutional practices to promote a “transfer culture”³⁸. Where a “transfer culture” is an organizational culture that addresses all students, including Latino students, in transferring to four-year institutions³⁹.

Title V

In addition to institutional grants via Title III, a commitment towards Latino community college success requires a strong

commitment to Hispanic Serving Institutions. HSIs are important not only because they enroll the largest and often times the most underserved demographic in the country but because they grant more associate’s and bachelor’s degrees to Latino student’s than *all* other American colleges and universities combined⁴⁰. Essentially, HSIs are doing more with less and are taking lead in educating and graduating student’s of color, moving us that much closer to our goals. Therefore, during HEA reauthorization, consideration should be given to this important role and the necessity of providing sufficient resources to strengthen these institutions. According to the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (2012) HSIs receive less funding per student, on average, than do other kinds of institutions⁴¹. Increasing funding for HSIs makes fiscal sense and has the potential to improve completion on a national scale as it would create the environment needed to facilitate a smooth transition from community colleges to four-year institutions.

Additional, during HEA reauthorization there should be efforts to ensure that funds that are distributed to HSIs actually result in improved outcomes for Latino students. Currently, funds distributed under Title V are absent of requirements that demonstrate funds are actually being channeled towards initiatives improving Latino academic success. For example, HSIs are not required to report the *direct* benefits to Latinos derived from Title V funding⁴². Nor does Title V request that institutions establish success goals to close equity gaps between Latinos and students from other racial/ethnic groups⁴³. Therefore, to ensure HSI’s continue to serve and graduate Latino students, federal government should (A) encourage institutions to develop institutional practices that integrate their Hispanic-serving iden-

tity into their core processes and policies, (B) incentivize institutions to identify areas in which they may be falling short of facilitating Latino student success and develop plans of action to address the gaps and (C) request that HSIs to establish success goals to address the equity gap. Through the implementation of these recommendations, we move closer towards fostering environments that foster academic success for Latinos and ensure federal funding is channeled towards students with the biggest need.

Conclusion

Significant challenges lie ahead if the country is to meet President Obama’s goal of having the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020. The biggest challenge towards increasing college attainment in the country is better serving and ultimately graduating historically underrepresented students in higher education, specifically Latino students. At this point, goals are simply not enough; action must also follow. Federal policy must step in and ensure (A) clear articulation pathways from community colleges to four-year institutions (B) supplementary funding towards HSIs, particularly community colleges (C) incentives for HSIs to develop institutional practices that integrate their Hispanic-serving identity into their core processes and policies, and (D) incentivize institutions to identify areas in which they may be falling short of facilitating Latino student success and develop plans of action to address the gaps. Ultimately, creating an environment where the country can reach its fullest potential can only be possible if federal government recognizes community colleges as partners in the effort to prepare Latino graduates to lead the 21st century and beyond.

Endnotes

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