

Challenges and Strategies for Assisting Latino Students with College Access and Completion

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Latinos are the largest and most rapidly-growing minority group in the United States, yet they have the lowest college completion rate. While Latino high school graduation rates have improved in the last decade, only 15% of Latino adults hold a bachelor's degree (The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, 2014). The dire state of affairs

associated with college access and completion is urgent when we recognize that Latinos are predicted to comprise 30% of the population by 2050 (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011). IECs possess the unique knowledge and skills to transform the educational outcomes for Latino students by providing the knowledge and strategies to not only attend, but to graduate from college and continue on to fruitful careers.

What are the contributing factors to the Latino college attending and degree completion gap? While this subject is complex and multi-layered, several cultural, socio-economic and educational issues emerge:

Being a first-generation college student/lack of college-going culture

One of the contributors to the lack of a college-going culture among Latino youth is that half of parents of Latino undergrads have never enrolled in or graduated from college (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011). The result is that first-generation Latino college students often cannot rely on their parents or other family members to assist with the selection/admission process or provide adequate support during college. Although the vast majority of Latino families value a college education very highly, parents may be hesitant to aggressively advocate for their children and are unaware of the necessity for rigor and college preparatory coursework in high school.

Belonging to a low socio-economic group

It is shocking to learn that almost one-third of Latinos in public schools live at or below the poverty level (Gaitan, 2013). Students from these families will more than likely attend schools that are greatly lacking in resources and preparation for higher education. Many families also lack knowledge of the availability of financial aid and may feel college is impossible to afford—only 44% of Latino parents know about the Pell Grant, for instance (National

Conference of State Legislatures, 2012). Culturally, Latinos could be quite hesitant about utilizing loans—even for college.

Speaking English as a second language

In some parts of the country with the fastest-growing Latino populations, almost 35% of families have limited English proficiency (Gaitan, 2013). Speaking English as a second language can be quite an obstacle for students. These challenges related to language extend to parents, as they translate to a lack of knowledge and understanding of the education system as well as the importance of their child attending and graduating from college.

Being perceived as academically inferior

Racial and ethnic stereotypes as well as lower academic expectations are significant hurdles for Latinos aspiring for higher education. Latino students may be designated as “non-college bound” from the outset and may not take advantage of college preparatory courses that are available in high school.

Lacking guidance from parents, role models, mentors, counselors

Many Latino high school students lack guidance from parents or counselors when they are undertaking the college selection and application process. Some immigrant parents may be unfamiliar with the college system in the United States. The entire college process can be so intimidating and confusing that these students simply give up without any protest from parents, who often do not understand the ramifications of that fateful decision. It also may be difficult to find inspirational role models and mentors (particularly Latinos) who have attended college because of the college completion gap that persists. Attending overcrowded and under-resourced schools compounds this situation—as overloaded school counselors are unable to meet the needs of their students.

Being constrained by family pressures

Latino parents tend to be protective parents. They may not be used to giving their children as much independence as their peers and may have strong opinions that could complicate and even hinder college attainment. For example, many Latino parents prefer their children to live at home or not attend college far away from home. This could prove a challenge if say, the student receives an excellent financial package from a college across the country, but the parents will not allow him/her to attend. Parents may also fear they may “lose” their children to another

culture or that they will not come back home after college. In practical terms, parents may not want their children to attend college because they want or need them to work and support the family financially. Deferring college can be a missed opportunity for these students and almost a surety that they will live out their lives in the same socio-economic conditions as their parents.

As IECs, we have the knowledge and skills to assist Latino students with their higher education aspirations. Parent engagement is crucial, and therefore providing this knowledge in Spanish is helpful if language is a barrier for parents. Also, rather than simply imparting this information, it is crucial to take into account the many deep cultural and emotional factors at play in the process. Several key strategies are essential to this effort:

Educating Latino students—especially first-generation—about the necessity of higher education, college preparatory coursework, “fit,” as well as the admission and application process

As IECs, we can provide the essential college knowledge that is lacking from many Latino families. First, we need to educate families about the significance of a college degree—the difference in lifetime income stemming from this, as well as the notion that college graduates have much lower unemployment rates and usually live longer and happier lives (Riggio, 2014). Second, we need to convey the importance of college preparatory coursework. Since many of these students are presumed as not being college-bound, IECs need to change the equation by informing students and parents that proper course selection and rigor is crucial. Latinos are especially lacking in advanced STEM coursework.

If a family seems to be pushing a specific career path other than what the student has in mind, an IEC can research and approach parents with tangible examples of successful professionals, preferably Latinos, in that field. Students could also explain the professions associated with that field through the Bureau of Labor Statistics www.bls.gov/audience/students.htm.

Education about college “fit” is imperative and could well be a foreign concept to many families. Many Latino parents deem proximity to home as their primary college criteria, which poses a challenge to students. A wonderful resource to illustrate “fit” is Dr. Steve Antonoff’s website (www.schoolbuff.com), which now features his famous intake forms in Spanish.

An excellent organization for connecting students with colleges (many of them need-blind) that are actively seeking first-generation students is the Center for Student Opportunity (www.imfirst.org). Many of these colleges offer fly-in, summer and outreach programs. In addition, the Posse Foundation (www.possefoundation.org), with chapters in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, New Orleans, New York and Washington, D.C., offers full-tuition leadership scholarships through its partner colleges. Questbridge (www.questbridge.org) is another noteworthy program that offers full scholarships to low-income students through partner colleges.

Educating Latino students about the availability and accessibility of financial aid and scholarships as well the opportunity for paid internships

It is disconcerting that so many Latino families are unaware of the availability of financial aid or scholarships. IECs can provide guidance and educate families about the different types of aid available as well as a plethora of scholarships aimed at Latinos (see Appendix A). A great starting point is the searchable database (NextOpp) provided by the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute (www.chcnextopp.net).

To address the common necessity of offsetting college expenses, and at times, contributing to the family financially, Latino students living away from home can be connected with paid internship opportunities. The INROADS program (www.inroads.org/students) offers paid corporate multi-year summer internships with the same company. The Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) National Internship Program also offers paid internships through various corporations and the federal government (www.hacu.net/hacu/HNIP.asp).

Balancing family pressure and living away from home

For many Latino students, college offers the opportunity of geographic and emotional freedom. Quite often, Latino students attending college away from home face resistance from their families. One suggestion to alleviate parental fears is for the student to explain their daily actions in college. These details include the classes they are taking, their friends, hours they study, the time they spend in clubs or volunteer activities and how free time is spent (Dabbah, 2009). In addition, parents can voice their concerns with college administrators to be assured of their child’s safety. The student can also make a plan with their parents regarding specifically when they will come home for visits. This visit plan, along with online and phone communication, will reduce parental stress and provide reassurance that the student is “not drifting away from [the] family” (Dabbah, 2009). Students studying away from home (especially first-generation students) should convey to their parents the notion of being “trailblazers”—they are doing something that is wonderful, new and different than what the family has experienced—all for a better future. Finally, it is important for students living away from home to develop their support system at college through a faculty or residential advisor or friends that have similar interests. If the student feels quite isolated and cannot seem to fend off their sadness, they need to know that despite the stigma that many Latinos associate with therapy, it is beneficial and necessary to seek help when needed.

Assisting students with finding mentors

Connecting with a mentor or mentors may be instrumental to the successful college graduation of Latino students as they can assist with their educational—and even professional—journey after college. Mentors can be professors, alumni or professionals in a field of interest. A great resource for finding Latino mentors is the Hispanic Heritage Foundation’s LOFT (Latinos on Fast Track) Network (www.hispanicheritage.org/loft.php) and the Hispanic Alliance for

Career Enhancement (HACE) El Futuro High School Program (www.haceonline.org/content/el-futuro-program).

As demonstrated by the various viable strategies to combat the challenges facing Latino students in closing the college graduation gap, IECs have the knowledge and skills necessary to be true game-changers. Latino college access and completion need to improve dramatically in this country. IECs, with the power of information combined with a cognizance of cultural considerations, can change the lives of young Latinos and transform distant dreams of college degree attainment into tangible and successful realities.

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NOTES

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Ensuring Latino Success in College and the Workforce." *National Conference of State Legislatures*. 2012. Web. 17 Nov 2014. www.ncsl.org/issues-research/educ/ensuring-latino-success-in-college-and-workforce.aspx

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APPENDIX A

WHITE HOUSE INITIATIVE ON EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE FOR HISPANICS

Financial Aid Guide to Success (English and Spanish) - ;Graduate!

<http://www.ed.gov/edblogs/hispanic-initiative/graduate-financial-aid-guide-to-success/>

Hispanic Teacher Recruitment Initiative

<http://www.ed.gov/edblogs/hispanic-initiative/hispanic-teacher-recruitment/>

EXCELENCIA IN EDUCATION (detailed analysis of Latino college completion by state)

<http://www.edexcelencia.org/research/college-completion/united-states>

EXAMPLES OF SCHOLARSHIP OPPORTUNITIES FOR LATINOS

NextOpp Database: Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute <https://www.chcinextopp.net/>

Adelante Fund <http://www.adelantefund.org/#!/scholarships/crij>

Advancing Hispanic Excellence in Technology, Engineering, Math and Science

(AHETEMS) <http://www.shpefoundation.org/scholarships/ahetems-general-scholarships/>

Dr. Juan Andrade Jr. Scholarship for Young Hispanic Leaders <http://www.uskli.org/student/scholarship.php>

Alliance/Merck Ciencia Hispanic Scholars Program <http://alliancescholars.org/applications/>

ACS (American Chemical Society) Scholars Program <http://www.acs.org/content/acs/en/funding-and-awards/scholarships/acsscholars.html>

AMS (American Meteorological Society) Minority Scholarships <http://www.ametsoc.org/amsstudentinfo/scholfeldocs/industryminorityscholarship.html>

Chicana/Latina Foundation <http://www.chicanalatina.org/scholarship.html>

Geneseo Migrant Center Scholarships <http://www.migrant.net/migrant/scholarships/>

Hispanic Association of Colleges & Universities (HACU) <http://www.hacu.net/hacu/Scholarships.asp>

Hispanic Heritage Foundation http://www.hispanicheritage.org/youth_int.php?sec=80

Hispanic Scholarship Fund (HSF) <http://www.hsf.net/>

League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) <http://lulac.org/programs/education/scholarships/>

Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund <http://www.maldef.org/leadership/scholarships/>

Ronald McDonald House/HACER <http://www.rmhc.org/rmhc-us-scholarships>

TELACU Education Foundation <http://telacu.com/telacu-education-foundation/college-success-program/toyotatelacu-scholarship/>