Research in Brief - Awareness into Action: Helping Latino Students Succeed in Texas Higher Education

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THE PROBLEM

The increasing numbers of underrepresented student populations entering American higher education has dramatically transformed the racial/ethnic demographic profile of incoming first-year undergraduates. Within this influx of undergraduates, Latino students represent the fastest growing racial/ethnic group of 18-24 year old adults attending a degree granting institution. In the last 10 years (e.g. 2001 to 2011) Latino undergraduate students grew 13.1 percent (i.e. 21.7 to 34.8) (Snyder, 2013).

A closer look at higher education enrollment trends suggest there are similar enrollment patterns for Latino students in Texas. In 2011, there were 1.56 million full or part time undergraduate students attending two and four year public and private Texas higher education institutions (Snyder, 2013). Latino undergraduate students represent 33 percent (i.e. 498,127) of this student population. Despite these enrollment increases for Latino students, there have not been significant increases in degree attainment in Texas public higher education institutions.

Latino students have not met the target number of enrollment in public higher education (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2013). For example, in 2012, 260,247 Hispanic students were enrolled, but the 2012 target was 317,446 students, approximately an 18% shortfall. Of the 200,000 postsecondary degrees, White students compared to Latino students earned a greater percentage of those degrees, 51.4 and 29.6 respectively.

The future of Texas’ educated workforce is dependent on ensuring that more students, especially Latino students, enroll and complete a postsecondary degree. However, the pathway to earning a degree is fraught with many challenges for students, but especially for

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Latino students (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). Higher education administrators recognize that many of these students need a collaborative effort between academic and student affairs to improve their degree completion rates.

Student affairs professionals should play a pivotal role in addressing this critical issue on their campus. Regardless of institutional type, many of these professionals need to understand the extant research literature, create appropriate programs and policies, and engage with these students in authentic ways to help them academically succeed. Therefore, the purpose of this essay is to empower and inspire Texas student affairs professionals who work with Latino students on their campus.

**THE LITERATURE**

Researchers have found that Latino students have unique challenges that become obstacles in their pathway to degree completion. For example, early research found that Latino students often came from homes with parents who want their child to succeed, but lacked critical information to transition into postsecondary education (Nora, 2004; Solorzano, 1986; Valdes, 1996). Next, for Latino students who attend Predominantly White Institutions, researchers found that, compared to their peers, they often have challenges with a sense of belonging to the campus (Nunez, 2009) and adjusting to their college climate (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005). Latino males, compared to Latina females, are less likely to enroll in college and complete a college degree (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). Since many Latino students often begin their postsecondary education at two-year institutions, researchers found that these students often face daunting challenges to complete a four-year college degree (Flores, Horn, & Crisp, 2006; Nunez, Sparks, & Hernandez, 2011). Finally, unlike other students, students with an undocumented status face unique and overwhelming obstacles towards college enrollment, persistence, and degree completion (Contreras, 2009).

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**MAKING A DIFFERENCE**

Since Latino students have low college enrollment and degree completion rates in Texas, Texas higher education student affairs professionals should develop effective institutional programs and policies to address this pressing issue. I provide some key recommendations based on the research literature:

**Welcome Families**

In order to address the cultural chasm between Latino families and college campuses, practitioners should welcome Latino families to college campus visits, so that the families might learn about the financial aid application process, and assist in their student’s adjustment to the college climate, especially for Latino first-generation students.

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Target Transfers

In order to improve Latino students’ graduation completion rates, practitioners should develop specific outreach programs for Latino students who have transferred from two-year institutions to ensure they have a seamless transition and complete their four-year degree.

Partner with Academic Affairs

In order to enhance a Latino student’s sense of belonging on their campus, practitioners should create academic and co-curricular partnerships that extend the academic curriculum into student affairs areas: academic themed residence halls, service learning activities, and outreach initiatives targeting Latino communities.

Innovate with Policies

In order to improve Latino males’ academic outcomes, practitioners should develop innovative policies (e.g. mandatory academic advising sessions during their first academic term) and programs (e.g. Latino males mentoring program).

Create a Safe Space

In order to address Latino students’ concerns about the campus climate, administrators need to create a safe space (e.g. Latino student center) for Latino students, especially for students who have an undocumented status, to unite, engage, and interact with their peers.

CONCLUSION

With the ongoing challenges of graduating a well-educated workforce looming in the near future, Texas higher education administrators need to focus their efforts on helping many Latino students enroll into and complete a degree at two and four year institutions. The higher education research on Latino students provides vital insights about the fastest growing student group in the state of Texas. Even though student affairs professionals work in different institutional types and there is ethnic diversity among Latino students (e.g. Mexico, Honduras, Cuba), these students require passionate, dedicated, and well-trained student affairs professionals who are committed to developing empirically grounded institutional programs and policies that help these students adjust, thrive, and succeed on their campuses.

Finally, solving the Latino students’ college enrollment and completion challenges issues requires student affairs professionals to connect and collaborate through professional organizations like TACUSPA to learn about best practices, innovative policies, and effective assessment and evaluation methods. Through these learning communities and professional practice journals, student affairs professionals have opportunities to continue to professionally develop, learn from higher education researchers, and inform other professionals about the unique challenges Latino students face on their campus.

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