

ED477908 2002-09-00 Hispanic Students and Community Colleges: A Critical Point for Intervention. ERIC Digest.

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In recent years issues pertaining to Hispanics* in higher education have garnered heightened attention from researchers and policy makers, and as part of this attention, community colleges have begun to receive increased attention as the decisive link in the greater overall educational attainment of this group. Hispanic college student enrollments have increased steadily during the last two decades, driven by increases at two-year institutions that saw the number of Hispanic students triple (NCES, 2001, Table 207). Despite the surge in enrollment, this group remains notably underrepresented at all levels of higher education, and has one of the lowest overall educational attainment rates of any major ethnic or racial group (U.S. Census Bureau, 1998). Nonetheless, the community college sector has become a critical avenue towards higher degree attainment for Hispanic students as evidenced by the increasing number choosing this path (Wilds & Wilson, 1998; Fry, 2002).

This digest explores the status of Hispanic students at community colleges, including a summary of recent enrollment and transfer trends, a focus on factors that shape Hispanic student enrollment at community colleges, and an overview of an exemplary program that facilitates the successful matriculation of Hispanic college students from two-year institutions to baccalaureate completion.

RECENT TRENDS FOR HISPANIC COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

Community colleges represent the frontline in educating students from diverse backgrounds, as America's 1,076 public community colleges educate over half of all minority students in higher education (NCES, 2001, Table 245). While Hispanics are underrepresented in four-year institutions, they are well represented in two-year institutions, where more than 55 percent of all Hispanic students enroll (Wilds & Wilson, 1998). Enrollment growth for Hispanics in the community colleges may be partly due to the fact according to the United States Census Bureau (2000) this group is the fastest-growing, youngest, and largest racial or ethnic group in the United States accounting for approximately 13 percent of the population. In light of this growth, the Hispanic college-age population has increased by 14 percent since 1994, expanding the potential college applicant pool (Harvey, 2002).

As Hispanic students become more concentrated at post-secondary institutions, their overrepresentation at community colleges is seen by some policy makers, researchers, and practitioners as a detriment to their educational attainment; others see it as a sign of good things to come. In general, it is noted that more than half of all students that begin at two-year institutions never achieve any type of post-secondary degree (Garcia, 2001; Rendon & Garza, 1996). For Hispanic community college students, this trend is even more pronounced, as their transfer and persistence rates are among the lowest (Harvey, 2002; Rendon & Garza, 1996). As a result, some critics view the community

college as an obstacle to further educational attainment, and ultimately as way to perpetuate social stratification (Karabel, 1972). Others argue that most Hispanic students tend to choose community colleges out of necessity, as they are often the only feasible affordable choice for a college education (Rendon & Garza, 1996). In general, it can be argued that community colleges facilitate postsecondary opportunities for those who might not otherwise attend and thereby act as a catalyst to the baccalaureate for a host of students.

FACTORS THAT AFFECT HISPANIC STUDENT ENROLLMENT AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES

For Hispanic students, the decision to attend a community college is often the most sensible choice available. Students are attracted to community colleges not always as a means of transfer to four-year institutions, but precisely because they offer vocational preparation, adult education, remedial schooling, and career enhancement for professionals. In addition, community colleges are more affordable, offer many night and weekend classes, willingly accept part-time students, offer neighborhood convenience, and have an open admissions policy. These are among the most common and practical reasons for any student who might choose to attend a community college, but for Hispanic students, there are some additional factors that affect this decision. For one, young Hispanic adults have an extraordinarily high labor force participation rate, as contributing to the household expenses is a common necessity in most Hispanic households (Fry, 2002). Hispanic women face additional cultural stressors in navigating the higher education pipeline, as entrenched gender roles in Hispanic families can act as suppressors to their educational and career aspirations (Romo, 1998; Rendon, 1992). Nevertheless, Hispanic women also continue to be more likely than their male counterparts to participate in higher education (Harvey, 2002). Further, the longer Hispanics wait to enter higher education, the more likely they will enroll in a community college, as a significant portion of the Hispanic community college population is made up of students over the age of 24 (Fry, 2002). It is important to note that a strong commitment to work and family does not prevent Hispanics from attaining post-secondary education, although a sense of these responsibilities coupled with low income status might be factors in explaining why so many attend affordable and conveniently located community colleges on a part-time basis (Fry, 2002). Ultimately, cultural validation is crucial to increasing the persistence and transfer rates among all Hispanic students in community colleges, and any interventions targeting this population must be sensitive to this type of cultural awareness (Laden, 1998). One exemplary program that has done well in employing a cultural-specific strategy is the Puente program.

AFFECTING TRANSFER RATES THROUGH PROGRAMMATIC INTERVENTION

Some states have engaged in programmatic efforts targeting Hispanic community college students, and among the most recognizable and lauded efforts is the Puente Project, a 20-year collaborative partnership between the California community colleges and the University of California. Originally conceived as an institutional response to the low transfer and associate degree completion rates of Hispanic community college students, the Puente Project currently serves students at 45 community colleges and 31 high schools throughout California. Its goal is to increase the number of educationally underserved students who transfer from two-year to four-year institutions and earn degrees.

Community college educators Patricia McGrath and Felix Galaviz founded the Puente project on the premise that greater participation by the Hispanic community would engender more institutional accountability and responsiveness, and ultimately a more effective and culturally sensitive educational environment (McGrath & Galaviz, 1996). An important documented component of the Puente project is how it addresses the unique needs of Hispanic students by affirming their ethnic identities and validating their experiences through curricular offerings (Laden, 1998). In another recent evaluation by Gandara & Bial (2001), Puente was one of seven programs nationwide to offer three or more different types of counseling services, and the only one to use a comprehensive suite of personal enrichment and social integration strategies. Specifically, the report praised the regular interaction that students have with a Puente counselor as well as a community mentor who serves as a positive role model. Another mark of success is that approximately 50 percent of Puente students who complete the Puente program transfer to a four-year institution within three years (Laden, 2000). By employing targeted early intervention as well as ongoing exposure to culturally enriched environments, the Puente model serves as a prime template in designing programs geared toward increased persistence and transfer of Hispanic students.

CONCLUSION

This Digest has explored the status of Hispanic community college students and a sampling of factors that affect their enrollment and persistence. Programs such as Puente that target early intervention, expose students to culturally validating environments, and help in the transfer process to four-year institutions, are playing a more critical role for Hispanic students' movement through the education pipeline. In light of the changing demographics of the college applicant pool, community colleges will continue to be a critical point for Hispanic students' entry into postsecondary education.

More specifically, in reconsidering the rising enrollments and the stagnant persistence rates of Hispanic students, the transfer function must be the crucial point of intervention. If real strides are to be made in increasing the overall educational achievement of this group, researchers and policymakers must continue to study and address the needs of this population, and any intervention should be focused on Hispanic students already in the higher education system.

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Although there are many terms that can be used to refer to people of Latin descent, in this Digest the term Hispanic will be used to describe students that are of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, or other Latin descent.

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