

## **Latino Student Success at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) Summaries from Presidential Interviews**

### **Overview**

In 2003-04 representatives from six baccalaureate-granting Hispanic-Serving Institutions in three state public university systems participated in a project entitled, Latino Student Success at Hispanic-Serving Institutions. These institutions include two from California State University—(Los Angeles and Dominguez Hills), two from City University of New York (Lehman College and New York City College of Technology), and two from The University of Texas (El Paso and San Antonio). All six institutions receive support through the Developing Hispanic Serving Institutions program, authorized under Title V of the Higher Education Act (as well as other federal programs supporting HSIs).

Direct involvement from campus leaders, especially their presidents, proved critical to the Latino Student Success (LSS) project. The following summary profiles information gathered from interviews with each of the LSS project presidents. A description of the research methodology and a list of the institutions and presidents are located at the end of the summary.

### **How would you define student success at your institution?**

The presidents all acknowledged the traditional definition of student success: graduation and retention rates. However, each also offered additional characteristics to define student success at their institution, such as improved GPA, student engagement, and students achieving their educational goals.

- I define student success in two ways: first (success) is helping students achieve what they sought to achieve when they enrolled. For some it may be a bachelor's degree, but for others it may be to get sufficient skills to change careers, to get a post-baccalaureate, to get a teaching credential, or to get a master's degree. The second definition of student success is degree completion.
- A successful institution guarantees as many students as possible will graduate, increases the number who graduate with high achievement, and directs students to explore disciplines where they are underrepresented. These institutions also change the country's landscape of leadership through their success.
- A successful student is persistent (he returns each semester), improves his GPA over time, is connected to the university in some way beyond the classroom, and ultimately completing a degree.
- Student success is defined by institutional retention and graduation rates, but not at the velocity that other schools use. Institutions should consider up to 10 years for graduation rates to more accurately reflect the graduation process for many of our students. The first year retention rate is an important indicator of institutional success in facilitating the transition from high school to college, so it should also

be used as a measure. We also conduct surveys of alumni to determine their professional competitiveness.

- In a perfect world, students should graduate within a reasonable period of time. However, this is not realistic for many because they are also working to support their family and attending college part-time. A lot depends on the drive of the individual too; the institution can provide them all the opportunities they need to be successful and help lower barriers they face.
- Because most students take a great deal of time to graduate, progress has to be a part of student success

### **What is Latino student success?**

The LSS presidents did not distinguish characteristics of student success by ethnicity. However, several presidents noted important factors affecting Latino student success: ensuring equal opportunity to resources, the importance of disaggregating data to know how Latino students are performing, and the importance of institutional leadership.

- For Latino students to be successful, we have to afford them the same opportunity to faculty, research, and early access as offered to other students. Too many institutions are investing their resources in the same way that they have in the past, even though demographics have changed, and the needs of students have evolved.
- Hispanic/minority student success must be a continuum reflective of undergraduate through graduate and professional education and employment.
- Our institution is majority-minority, so any student success we attain reflects the success of our minority students
- To ensure student success, presidential leadership and commitment is critical. Institutional changes that serve students from diverse backgrounds require leadership from the top and reinforcement all the way down the institution. Further, we have to embrace our geography and demographics throughout the institution so that we can create a pathway that, in turn, creates capacity for higher education (graduate school). Graduate education has to be an institutional emphasis that we can help students aspire to so that we can faculty to serve Hispanic students.

### **What is your institution doing that is having a positive effect on Latino student success?**

Each president observed that their institutional mission is to serve all students well. They each also indicated that their enrollments are either majority Latino, or majority/minority students (combined Latino and African American enrollment representing over 50 percent total enrollment) Therefore, the presidents held that most of the institutional programs and services they offer all students also serve Latino students.

- We believe that institutional activities that help Latino students succeed also benefit all students, because many of them have common needs. For example, by attempting to address the learning needs of Latino students we have created supportive and competitive learning environments that benefit all of our students.
- To support students, we have diversity in our student services and academic support staff (they are bilingual and bicultural staff), which are a valuable resource for students and help strengthen our campus climate.
- We take Latino retention issues seriously. We look at our data on transfers/articulation, as well as gate keeping courses, to inform our activities. We have set up mentor groups such as “La Junta” (Latinas relate to young women on campus to be role models), we have a program to improve writing across the curriculum (funded with Title V), and have activities specifically geared to Latino students.
- We believe students have an educational advantage and perspective if they are engaged in research, learn to write, and are able to make presentations early on in their educational career. Students who complete their bachelor’s degree here can compete with other students from “top tier” institutions as equals.
- We have good faculty who value teaching, we have instituted a learning communities program, we provide supplemental instruction, we have learning assistance programs through the Tomas Rivera Center, we have academic advising centers for students, we have many student organizations, a diverse student body, and friendly staff and institutional policies.
- We actively work to increase graduation and retention rates. We try to understand why students drop out or stop out and contact students who are in good standing but do not return. We know that many of our students need to work in order to support their efforts. We try to tell students that getting minimal skills is not enough for the long run and try to do what is in their control, to prevent students from dropping out.
- We encourage students to prioritize education in the short run, for long-term benefits. If going to college is something they are doing “on the side”, it is less likely they will complete. Families worry about the lost income, separation from family, and the possibility that the students will leave when a student goes to college. To encourage making college the priority we invite parents and family members to our school orientations so that they can understand what is required for getting a university education
- We also have a university seminar for freshman that helps to build peer groups (cohort) for students. Since many of our students are commuters, these peer

groups allows students to get “the religion” of higher education from peers as well as the university.

### **As an educational leader what does it mean to you be a “Hispanic-serving” institution?**

Each president indicated that being identified as an HSI means that institutions acknowledge their large Latino enrollment and take responsibility to serve these students well. Some LSS presidents believe that being identified as an HSI involves more: institutions must play a critical role in the broader community, their leadership can create a positive campus climate, and institutions identified as HSIs serve as “trend-setters” in higher education by serving the large, and growing Latino population.

- To be an HSI is to be at the forefront of change in higher education because of the change in demographics. We have an opportunity to be trend-setters where we have not historically been seen as an institution.
- Being a leader of a Hispanic Serving Institution brings a great deal of pride, but also commitment and accountability to make a difference in the lives of Hispanic students, families, and communities by helping Hispanics participate in higher education and complete degrees. We have increased the diversity of our faculty and courses we offer; added academic support programs such as our Title V-funded Learning Communities Program; and expanded programs such as Supplemental Instruction. We have changed policies and processes and increased campus life opportunities to give our students a stronger sense of a university community that supports diverse students and values their cultural traditions.
- The term HSI was foreign to most of the staff. Today, many more are aware and the institution is talking a little more about cultural issues and flavor because it is “seeping” into the campus climate. However, being an HSI is more than just numbers and plurality to a campus. Being an HSI is creating history.
- Our institution has a responsibility to recognize and be responsive to the people in our community, and Latinos are a large group in our community. We need to understand the external pressures they must deal with, their expectations, problems, and issues to help them have educational opportunities on our campus. We also have a responsibility to interact with other institutions with large Hispanic groups to better understand how to serve better.
- Since almost half of the student body is Latino, institutional success is tied to Latino student’s success. Our institutional role is to make sure Latinos get all the services we can provide and ensure they are quality services so that students get a quality education. And we recognize that focusing on Latino students does not have a negative impact on other students.

- Presidents must be evidence-based, informed proactive advocates, i.e., they should address the academy in terms it “values”. Presidents should become stronger advocates of the university as a *learning community*.

**Why did your institution apply to the Title V-Developing HSIs program? How do you expect your Title V program to affect Latino student outcomes?**

In general, the presidents valued the ability the HSI program gave them to improve the capacity at their institution, leverage funds from other sources, and specifically target their Latino students.

- After choosing to identify as an HSI, our staff began to see what resources were available for the institution and saw it as an opportunity to improve the institution and the services it provided its students. Today, every faculty member understands the importance of being a HSI for what they do. Programs, such as the HSI program, provide a “safety net” that allows us to build a reputation and strengthen our programs so that we can eventually compete with other prominent institutions.
- We want all students to succeed, and if most students are Latino, then we want them to succeed, and if have to go after earmarked and specific fund to provide quality services, we will do so. This approach reflects our institutional leadership. We expect our programs to enhance Latino students’ persistence, skills that promote college success, GPA, feeling of belonging and support, and ultimately retention and graduation rates, though those are not the only or most critical measures.
- The Title V program provides federal funds, which, in turn, institutions can use as leverage to gain access to additional resources to leverage the services they are interested in providing. However, institutions must balance this with serving all students on campus.
- My institution decided to apply for the HSI program because a large number of our students are minorities and most “hurdles” these students face are the same. We felt that getting funds to do a project that helps our Hispanic students as a pilot could help all students and have broader implementation.
- While HSIs are defined by Latino enrollment, the Title V grant is not solely about Latino students. While there is sensitivity that the institution is “non-majority,” the Title V funds and designation as an HSI allows us to talk about Latinos and conduct activities that target Latino students. Our activities funded by Title V, while targeting Latinos, address retention overall, which benefits all students.

**What is the relationship between institutional capacity building and educational outcomes?**

The presidents discussed the need for long-term investment in both institutional capacity building and efforts to address educational outcomes. However, the challenge they face is to establish direct links and immediate results sought by funders (public and private). The LSS Presidents acknowledge their responsibility to help develop

appropriate time frames and measures to assess the impact of capacity building and outcomes prompted by the current national accountability discussion.

- Capacity building, if done right, should enhance educational outcomes for all students, not those most likely to be successful; good capacity building may not be linked overnight to educational outcomes. The link between capacity building and educational outcomes is hard to understand and involves trying to identify what it takes to get change to happen at an institution. However, we do know that change does not happen overnight because an institution is trying to change several cultures: that of the faculty and institution with systemic modification, and that of students. As if this weren't complicated enough, it is further impacted by what happens outside the institution, which we have no control over.
- What's an appropriate timeframe to see change in educational outcomes? Both capacity-building and educational outcomes are tied to what institutions are doing. HSIs are investing in programmatic activities rather than in institutional investments.
- It is important to try to tease out cross-cutting issues between institutions so that we do not reinvent the wheel or take a solo approach that may not be effective. It is also important to provide more general oversight of proven strategies that can go beyond a single institution (model to apply in other settings).
- A majority of our students are transfer students so if we could segregate our work between dealing with students with financial support between high school graduate (younger) and working students (transfer and part-time), we might have a better way to measure the impact of capacity-building with educational outcomes.

### **What measures of accountability are appropriate for assessing institutional effectiveness in educating Latino students?**

Each president pointed out the complexities of developing measures applicable to all institutions, given the diversity of institutions in higher education. Beyond the traditional graduation and retention rates as measures for institutional effectiveness, they offered alternatives and suggested that multiple measures of effectiveness would better represent the "value-added" to a student's experience provided by the institution.

- While retention and graduation rates are important, so is high achievement; and, we must find ways to close the achievement gap at all education levels.
- We need to develop internal institutional guidelines to talk about what students have accomplished while they are at our campuses and be able to prove through value-added and on-going measures that students have done well. An internal assessment will also strengthen institutional practices. We need to find a way to measure value-added by looking at the starting and ending points of a student's education.
- Using multiple measures, and including ways to look at value-added is much fairer than other general measures currently used. We are exploring variables NSSE is

using because it is a start to defining value-added of an institution to predict achievement by measuring what an institution is and can be doing with student engagement. However, while the value-added to a student's education is a good idea, the issue is how to operationalize value-added as a viable measure.

- Some students have to take longer to complete their education because of other responsibilities. We have to be careful not to discriminate against those who cannot complete on time or label them as “failures” and thus their institutions as “failures” as well. Therefore, I don't think that time-to-degree is an appropriate measure for institutions serving Latinos and low-income students. However, we must acknowledge that the longer it takes, the higher chance students won't complete.
- Institutions have to ask if students who come in for one year and leave but become successful in what they do are a success for the institution, even if that student never gets a degree. And every institution is different, as are students' experiences. Even from the same family, children are different. It would be so easy if all students were the same, but that is not the case.
- Much of the information for assessments is anecdotal. This information tells you what went on after the fact, but does not really help improve the quality of the education at the moment. Tests are not going away, but we have to look at more than tests because students start out at so many different points and come with so many different experiences.
- It is important that measures are appropriate to an institution. Graduation and retention rates are the standard measures of accountability. However, if we only use a number, we don't recognize that this number is influenced by other factors: the students' background and their real world experience and environment. Therefore, we should use these rates, but with caution. Another potential measure is considering the next steps of students who complete (get job, keep job, and stay in field studied). However, if we only look at outcomes, we miss the richness of the contribution higher education had on the student and other potential impacts not measured by employment. Another measure might be a test used for outcomes. However, we do not know that a test can define success and are not sure that it tells you whether the institution has been successful or not. Yet another measure might be looking at the number of students who go to graduate or professional school. However, since it is not in the mission of most institutions to prepare students for graduate education, this measure may be hard to use and not always be appropriate.
- We do need some of the indicators being used today because they are a way to evaluate student learning and validate skills. However, we have to look at the value-added of the institution rather than limiting our view of success to graduation. For example, civic participation rates can be a measure of success because the institution actively encourages our students to be active participants in their community. Another potential measure might be mobility in the workplace. The idea

behind this measure is that a student's experience at an HSI facilitates their access to other opportunities, whether or not they complete a degree.

- The ratio of Latino students applying with the number that were admitted and enrolled; the ratio of opportunity to persistence to the percentage of Latino students returning each semester; an increase in academic skills; student improvement in GPA; overall GPA; retention and graduation rates in comparison to other UTSA students and Latino students at other universities; data from NSSE and other assessment instruments re feelings of belonging, attitudes about services, etc. that show a comfort level with the institution to get needs met that facilitate academic success.

### **What role, if any do faculty play in Latino student success?**

Presidents discussed the important role of faculty in educating students and supporting student success. Several presidents shared examples of faculty working as mentors or in research and publishing to enrich the student's education as well as the institutional environment.

- Our most important asset for student success is the commitment and buy-in of our faculty to our educational enterprise. Our faculty shows that they are committed to student success. If faculty don't have high expectations and are willing to work to ensure success, then Latino student success won't take place as needed.
- Faculty play a major role – faculty can offer students possibilities they may never have imagined and play important roles inside and beyond the classroom. Many of our students become involved in research, publishing, and other academic opportunities because of faculty and end up pursuing graduate education.
- Because the role of faculty is so critical to student success, we have strengthened our expectations of quality. Whereas ten years ago our focus may have been on instructional performance, today we focus much more on educational performance.
- We must find better ways to identify, employ, and nurture faculty and staff who value the proposition that excellence and diversity must go hand-in-hand.
- Our institution has a great deal of faculty interaction. We are spending more time with new faculty each year in orientation session and in other activities so that we can share with them our student profile and set the vision and tone of the institution because they are the ones that interact with the students.

### **How should the Higher Education Act be changed to help institutions better serve Hispanic students?**

The Higher Education Act authorizes most federal programs in higher education and is due for reauthorization. Presidents were asked, based on their experiences leading HSIs, to suggest changes to federal policy and programs. In general, presidents



thought more resources should be invested in student financial aid, and in programs that support institutional development and student services.

- We need to invest in systemic change, rather than just an institutional project, for a long-term commitment. We also need to get research universities to make a greater commitment to diversity. They can create critical pathways to graduate education and success for these students. For example, there should be a focus for AAU institutions to increase, on an annual basis, the number of minority students who get PhDs. There could also be partnerships between HSIs and Research I institutions to develop this future faculty.
- I think we need to expand Title V and other funding for student success programs such as learning communities. I think we need to support more K-16 programs that promote bridges to higher education.
- First, we should eliminate the wait out period for Title V. Institutions cannot create long-lasting institutional change in three-to-five years because they need a continuity of funding. Second, we need to support field projects with more money, rather than spreading the funds too thinly, and give them sufficient support and time to succeed. If these projects are successful, they can better inform institutional practice.

### Methodology

Over a three-week period in 2003, each president participated in an interview conducted by project Co-PI Sarita Brown with project team member Deborah Santiago collecting the data. In general, the questions provided in this summary are the questions posed to each president. Notes from each interview were reviewed and assembled into individual files. For this summary, responses from individual interviews were grouped by questions as appropriate.

<b>LSS at HSIs Project: Participating Institutions</b>	<b>President</b>
California State University-Dominguez Hills	James Lyons
California State University-Los Angeles	James Rosser
City University of New York—New York City College of Technology	Fred Beaufait
City University of New York—Lehman College	Ricardo Fernandez
The University of Texas at El Paso	Diana Natalicio
The University of Texas at San Antonio	Ricardo Romo

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Prepared by: Deborah Santiago, Principal, *Excelencia in Education*, 7/2/04



*Excelencia in Education* partnered with six HSIs to conduct the Latino Student Success at Hispanic-Serving Institutions Demonstration Project. In addition to this line of work, *Excelencia in Education* provides non-partisan, data-driven analysis on the educational status of Latino students and highlights education policies and institutional practices that support Latino academic achievement. For more information about *Excelencia* please visit [www.EdExcelencia.org](http://www.EdExcelencia.org).