Increasing Latina/o College Completion: Mistakes and Opportunities

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Abstract

In this essay, the authors accomplish three tasks: (1) identify common limitations of programs designed to increase the success rates of Latina/o college students, (2) describe the common characteristics of programs that exhibit effective practice, and (3) provide a framework to guide colleges and universities in designing effective program components that address the common factors impeding Latina/o student success in college.

Introduction

The American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education, Inc. (AAHHE) is a national organization devoted to improving the educational experiences and outcomes of Hispanics in colleges and universities. On the final day of the 2011 AAHHE national conference, a large audience sat comfortably during the final plenary session looking onto an ornate stage filled with award recipients. Each year, AAHHE recognizes outstanding achievements in the areas of leadership, scholarship, teaching, technology, and the arts. The room overflowed with prominent scholars, leaders, and teachers who have devoted their entire careers to increasing the success of Latinas/os in higher education. The compilation of their work is substantial and has created opportunities for new generations of Latinas/os in higher education that would have never existed without their effort and sacrifice.

Juxtapose this moment with the current state of Latina/o college completion, however, and it accentuates a compelling conundrum: Why has the gap between White and Latina/o college degree attainment widened over the past three decades instead of narrowed? More Latinas/os are participating in college than ever before (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009); and some argue that they are better prepared for college than 15 years ago

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(ACT, 2007). Unfortunately, only 12% of Latinas/os between the ages 25 to 29 hold a

bachelors degree, which is 25 percentage points lower than the 37% degree attainment

level of Whites (Aud, Hussar, Planty, and Snyder, 2010). Moreover, since 1971, the gap

between Latina/o and White degree attainment has grown by more than 11 percentage

points. For those who feel compelled to reverse this trend, at least two options exist: (a)

work harder or (b) work differently. The purpose of this article is to provide insights into

how we might work differently.

To be clear, the causes for the gap between White and Latina/o degree attainment is

more complex than can be addressed here. Furthermore, shrinking federal and state

dollars allocated to financing public higher education make it that much more difficult to

gain any ground (Heller, 2009). Still, we argue that the appraisal of existing programs

designed to increase degree attainment among Latinas/os might provide insights into

which structures and processes are promising and those that are not. The following

section describes our approach to accomplish this task.

Methodology

To narrow our focus on efforts to increase Latina/o degree attainment levels, we

began by gathering a list of college-based intervention programs that were reviewed and

recognized by an external organization as a "promising practice." The U.S. Department of

Health and Human Services (2010), defines a promising practice as "a program, activity or

strategy that has worked within one organization and shows promise during its early

stages for becoming a best practice with long term sustainable impact. A promising practice

must have some objective basis for claiming effectiveness and must have the potential for

replication among other organizations (p. 104)." Specifically, we targeted the winners and

finalists of an annual, national competition, *Examples of Excelencia* (Excelencia in

Education, 2008; 2009; 2010). Administered by the national organization *Excelencia in*

Education (www.edexcelencia.org), *Examples of Excelencia* was designed to identify

effective, college-based programs that increase achievement for Latina/o students at the

associate, baccalaureate, and graduate levels, publicly recognize such programs, and

disseminate the profiles of the programs to a wide audience.

During the 2010 competition, for example, more than 90 institutional programs

were nominated to be *Examples of Excelencia*. Three programs won the 2010 competition,

and 10 additional programs were recognized as finalists. To be considered, each program

was required to submit data and a narrative describing its history, services provided, staff,

budget, the number of students served, and evidence of its effectiveness in improving

outcomes for Latina/o students. The following criteria were applied during the review of

the programs and used to determine the winners and finalists: (a) record of graduation

rates for Latina/o students, (b) leadership that demonstrated a commitment to

accelerating Latina/o student achievement, (c) measurement of student progress, (d)

efforts to confront obstacles to student achievement, (e) implementation of strategies to

attain specific program goals, (f) rationale of program components, (g) application of the

concepts that were central to the program, and (h) qualitative or quantitative data that

pointed to the program's impact.

After reviewing the program profiles, we sent emails to the winners and finalists of

the 2008, 2009, and 2010 competition requesting a telephone interview (Miller & Salkind,

2003). In total, we conducted telephone interviews using a protocol of open-ended

questions (Fontana & Frey, 2005) with the directors of 25 programs, representing 25

different institutions in 8 states. The vast majority of the programs interviewed were

located in California and Texas.   Two broad research questions guided our investigation of

these programs: (1) what characteristics did the programs have in common that

contributed to their capacity to increase Latina/o college degree attainment? (2) what

characteristics did they have in common that limited their capacity to increase Latina/o

college degree attainment? In addition to the topics that correspond with the criteria used

for the national competition, we asked questions about the scholarly literature used in the

design of the program, the process of tracking students, data disaggregation, plans to

increase the scale of the program, and evaluation methods. The following section

summarizes the common limitations that impeded the capacity of many programs to

increase Latina/o student success in college.

Findings

   Our interviews yielded several common characteristics among the programs that

revealed both mistakes or limitations, and examples of effective practices. The common

characteristics are summarized in Table 1, but an in-depth discussion follows.

Table 1: Common Limitations and Effective Practices

Common Mistakes/Limitations Identified in Programs Studied	Characteristics of Effective Practices Identified in Programs Studied
Insufficient funding to serve an adequate number of students or fully address the complex and multiple needs of Latina/o students.	Utilization of formative evaluation data.
Lack of longitudinal, disaggregated cohort tracking.	Longitudinal, disaggregated cohort tracking
Underutilization of the scholarly literature, in general.	Utilization of the scholarly literature, in general
Underutilization of the scholarly literature that focused on Latina/o college students, specifically.	
Lack of localized qualitative or survey data that identified the experiences and challenges of Latina/o students specific to the campus or region.	Collection and use of local data to that identified the experiences and challenges of Latina/o students specific to the campus or region

There were six common limitations found in our investigation of the programs: (a) insufficient funding, (b) small numbers of students served by the program, (c) lack of longitudinal, disaggregated cohort tracking, (d) underutilization of the scholarly literature, in general (e) underutilization of the scholarly literature that focused on Latina/o college students, specifically and (f) a lack of local data that identified the experiences and challenges of Latina/o students specific to the campus or region.

Insufficient Funding

In fairness to the individuals that implemented and sustained these interventions, many programs simply lacked the funding to serve adequate numbers of students or effectively address the complex and multiple needs of their students. Often, the program

directors shared that they wished they could have served more students and offer more

services, but that they simply did not have enough financial resources to meet student

demand. The directors also indicated that they regularly served more students than

planned and, consequently, were concerned about their capacity to sustain program quality

and outcomes.

Small Numbers of Students Served by the Program without a Scale-up Plan

Related to insufficient funding, many of the programs served very small numbers of

students, too few to have any significant impact on the overall percentage of Latina/o

students completing a degree at their institution. Frequently, we found programs that

served less than 5 percent of the Latinas/os attending the institution. Many of these

programs were in existence for more than 10 years, which is far too long to be considered

in a pilot phase. For those that had been in existence for less than 5 years, there was not a

plan to increase the scale of the program to serve more students. Consequently, despite an

increase in the success rates of Latina/o students served by the program, the degree

attainment rate for Latinas/os at the various institutions overall did not increase.

Lack of Longitudinal, Disaggregated Cohort Tracking

Another common limitation found in our study was the absence of a plan and

process to track student cohorts served by the programs over time. Longitudinal,

disaggregated cohort tracking is a process of monitoring a specific group of students (e.g.,

first-time-in-college Latina/o students) over a specified period of time (e.g, first term to

second term or first year to second year). Tracking a specific group of students is an

effective way to identify achievement gaps, as well as assess the impact of a program on its

participants over time (Voorhees & Lee, 2009). Unfortunately, many of the programs in

our investigation did not track their students as cohorts. Rather, program directors often cited the total number of students served by the program or the numbers of students participating in specific program activities. Rarely, did we encounter a program that tracked specific outcome measures, such as fall-to-spring persistence rates, for a specific cohort of students.

Underutilization of the Scholarly Literature, in General

Most of the programs designed their components and strategies without consulting the scholarly literature that identified the underlying factors impeding student success in college. Rather, programs were often built based on the assumptions and experiences of a small group of administrators, staff, or faculty or as a result of a presentation that was made about an existing program at a different institution that purported increases in student success. Occasionally, program directors cited the work of Vincent Tinto (1975; 1994; 2001) or indicated that their program was based on the literature on student engagement (Kuh, Cruce, & Shoup, 2008). On the whole, it was clear that the scholarly literature was underutilized.

Underutilization of the Scholarly Literature on Latina/o College Students

Similarly, we found that the vast majority of the programs had not considered or reviewed the scholarly literature that identified the factors impeding the success of *Latina/o* college students, specifically. Over the past 15 years, a new generation of scholars has produced new insights into the challenges and experiences of Latina/o students in college. Solorzano (1998), for example, found that Chicana/o students often experience microaggressions that negatively impact their experiences on campus. Pierce (1974) described microaggressions as subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed

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toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously. Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that perceptions of campus racial climate strongly impacts Latino students' sense of belonging on campus. And, Gonzalez, Stoner, and Jovel (2003) found that access to social capital in community colleges influences Latinas to further their education at a university. Stanton-Salazar (1995) refers to social capital as "social relationships from which an individual is potentially able to derive institutional support," such as guidance for the process of transferring from a community college to a university. Each of these studies and their findings have been cited frequently in the literature. Unfortunately, few of the program directors in our study were aware of them or how such insights could enhance their ability to serve Latina/o students more effectively.

Lack of Local Data Collected or Used to Identify the Challenges of Latina/o Students

Finally, very few of the programs we investigated collected and used local data that shed light on the localized experiences and challenges of the Latina/o students at their institutions. Program directors could identify specific challenges that they observed among some of their students. Anecdotes were common responses when asked about a local understanding of their student experiences on campus. Unfortunately, there was often no systematic data collection effort that addressed the local student experience that could be used to design new program components or enhance the effectiveness of their services or activities. No one knew, for example, if obtaining consistent transportation to and from college was a challenge for a few students or for a large number of their Latina/o students. In addition, no one knew if the campus culture was viewed as supportive or hostile during the students' first year in college. Without a national or local understanding of the barriers experienced by Latina/o students in college, many of these programs approached their

work with a great deal of assumptions and guesswork. The following sections outline the common characteristics of the programs that facilitated effective practice.

There were four common characteristics found in our investigation of the programs that represented effective practice: (a) longitudinal, disaggregated cohort tracking, (b) utilization of formative evaluation data, (c) utilization of the scholarly literature, and (d) collecting and using local data to revise and enhance services to students.

Longitudinal, Disaggregated Cohort Tracking

A few of the programs in our study served as sound examples of tracking and monitoring the progress of their student cohorts. One of the program directors, for example, knew that their 2008 cohort had higher fall-to-spring persistence rates than their 2007 and 2006 cohorts. They also found that the gap in persistence rates between Latina/o and White students had shrunk by two percentage points. Another program director noticed a slight decline in the GPA of her 2009 cohort, and was able to compare it to the increases in the number of students served by the program. The program director presented this data to her team and used it to discuss methods of serving a consistent number of students from year to year. Finally, we found a program that celebrated not only the individual achievement of their students, but also achievement gains in the overall cohort.

Utilization of Formative Evaluation Data

Formative evaluation is the process of collecting and using data to strengthen or improve the components of a program intervention. It may focus on the delivery of the program, the quality of its implementation, personnel procedures, and the organizational context (Trochim & Donnelly, 2006). During our investigation, there were a small number

of programs that collected and used formative evaluation data to enhance the effectiveness of their programs. For example, one program assessed the learning students acquired from their new student orientation program. After reviewing the assessment data, they realized that most of the students still had questions about why they were placed into remedial math courses and how long it would take them to be enrolled in a college-level math course. In response to the data, staff from the program organized a follow-up workshop devoted to the topic of accelerating student progress in math. Another program used formative evaluation data to gather feedback on the effectiveness of their peer mentors. Whereas most of the data shed positive light on the mentors, other data suggested that students were struggling with communicating with their mentors. Specifically, students perceived that they would "bother" the mentors if they asked them too many questions via email. The program staff responded by hosting a mentor/mentee breakfast that focused on the topic of mentor/mentee communication and expectations. There were other examples of programs using formative evaluation data to enhance the effectiveness of a program component. Unfortunately, it was not common practice across all programs.

Utilization of the Scholarly Literature

Another feature of effective practice was the utilization of the scholarly literature. Although not a widespread practice for the programs that we studied, there were a few programs that had thoroughly reviewed the literature and used the common findings to design the specific components of their interventions. One of the programs targeted Latinas/os in STEM fields, for example, and identified the common factors that impeded adequate representation of Latinas/os in STEM fields. They designed each of their program components to address the common factors impeding adequate representation of

Latinas/os in STEM fields. They also assessed the extent to which the components of their program effectively addressed each common factor. It was not uncommon to discover one program exhibiting multiple characteristics of effective practice. In addition to thoroughly reviewing and using the literature in the design of their intervention, this program also used longitudinal, disaggregated cohort tracking and formative evaluation data to strengthen the effectiveness of their program components.

Using Local Data to Design and Revise Services to Students

Finally, we found two programs that collected local data that identified the challenges and barriers Latina/o students experienced at their institutions. They used local data in the design or re-design of their intervention components. For example, one of the colleges conducted focus groups with first year Latina/o students to identify the primary challenges they encountered during the first semester. Another college conducted individual interviews prior to the fall semester with each of their in-coming students to identify their primary concerns and expectations. In both cases, the programs used the local data to design specific intervention components to address the needs of their students. The following section provides a discussion of the results in the context of effective, data-informed practice.

Discussion

As summarized in our findings, even among programs that were recognized as examples of excellence, there were common limitations that impeded their efforts to increase the primary goal of Latina/o college degree attainment. We also found, however, common characteristics and processes that enabled programs to enhance their effectiveness. In an effort to communicate what programs can do to be more effective, we

offer the following framework that captures the primary lessons learned from this study. The purpose of the framework is two-fold: (a) to serve as a guide for programmatic efforts to increase Latina/o student success in college, and (b) to offer simple and consistent language to facilitate such efforts.

Table 2: The Four Components of Increasing Latina/o College Student Success.*

Component One	Component Two	Component Three	Component Three
"Identification of Achievement Gaps"	**"Why"**	**"Intervention"**	**"Evaluation, Modification, & Scale"**
Use *Longitudinal, Disaggregated, Cohort* data to determine: Any gaps in Latina/o achievement with regard to term-to-term and year-to-year persistence, successful completion of developmental education, successful completion of gatekeeper courses (e.g., college algebra), and successful completion of a degree, certificate, or transfer.	Conduct a review of the scholarly literature to acquire a national perspective of the common factors impeding Latina/o student success. Collect local data to identify the common factors that impede Latina/o student success on a specific campus.	Use data from Component Two to revise or design new intervention components to effectively address the underlying factors impeding Latina/o student success.	Collect, analyze, and use evaluation data to answer: 1) To what extent did the intervention components effectively address the underlying factors impeding Latina/o student success? 2) To what extent did the program increase Latina/o student success? Make modifications based on evaluation results. Scale-up or down the program based evaluation results.

*revised from Gonzalez, K. P. (2009) Using data to increase student success: A focus on diagnosis. Lumina Foundation for Education.

We argue that individuals designing and implementing programmatic efforts to increase student success need to address four basic components. Component number one is about identifying achievement gaps and involves collecting and analyzing longitudinal, disaggregated cohort data. As mentioned earlier, longitudinal, disaggregated cohort tracking is a process of monitoring a specific group of students over a specified period of

time. Disaggregating the data allows a college to identify any gaps in Latina/o achievement

with regard to term-to-term and year-to-year persistence, successful completion of

developmental education, successful completion of gatekeeper courses (e.g., college

algebra), and successful completion of a degree, certificate, or transfer. Longitudinal,

disaggregated cohort tracking also enables a college to determine where it should focus its

time and resources to close achievement gaps. For example, should a college focus on

increasing Latina/o success rates in: (a) a specific gatekeeper course, (b) fall-to-spring

persistence, or (c) successful completion of remedial courses.

The second component shifts the focus from identifying achievement gaps to

understanding *why* achievement gaps exist. *Why* are Latina/o students less likely to

persist, for example? Component number two involves two steps. First, conduct a review

of the scholarly literature to acquire a national perspective of the common factors

impeding Latina/o student success. Second, collect local data to identify the common

factors that impede Latina/o student success on a specific campus. Both of these steps

answers the "why" question and enables colleges to know which issues to address to

increase Latina/o college student success. Ignoring this second component predisposes a

college to rely on guesswork and untested assumptions to guide their work.

Once a college has answered the "why" question, it is now ready to design or

redesign a program to increase Latina/o student success. Drawing from the review of the

scholarly literature and the local data, a college can design intervention components that

specifically address common factors that impede Latina/o student success. A college can

choose to prioritize common factors from a national context as a result of their review of

the scholarly literature or local factors that are specific to a campus or region. A college also can make an effort to address both perspectives.

Component number four involves the evaluation of a program's intervention components to increase student success. Component number four uses formative and summative evaluation data to determine: (a) the effectiveness of an intervention component in addressing the common underlying factors impeding Latina/o student success and (b) the extent to which the program led to increases in Latina/o student success. The use of evaluation data also enables a college to discuss and plan a process of scaling-up the program to serve more students, keeping in mind the goal of increasing college degree attainment for all Latina/o students at the institution.

As summarized in Table 1, there are four components to using data to increase student success. Component number one involves the use of longitudinal, disaggregated, cohort data to identify achievement gaps. Component number two entails using the scholarly literature and local data to answer the "why" question and identify the common factors that impede Latina/o student success. Component number three involves designing program components that address the underlying factors impeding Latina/o student success. Finally, component number four includes evaluating: (a) the effectiveness of the program's intervention components in addressing the underlying factors and (b) the extent to which the college's program increased student success.

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