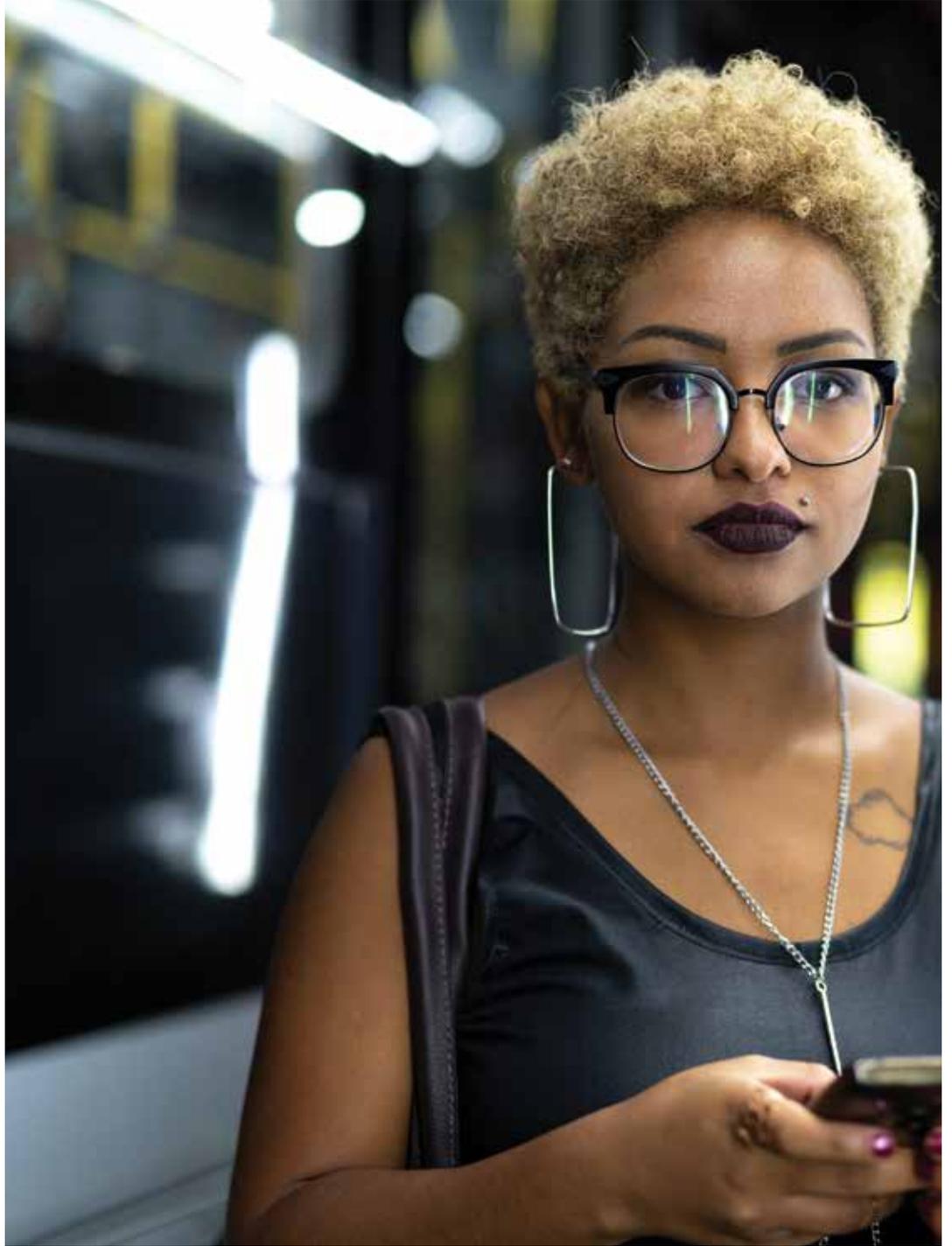
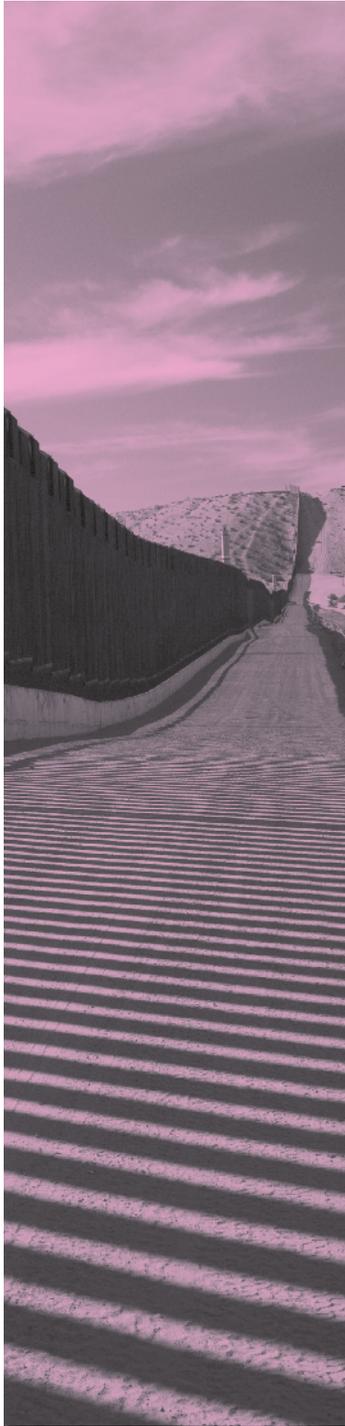


Creating a Sense of Community and Belonging for Latinx Students





Jorge Ochoa remembers what it was like to start the college admission process. He describes it as a “somewhat impossible landscape to maneuver if you are a first-gen Latinx student.”

Now Ochoa works for as a senior manager of college and career pathways at the KIPP Foundation, where he says that access to quality college counseling is the No.1 tool to ensure our Latinx student population is climbing the mountain to and through college.

“As a once undocumented, first-gen student, I can speak to how difficult it was for me to explain to my family everything that was necessary to apply to college—this was coupled with the already difficult conversation I had to have about moving away eight hours to attend UCLA,” he recalled.

Ochoa’s experiences aren’t unique. Many Latinx students face the similar circumstances when it is time to apply for college.

Latinx (an inclusive, gender-neutral term used in lieu of Latino or Latina) students, like many underserved populations, have traditionally faced barriers to higher education.

All minority groups have challenges—many overlap, but not all are the same. “Unlike African-Americans who had HBCUs or Native Americans that had tribal colleges, there were no institutions established to focus on the educational needs of Hispanic students,” explains Clyde E. Moore III, associate director of diversity enrichment programs at the University of Oklahoma.

A sense of “not belonging” can also hinder success of Latinx students due to their unique circumstances in the United States.

The Latinx population reached an all-time high of nearly 58 million in 2016 and has been the principal driver of demographic growth, accounting for half of national population growth since 2000, according to the Pew Research Center. So, if we want our nation to succeed, it is essential that this part of the population succeeds.

BARRIERS TO SUCCESS FOR LATINX STUDENTS

Unlike African-American, Native American, or other first-generation students, English isn’t often the primary language spoken at home for Latinx students. Communicating with families can be challenge, but many higher education institutions are tackling the language hurdle.

“In the past, the language barrier was a huge issue; most publications and information about college was not translated into Spanish. For many schools that can be an easy fix. At FIU we have publications translated into Spanish and Creole,” said David Dugard, admissions coordinator at Florida International University in Miami, Florida.

Tougher challenges for Latinx students revolve around the cost of college, the fear of student loan debt, and oftentimes minimal knowledge of the college application process and federal financial aid.

“The rising cost of college and limited early exposure to overnight visits to colleges continue to be the two primary barriers that impact Latinx student college enrollment,” said Chris Nieto, senior vice president for program development and expansion at the National Hispanic Institute. “In addition, Latinx students still lack an extensive network of colleges that are invested in their community and family making building family trust and support a challenge.”

Another key difference between barriers for Latinx and other students is the role of a student within a Latinx family.

By Elaina Loveland

“One additional barrier that may not be as easily identifiable is understanding that college becomes a family decision due to the collective nature of the Latinx family structure,” notes Nieto. “Removing a child from the household potentially means removing family income or a caretaker for siblings or other family members.”

If students are undocumented—as some Latinx students are—they face even more barriers to higher education.

“They have to deal with the ever-changing political landscape dealing with their status in the US,” said Moore. “Those who were able to sign up for DACA now have to worry about the program’s future and, if it goes away, what their future in the US holds. Also, DACA students cannot receive federal student aid and most states make it difficult for DACA students to receive state aid, so finances are a major barrier for undocumented students.”

OVERCOMING BARRIERS AND SETTING THE STAGE FOR SUCCESS

Earlier exposure to the college process and education about college admission can help Latinx students and families be better prepared to navigate the path to college. “Latinx students need to have continued dialogue with their family about what college will look like in the future for the entire family; this can begin as early as ninth grade so by the time a student enters their senior year, the family is ready and supportive,” suggested Nieto.

He also recommended that Latinx students should have early overnight experiences to college to help them begin to “psychologically prepare both the student and family of college life.”

Networking with community organizations in the Latinx community can build connections to the Latinx population.

“Colleges need to be connected to organizations that not only have access to the college-bound Latinx students, but also collaborate with these organizations to create more meaningful and enriching college experiences that allow Latinx students to be active members in campus and Latinx community life,” said Nieto. “This would require colleges to look beyond having cultural events on campus, but opportunities for Latinx students to play more active and visible roles in Latinx community life in the college community and back home.”

Fostering a sense of belonging on campus is also very important to help Latinx students overcome the barrier of access to higher education

“All too many times, Latinx students may not feel welcomed on campus both socially and culturally when visiting college campuses,” explained Nieto.

Creating a strong sense of cultural and community identity is important for Latinx student development prior to enrolling into college, according to Nieto. “Colleges can do their part, too, in facilitating a more culturally grounded and community connected Latinx student through their outreach efforts and community partnerships on campus.”

GETTING TO COLLEGE DOESN'T ALWAYS EQUAL COMPLETION

The percentage of Hispanic 18 to 24-year-olds enrolled in college has climbed from about 22 percent in 2000 to nearly 35 percent today, according to statistics published by the US Department of Education.

TIPS FOR RECRUITING LATINX STUDENTS

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- **Be cautious of bias.** Latinx students aren’t always students of color and low-income and first-generation. Latinx students have a wide array of experiences and they all deserve respect and appreciation.
- **Analyze your prospect student data.** Where are Latinx students applying from? The Pew Research Center analyzed that “from 2007 to 2014, the Northeast Region accounted for a larger share of Latinx population growth than in prior periods” and “South Dakota has the fastest-growing state Latinx population since 2000.” While Latinx students continue to be represented in high numbers in the Southwest, the population is growing at fast rates across the country and we can no longer assume that you go to X state to find Latinx students.
- **Consider different ways of reaching Latinx students.** If traveling is not an option, how is your institution connecting and engaging with Latinx students? Be creative and think outside the box. Our office has recently embarked on a new way to engage with students who aren’t able to come to campus because after looking at our data, we saw that many students who are able to visit campus are often privileged. We have used chats, increased our diversity fly-in program budget, and will use webinars to connect students to various aspects of what life is like at our institution.
- **Meet them in their communities.** Work with community-based organizations, find out which groups and organizations or high school counselors are doing great work with Latinx students and work to build relationships with them.

Tips provided by Michelle Gonzalez, senior assistant dean of admissions at Pomona College (CA) and Cyrus Nichols, associate director for recruitment and outreach in the Office of Admissions at the University of Oregon.

However, just because these students are getting to college in greater numbers, it does not necessarily equate into student success. Six years after beginning college, 35 percent of Hispanic students drop out without earning a degree, compared with only 27 percent of white students, according to the National Student Clearinghouse.

Many Latinx students begin college at community colleges.

“Latinx students are more likely to be first-generation college-goers and choose to begin at community colleges because of cost, the colleges are close to where they live, and they offer flexible schedules,” noted Sarita Brown, president of *Excelencia* in Education, a nonprofit organization in Washington, DC dedicated to advancing Latinx student success in higher education.

Many community colleges have transfer pathway articulation agreements with four-year institutions to help ease the transition from a community

college to a four-year institution. But still, Latinx students sometimes fall through the cracks—and at a greater rate than their white peers.

Brown said that to help Latinx and other students succeed, institutions can focus on student success as an institutional metric. “Institutions that apply a tactical strategy to the use of student data and hold themselves accountable for the impact they have on students are improving students’ experiences and seeing increases in completion,” she explained.

WHY RECRUITING AND RETAINING LATINX STUDENTS MATTERS

“The Latinx student high school graduation population is growing the fastest, and other populations are either shrinking or staying flat; it’s in colleges’ economic self-interest to learn how to attract and retain Latinx students to help reach enrollment goals,” said Cyrus Nichols, associate director for recruitment and outreach at the University of Oregon.

“Beyond the fact that the Latinx population in the US is rising, recruiting and welcoming Latinx students for campus diversity matters because of the diverse perspective they bring to the conversations,” noted Ochoa. “Looking beyond numbers, we must be better as a country of educating our youth and young adults in a landscape that mirrors the world they live in. When the population in the US is almost equal white and people of color, our colleges and universities cannot continue to lack in diversity the way they do.”

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LATINX STUDENT SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

- Make college a family decision-making process.
- Include parents in discussions early.
- Connect parents with other parents of current students and/or alumni.
- Encourage Latinx students their ninth grade year to seek out leadership opportunities and overnight college visits.

Tips provided by Chris Nieto, senior vice president for program development and expansion at the National Hispanic Institute

The barriers to higher education for Latinx students begin way before they even begin to think about going to college. It begins as early as starting kindergarten.

“Many Latinx students begin their formalized schooling without the economic, social, and educational resources afforded to others, planting in them this idea that they don’t belong. These initial disadvantages often stem from parents’ immigrant and socioeconomic status, their lack of

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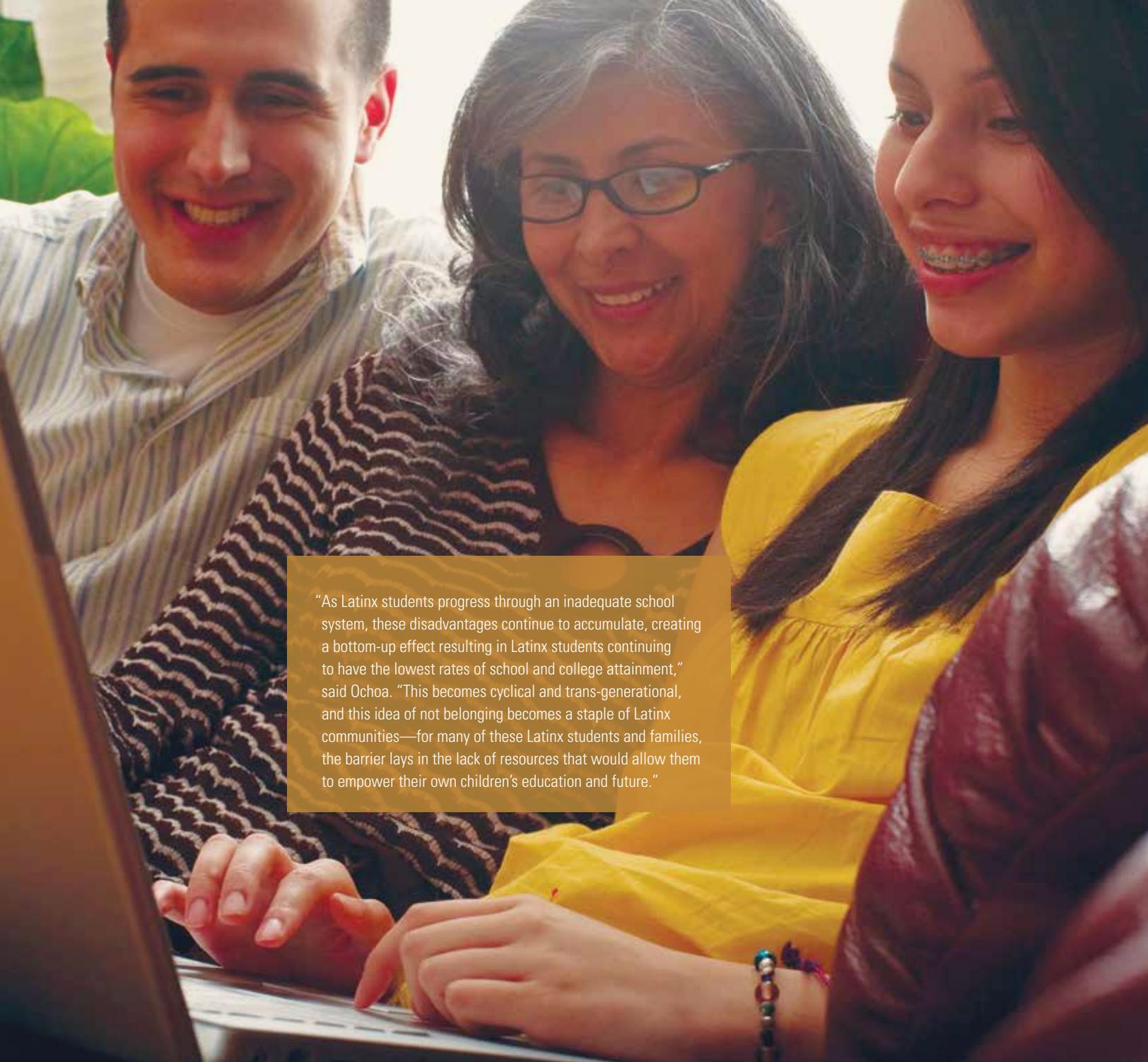
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“As Latinx students progress through an inadequate school system, these disadvantages continue to accumulate, creating a bottom-up effect resulting in Latinx students continuing to have the lowest rates of school and college attainment,” said Ochoa. “This becomes cyclical and trans-generational, and this idea of not belonging becomes a staple of Latinx communities—for many of these Latinx students and families, the barrier lays in the lack of resources that would allow them to empower their own children’s education and future.”

knowledge about the complicated US education system, and language barriers,” explained Ochoa.

“As Latinx students progress through an inadequate school system, these disadvantages continue to accumulate, creating a bottom-up effect resulting in Latinx students continuing to have the lowest rates of school and college attainment,” said Ochoa. “This becomes cyclical and trans-generational, and this idea of not belonging becomes a staple of Latinx communities—for many of these Latinx students and families, the barrier lays in the lack of resources that would allow them to empower their own children’s education and future.”

Latinx families have the desire to see their children succeed—but this is new territory. That’s where the role of counselors come into play. Reaching

these families has the power to increase the number of Latinx students applying to college—and with family support, they are more likely to complete college as well.

“It’s important that Latinx people succeed in college, because they can then be in these counselor roles and help other Latinx students. A white counselor cannot understand a Latinx students’ struggles in the same way,” said Yvette DeChavez, a mental health advocate, and first-generation Latinx former student who went on to earn a doctorate.

DeChavez also emphasized the importance of having Latinx voices on campus. “Latinx students bring in diverse perspectives that help foster critical thinking in the classroom,” she said.

Opening wide the doors to higher education for Latinx students and helping them succeed is something that will help colleges better reflect the diversity of the US. Higher education institutions can be intentional about reaching and retaining Latinx students.

“As the fastest growing population in America, it is imperative that institutions have a strategy for recruiting, enrolling, retaining, and graduating Latinx students—all four steps are imperative for every institution,” said Michelle Gonzalez.

Latinx students can’t get left behind in terms of higher education access because the significance of their success goes beyond just the ivory tower.

“By 2025 Latinos will make up about one-fifth of all college students in this country,” said Brown. “To have the ongoing talent to stay competitive in today’s global economy, the US will need the energies and skills of college-educated Latinx students in our future workforce and civil society.” 

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Elaina Loveland is a freelance writer and the author of *Creative Colleges: Finding the Best Programs for Aspiring Actors, Artists, Designers, Dancers, Musicians, Writers, and More*.
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Sensitivity reader **Yvette DeChavez** is a professor at University of Texas at Austin and a mental health advocate.

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RESOURCES ON LATINX STUDENT SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

College Counseling for Latino and Underrepresented Students

nacacnet.org/CounselingLatinoStudents

College Completion through a Latinx Lens

edexcelencia.org/media/680

Excelencia in Action Network

The *Excelencia* in Action network facilitates engagement on data, practice, and leadership and brings attention to those having a positive impact on Latinx student success.

Learn more: edexcelencia.org/presidents-Latinx-student-success

Growing What Works Database

The Growing What Works database is a searchable, online resource listing information about evidence-based programs recognized for their efforts in supporting Latinx student success. Search the database: edexcelencia.org/programs-initiatives/growing-what-works-database.

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