

**Promoting Hispanic Student Retention in  
Two Texas Community Colleges**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The United States has seen significant demographic change over the last few decades. Among the most striking change has been the steady growth of the Hispanic population. From 2000 to 2010, Hispanic citizens grew in number to 50.5 million nationally (16.3%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Similar but more dramatic shifts occurred in Texas, where Hispanic inhabitants increased by 37.6% from one census to the next.

Hispanic enrollment at colleges and universities has also increased nationally, surpassing the rate of Hispanic population growth. In Texas, Hispanic enrollments in higher education have risen dramatically. Between 2000 and 2013, Hispanic undergraduate enrollment grew by 118% overall, with the majority attending 2-year institutions. Despite this growth in access, Hispanic students have not fared well in college completion. According to Complete College America (2013), “most Hispanic and African American Texans start at 2-year colleges, and few graduate even when given three times longer” (p. 13).

The present study focused on first-time Hispanic students’ retention at two, metropolitan Hispanic-serving community colleges in Texas. The purpose of the study was to identify the institutional factors that they identified as supporting or deterring their retention and to ascertain the kinds of services these students most valued or needed.

## **BACKGROUND LITERATURE**

With a current population of more than 50 million, Hispanics represent the largest minority group in America. However, Postsecondary Education Opportunity (2012) reported that “Hispanics are less committed to education than any other group (p. 2)” and leave the educational system to begin their adult lives earlier than any other ethnic group. Although Hispanic youth have constituted a steadily growing share of public high school graduates and

college freshmen since 1995, their college completion rates remain low (Lumina Foundation, 2011). Overall, Hispanics are the least educated major racial or ethnic group. For example, only 11% of those over the age of 25 have a bachelor's degree compared to approximately 17% of Blacks, 27% of Whites, and 47% of Asian-American adults in the same age bracket. More than 40% of Hispanic adults over 25 never graduated from high school and more than 25% have less than a ninth grade education (Lumina Foundation, 2011). The implications of these data for the U.S. and Texas economies are ominous.

Over the years bachelor's degrees awarded to Hispanic students have risen from about 2.3% to 6.2%, but several trends in higher education have made it difficult for Hispanics to receive a college education. Schmidt (2003) noted that state budget cuts have caused institutions to raise admissions standards and tuition, to cap enrollments, and to reduce student financial aid. Further, the shift in federal student financial aid from majority grant to majority loans has affected Hispanic students who avoid assuming debt. Finally, recent attacks on affirmative action and a lack of academic support programs for minority students have affected Hispanic enrollment.

### **Hispanic Students' Challenges**

Hispanic students must overcome many personal challenges to attend college: poor academic preparation, first-generation status, misinformation, and financial constraints. O'Banion (2011) identified three pertinent issues that affect the community college student: low-income, under-preparedness, and first-generation status. Hagedorn (2010b) also identified these issues as significant and urged that they be taken into account in devising strategies to promote Hispanic student success.

Studies show that finances are a primary cause of attrition among first-time Hispanic freshmen because many come from low-income families and need to work while attending college. (Santiago, 2010) In 2010, the median weekly earnings of Hispanic full-time wage and salary workers were \$535 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). Although the median income of Hispanic households has increased since 1980, Korzenny (2009) analyzed the U.S. Census Bureau's 2008 American Community Survey and found that the gap between median income in Hispanic households and that of all U.S. households was actually the largest since the 1990s.

From an academic responsibility standpoint, students do not take advantage of all available financial aid, do not transfer from 2-year to 4-year colleges, and often do not complete their 4-year degrees. More than half of all students who begin at 2-year institutions never achieve any type of postsecondary degree. According to Rendón and Garza (1996), "For Hispanic community college students, this trend is even more pronounced as their transfer and persistence rates are among the lowest" (Saenz, 2002, p. 2). As a result, some critics view the community college as an obstacle to educational attainment and, ultimately, as a way to perpetuate social stratification (Wilds & Wilson, 1998). Others argue that most Hispanic students choose community colleges out of necessity as it is often their only affordable option (Rendón & Garza, 1996). Saenz (2002) noted, "In general, it can be argued that community colleges facilitate postsecondary opportunities for those who might not otherwise attend college and thereby act as a pathway to the baccalaureate for a host of students" (p. 2).

### **The Role of Institutional Practices**

In recent years, studies have shown that various institutional practices have detrimental effects on successful program completion among students of Hispanic descent. Hossler, Ziskin, Moore, and Wakhungu (2008) examined the role of institutional practices in college student

persistence and identified eight policy levers in higher learning institutions (HLIs) that influence student retention. These included recruitment practices tuned to fulfilling student expectations of college life, anti-racism and prejudice measures, reasonable academic and administrative policies, nurturing course satisfaction among students, enhancing learning strategies in lectures, facilitating positive social interactions among students (especially in residential settings), and facilitating financial aid on an as-needed basis. These eight areas of interest provide an outline for institutional practices that may result in attrition among Hispanic community college students. Earlier studies identified three influences that researchers needed to address when analyzing the impact of colleges on students: 1) precollege characteristics in student demographics, 2) institutional structural characteristics, and 3) academic and non-academic student experiences (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004).

Studies have shown that some practices within community colleges, such as extensive developmental education courses, lack of work-study opportunities, and inaccurate information from advisers, work against Hispanic student retention and completion (Barefoot et al., 2005). In addition, some institutional practices do not support students' persistence, resulting in high dropout and low completion rates. The combined effects of such practices discriminate exclusively on some students and are typically based on economic and academic groupings. Boggs (2011) argued that the practice of tracking and restricting the placement of students in accordance with past academic performance discourages Hispanic students from aspiring to greater academic achievement and eventual degree acquisition.

### **Best Practices for Hispanic Success**

Hispanics contribute to the nation's economic development, despite the lag in educational attainment; but the potential fiscal impact of Hispanics would be much greater if a larger

proportion were able to complete higher education. Therefore, it is imperative that colleges find ways to assist first-year Hispanic students through work opportunities on campus, flexible class schedules, and culturally sensitive support staff. Without these measures, the gap in graduation rates will continue to grow. Toossi (2002) reported that, by 2050, Hispanics will make up nearly 25% of the U.S. workforce. The future development of the Hispanic community is of great importance as Hispanics continue to become an influential group in American society.

According to the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), several best practices contribute to retention: increased engagement between student and faculty members and student and institution; a committed academic advising team; informed financial aid staff; and early alerts (Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCCSE], 2012). For example, when community college students describe occasions when they considered dropping out, but did not, they typically refer to a strong early connection to someone at the college as their reason for continuing (Hamilton, 2012).

The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans has developed many strategies over 7 years to increase student success. To overcome the knowledge gap in the Hispanic community, U.S. Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, developed a range of educational information in English and Spanish about education. Additionally, the Partnership for Hispanic Family Learning significantly expanded the public-private partnership to encompass over 400 organizations. These organizations passed out The Tool Kit for Hispanic Families, a product of the U.S. Department of Education.

In academic preparation, subjects such as math and science are an important part of education reform (Harvey, 2002). This emphasis has been strengthened by the President's desire to improve America's competitiveness in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics

(STEM). Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) develop Hispanic talent in the STEM fields and became the focus of a comprehensive conference that the White House Initiative convened in April 2007 at the University of Texas at El Paso (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Although there are many successful programs being implemented, another favorable and significant effort is that of federal research on early literacy and language development of children (birth to age 5). These efforts aim to produce high quality, research-based information to support early childhood education and care of English language learners (ELLs). The White House Initiative also supports a federal interagency effort to expand the base of scientific research and knowledge on early childhood education for ELLs to better inform parents, practitioners, and schools on the education needs of language minority children (Department of Education, 2008).

This review of the literature revealed the growth of Hispanic-serving institutions and the Hispanic student demographic in higher education. Noteworthy was the fact that first-time Hispanic students enrolling in community colleges, whether predominantly white or Hispanic-serving, experience difficulties in staying in school at the same rate as other groups. This means that institutions need a “reality check” concerning their institutional practices to confirm that they support Hispanic students’ access, persistence, and graduation needs (Santiago, 2010).

Texas community colleges and 4-year institutions along the border have developed effective strategies to improve Hispanic student enrollment and degree completion. The present study built on this information to survey Hispanic community college students about their particular needs to be successful in two metropolitan HSIs. To explore the importance of institutional factors in the retention of first-time Hispanic community college enrollees, the present study addressed three issues: students’ demographic characteristics and reasons for

attending college; their views of institutional services intended to support their retention; and differences in their assessment of institutional services by gender, age, enrollment status, and dependent status.

The presenters will outline the research methodology and findings as well as their implications for institutional practice as higher education seeks to serve an ever-increasing Hispanic population. Discussion will focus on how meaningful institutional change can promote Hispanic student retention and success.



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