

HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTIONS IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Their Origin, and Present and Future Challenges

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THE ROLE OF STUDENT AFFAIRS AT HISPANIC- SERVING INSTITUTIONS AND ITS IMPACT ON SUPPORTING STUDENT SUCCESS

Vasti Torres

Since their inception in the 1980s, Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) have enrolled many first-generation college students despite being insufficiently funded and resourced to meet the academic needs of all the students they serve. Because 59% of Latino college students are enrolled at HSIs (Santiago, 2014), it is necessary to understand the specific role student affairs can play in providing intentional support for student success. The student affairs practice has always been based on seeing the student as a “whole” (Boyle, Lowery, & Mueller, 2012, p. 23), yet when this concept was envisioned in the late 1930s, the authors never considered institutions like HSIs or the types of students served by these higher education institutions. For this reason, new ideas and research for how student affairs can serve the whole Latino/a student must be considered. Research directly involving student affairs practice and HSIs is limited; therefore, research about students at HSIs and Latino/a college students and other relevant literature was considered for this chapter. This chapter focuses

on student access to higher education, student outcomes, and institutions as agents for helping Latino/a college students.

As mentioned previously in this book, 48% of HSIs are community colleges and 20% are public universities (Santiago, 2014), and many of the students attending these institutions are the first generation in their families to go to college and have various financial and academic needs. These characteristics lead to a student population that may lack the knowledge and capital needed to maneuver higher education successfully (Núñez & Bowers, 2011). For this reason student affairs practitioners can be immensely helpful in supporting student success. The function of student affairs is most visible in grant proposals because the majority of HSI grant-funded activities from 2004 to 2009 were focused on student support services (102 awards); faculty and curriculum was second in the number of grants awarded (Villarreal & Santiago, 2012). While the specifics of the student support services that were funded are not clear, the number of successful proposals serves as an example of how important student services are to HSIs around the country. With this in mind it is imperative for practitioners working in multiple student support areas to understand their role in supporting student success.

In this chapter, the term *student affairs practitioners* is used as a generic category to represent professionals who function within student support services. While institutional organizational charts may place an array of different departments under the student affairs division, everyone who supports students in out-of-class and academic support areas is likely to find aspects of this chapter helpful. To provide a context for the process of creating student success, the chapter begins with a discussion of access to institutions of higher education.

Access to Higher Education

Accessing higher education is the first step toward achieving student success in higher education. Yet little is known about why Latino/a students choose to attend an HSI instead of another type of institution. What *is* known about the college selection process is that Latino/a college students value an understanding of the cost of attending, a location that is close to their families, and the idea of getting a good job that can offer financial security (Hurtado, Sáenz, Santos, & Cabrera, 2008; Torres & Zerquera, 2012). For these reasons a large number of Latino college students begin their educational journeys at community colleges, many of which are HSIs.

The characteristics of high schools are also an important influence on the college selection process of Latino students. Research shows that students from high schools with large proportions of Latino teachers and students are

more likely to access higher education through a community college (Núñez & Bowers, 2011). These students are also less likely to have access to financial aid and academic information. This lack of information may influence their college readiness and their level of financial literacy about the cost of attending. For many of these students, the choice to attend an HSI may be more closely tied to decision-making processes that are centered on proximity to home and following another member of the family who previously attended the institution—a concept that is referred to as “chain enrollment” (Torres & Zerquera, 2012, p. 266).

As Latino students access higher education, student affairs practitioners are on the front lines helping them understand the complex ways in which admissions and financial aid work. According to a study of Texas-border Latino students attending HSIs, 75% of these students rely on financial aid to pay for college, and financial aid officers working at these institutions described Latino students as having an aversion to borrowing money to pay for college (Santiago, 2010). This combination of being from low-income households and being averse to borrowing creates a perfect storm that promotes working for pay over schoolwork, thus jeopardizing success in college. When a student prioritizes work over school, he or she will likely limit time for studying and change course, taking patterns to fit work schedules (Ziskin, Torres, Hossler, & Gross, 2010). Helping Latino students develop their academic and financial capital has to be an important goal for student affairs practitioners in the enrollment management area. Without this knowledge and understanding of systems, students are likely to take courses without knowing if they will count toward requirements and to fail to understand the sequences of courses that are needed in the prerequisites; these unknown mistakes can inhibit academic progress. A critical first step for student affairs practitioners is to initiate conversations about academic systems that can help students succeed.

Student Outcomes

Student affairs practitioners in many states are adjusting their work to focus on the student success agenda required in performance-based funding states. In states that use performance-based funding, the metric used may be specifically associated with being a Latino/a college student. While there is limited research on HSI students, there is significant research on the experiences of Latino students that can reveal particular concerns a student affairs professional at an HSI should know about to properly serve students. The first of these concerns to be discussed is helping students overcome the negative

images that society has of Latinos, the second is understanding the role of family, and the third is mentoring students within HSIs.

Overcoming Adversity

Popular media, along with educational interactions, create negative stereotypes of Latino students that can hinder how students see themselves and thus influence their academic success (Torres, 2009). HSIs are in a position “to change societal views of Latino students” (Dayton, Gonzalez-Vasquez, Martinez, & Plum, 2004, p. 37). In their study of administrators and students at HSIs, Dayton et al. (2004) found that administrators saw themselves as being in a position to change societal understandings of Latino/a college students by creating environments where everyone had the same opportunities.

It is important to distinguish between everyone having the same opportunity and everyone being treated the same. This book illustrates that the students attending HSIs are not all the same, and, therefore, they should not all be treated as if they all had the same opportunities and access to academic or other types of capital. One area critical to understand is the influence that little academic capital can have on the ways first-generation college students seek out information (Torres, Reiser, LePeau, Davis, & Ruder, 2006). A longitudinal study of Latino students that included two HSIs found that first-generation students tended to rely on online and print materials (“pamphlet advising”) and trusted others for information instead of on an academic adviser (Torres et al., 2006). These trusted advisers tended to be family members who had previously attended the institution but who may not have had updated information or a complete understanding of underlying requirements and policies. As a result, many of these students found themselves experiencing negative consequences such as losing their financial aid after making insufficient progress or not completing the correct sequence of courses to satisfy their degree requirements. Intentional intervention by student affairs practitioners can help these students avoid many of these negative consequences (Torres et al., 2006). It is critical for student affairs practitioners who work with first-generation college students to understand that a title may not be sufficient for these students; trust must be developed for the student to feel comfortable asking questions and admitting his or her vulnerability when not knowing what to do. In addition to information-seeking processes, it is important to understand the role of family among the students who attend HSIs.

Another example of the unique qualities of students who attend HSIs is the way students view themselves within the United States. In HSIs where

the percentage of Latino students is 80% or more, Latinos/as do not see themselves as minorities or as oppressed because they are actually the majority in their communities. As a result, these student do not understand how they may be viewed outside their predominantly Latino environments. As one teacher of writing put it, “HSIs attract students whose access to higher education is limited by financial, sociological, academic, and cultural circumstances” (Newman, 2007, p. 18). These limits may create situations in which students are ill equipped to deal with U.S. societal norms outside their own communities.

Role of Families

Families can serve both as support systems and as barriers. As support systems, the vast majority of Latino parents want their children to succeed in education. As barriers, Latino parents may not understand what it takes for the student to be successful in higher education (Dayton et al., 2004; Torres, 2003). Student affairs practitioners are in a position to help Latino students understand how to articulate their experiences to their parents, who may have little knowledge of formal education, much less higher education (Torres, 2004). In Torres and Hernandez's (2007) longitudinal study of Latino/a college students (which included two HSIs), it became clear that the students needed to learn to manage family expectations, not be encouraged to ignore them (2007). This requires the student affairs practitioner to develop the trust needed for a student to share these types of vulnerable issues with him or her.

A completely different way of thinking about family influence is the consideration that students at HSIs are more likely to be older than is traditional and also more likely to be transfer students (Bridges, Kinzie, Nelson Laird, & Kuh, 2008). This means that some students at HSIs are not children but parents responsible for their own families. Limited research is available on HSI students who are parents. Regardless of the family role, Latino students are likely to need someone to help them understand and maneuver in the college environment. This type of mentoring relationship is critical for Latino student success and is often found in student affairs departments and programs.

Mentoring Latino Students

Despite knowing that mentoring can help students succeed in higher education (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; McDonough, 2004), in a study of Latino college students only 42% of the participants had identified an adviser or

mentor by their sophomore year (Torres & Hernandez, 2009). The students who had identified an adviser were more satisfied with faculty; experienced greater academic integration, institutional commitment, and encouragement; and saw the environment as having more cultural affinity. These factors are important in helping to retain students at the HSI where they began their academic journey (Torres & Hernandez, 2009). Student affairs practitioners are critical in creating mentoring opportunities and helping students understand how they can be a part of the educational community.

In a study on student mentoring at a large HSI, researchers found that women experienced more mentoring than men, and first-year students experienced more mentoring compared to students in subsequent academic years (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). This study goes on to recommend that generic mentoring programs that are not specifically designed for diverse groups, such as Latino/a students, may not be as effective as mentoring activities for these cohorts. For example, much energy and attention is paid to the first year of college, yet the low completion rate may indicate that mentoring should be considered beyond this first year. In addition, the finding that women experience more mentoring leads to questions about how Latino men (African American men as well) experience mentoring, since these men have lower completion rates. This would indicate that mentoring programs should be refocused to make sure mentoring initiatives for men are sustained beyond the first year of college and that the focus on males at HSIs should be intentional.

Role of Institutions as Agents in Promoting Latino Student Success

Because HSIs are considered HSIs only as a result of the number of Latino students at an institution and must apply for this designation, critics say HSIs do not have an identity that is truly focused on the success of the Latino students who attend the college (Contreras, Malcom, & Bensimon, 2008). In an analysis of institutional mission statements Contreras et al. found that none of the institutions in their study mentioned being an HSI in its mission statement. Although mission statements usually include broad language and are meant to be overarching, the fact that these institutions do not choose to publicly state their identity as an HSI may indicate that the institutions do not see their primary mission as contributing to the student success of Latino/a college students. To be an agent for Latino student success, it is recommended that administrators of HSIs consider the role of staff and faculty in helping carry out a mission of serving Latino student populations (Contreras et al., 2008). This connection with a mission focused on Latino/a

student success includes understanding how student affairs practitioners can serve as agents to promote the success of Latino students. Because the behavior of practitioners should be guided by the mission of the institution, when the mission does not encompass an identity focused on ensuring Latino/a student success, other goals will likely take priority, making attending an HSI no different from attending a predominantly White institution (PWI).

Research comparing HSI students to students at other types of institutions found that committed HSIs may help students overcome challenges by engaging them in educationally meaningful activities at higher levels than Latinos attending PWIs (Bridges et al., 2008). This finding must be considered within the context that HSIs can vary by having in excess of 90% to having fewer than 25% Latino student population. These contextual differences among HSIs create a variety of challenges for student affairs professionals. Institutions with a larger number of Latinos will create a comfortable environment for these students because there is no challenge to their ethnicity, and they compose the majority of the student body on the campus. While this comfortable environment may be very supportive, student development occurs when students have a balance of support and challenge (Sanford, 1969). Therefore, an HSI with a large proportion of Latino/a students needs to consider how to challenge its students in different ways. Without this level of challenge, students who leave community environments with a majority of Latinos may not have the skills to interact in more diverse environments.

For HSIs with an ethnically diverse student population and a critical mass of Latino/a students constituting about 25% of the population, it is important to understand that these students will likely have very diverse experiences and may question their own sense of ethnic identity. The institutions that are successful in engaging students will intentionally create opportunities for students to feel supported academically and socially (Bridges et al., 2008). A study of faculty attitudes and perceptions found only a few differences between HSIs and institutions with fewer Latino/a students. This finding led the researchers to assert that this was “further evidence that HSIs do not have institutional missions that directly serve the needs of the Latino population” (Hubbard & Stage, 2009, p. 285). These institutions must support the identity of Latino/a students through cultural artifacts and activities that engage them in cultural exploration and expressions (Torres, 2006).

Opportunities for Student Affairs at HSIs

As this chapter illustrates, student needs at HSIs are many, and the research available to help student affairs practitioners is limited. While other research

has been used to piece together the role of student affairs practitioners, there are some clear themes at HSIs that should be considered when working in this environment.

The first is to understand the unique student who is likely to attend an HSI. Many (though not all) students in HSIs are the first generation in their family to attend college and will need additional attention to adjust and make the transition to higher education institutions. Second, it is clear that student affairs practitioners can make a difference for these students by providing information and mentoring. Helping Latino students succeed may well be one of the most important aspects of student affairs work in HSIs. Finally, as an institution moves toward becoming or more deeply embracing an HSI, it is critical that those at all levels in the institution discuss what it means for the mission of the institution to include the HSI classification. Without intentional efforts, Latino/a student success is not likely to be influenced.

While the influence of student affairs is often relegated to the out-of-class experience, this chapter highlights several areas in which professionals in student services can be critical to students' academic success. The goal of any HSI should be to ensure that all professionals are aware of the unique needs of Latino/a students and have the cultural competence to serve students in this environment. If all HSIs can accomplish this goal, the future of Latino/a student success should become much brighter.

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