



Why the United States Should Improve Support for Colleges and Universities Serving Hispanic Students

Anne-Marie Nuñez, University of Texas at El Paso

President Obama has called upon the country to double the number of Americans with college credentials by 2020, but reaching that goal will be impossible without raising the educational attainment of Hispanics, the youngest and fastest growing U.S. ethnic group. People of Hispanic background are pursuing college degrees at higher rates and now surpass African Americans as the largest share of non-white students enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education. But Hispanics still lag behind other groups in actually completing college work to attain their degrees. The reforms America must undertake to boost Hispanic graduation rates include enhancing resources for what the U.S. federal government labels “Hispanic-Serving Institutions” – that is, non-profit, degree-granting colleges and universities whose undergraduate enrollments include at least 25% full-time students of Hispanic descent. My work looks at the special challenges these institutions face and suggests useful steps forward.

Hispanic-Serving Institutions in U.S. Higher Education

Since 1992, Hispanic-Serving higher education institutions have more than doubled from 189 to 409, and they are now the fastest growing group among officially designated minority-serving colleges.

- These institutions enroll 60% of Hispanic undergraduates. They award 40% of all bachelor's degrees earned by Hispanics, and 54% of all degrees earned by Hispanics in the crucial “STEM” fields of science, technology, engineering, and math.
- These institutions must focus on the needs of growing numbers of Hispanics in their undergraduate bodies. But unlike “historically black” and “tribal” colleges, the increasing numbers of Hispanic-Serving Institutions on the U.S. mainland and Puerto Rico now include many two-year and four-year public and private not-for-profit colleges with multiple goals and student bodies that include low-income and first-generation college-going students from many backgrounds.

Challenges and Binds

Hispanic-Serving Institutions serve undergraduates with many characteristics that, according to previous research, make students disproportionately likely to drop out short of finishing degrees. More than at other colleges and universities, students who attend these institutions tend to be less academically prepared for college and come from low-income families or families where no parent or grandparent previously attended college. Relatively low graduation rates come as no surprise, given the many obstacles such students, including many Hispanics, must overcome.

Ideally, colleges that enroll students from less privileged backgrounds should have extra resources to support advising, remedial instruction, and intensive learning. But in practice many Hispanic-Serving colleges and universities have fewer resources than other institutions of U.S. higher education, even though they serve students at higher risk for dropping out. In particular, Hispanic-Serving Institutions receive relatively less funding from city, state, and national governments. Although these institutions are eligible to apply for extra federal funding, only half of them actually do so, in part because they do not have the extra personnel, time, and skills needed to file effective applications. Furthermore, America's changing demography means that more and more colleges and universities gain the designation “Hispanic-Serving” – so competition for limited federal funding becomes more intense.

The growth in Hispanic enrollment in U.S. higher education is happening just as public support is in decline. The federal Pell Grants available for low-income students cover less of the cost of college now than they did decades ago, and the federal government disburses less support for institutions of higher learning. Yet at all levels of government, there are increasing calls for colleges and universities to be “held accountable” for

graduation rates and even for the jobs landed by their graduates. Some politicians call for public funding for colleges to be directly linked to such metrics. But researchers have discovered that such accountability efforts can have unintended negative consequences – especially if they end up penalizing underprivileged students and the colleges and universities they attend. Hispanic-Serving Institutions fall into this bind. Because many of their students struggle to graduate, these institutions could end up with reduced resources to serve the very students who must need extra guidance and support.

Supporting Hispanic-Serving Institutions and Their Students

What can be done? Higher education researchers, faculty and staff, and state and federal policymakers all have a role to play in advancing Hispanic postsecondary attainment and supporting the Hispanic-Serving colleges and universities.

- Well-designed research studies, with results effectively disseminated, can help college faculty and staff learn what works – and what needs improvement – to educate Hispanic students, including those from less privileged backgrounds.
- As state and federal policymakers devise specific metrics for college accountability and set criteria in competitions for institutional funding, they should pay careful attention to the special challenges faced by Hispanic and other minority-serving colleges and universities.
- Leaders in businesses, schools, and communities can work hand in hand with colleges and universities to better prepare Hispanic students and reach out to support them as they apply for college, proceed in their studies, and make the final push to graduation.

In short, furthering the success of Hispanic students and bolstering the capacities of the colleges and universities serving growing numbers of these students will necessarily require sustained contributions from many players. There is no simple solution, but many-sided efforts can pay off. If more Hispanic students not only enroll in college but also complete their studies and attain degrees, the nation as a whole stands to gain economically and socially – and American democracy will benefit as well.

Read more in Anne-Marie Nuñez, Sylvia Hurtado, and Emily Calderon Galdeano, Editors, *Hispanic-Serving Institutions: Advancing Research and Transformative Practice* (Routledge, 2015).