Hispanic Student Experiences at a Hispanic-Serving Institution: Strong Voices, Key Message

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A symposium at New Mexico State University, a Hispanic-Serving Institution, revealed Hispanic students’ attitudes about their experiences at the university. Discussions concerned the campus climate, mentors, the experiences of first-time students, cultural challenges, retention, and accountability. Discussion of the resulting data yields policy recommendations to help address the issues raised.

Key words: ENLACE, College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP), cultural challenges, first-time students, accountability, retention

The number of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) continues to increase as more and more Hispanics/Latinos attend institutions of higher education. Although HSIs represent a relatively small percentage of institutions of higher education, they enrolled 54% of all Hispanic students in 2009–2010 (Santiago, 2011). The definition of an HSI changed twice in the 1990s, ultimately becoming “accredited, degree-granting, public or private, non-profit colleges and universities with 25% or more total undergraduate full-time equivalent (FTE) Hispanic student enrollment” (Laden, 2004, p. 186).

As more colleges and universities in the United States begin meeting the criteria to become an HSI, they are in the unique position of serving increasing numbers of Latino students (Benítez, 1998; Benítez & DeAro, 2004). Thus, these HSIs are crucial to the educational attainment of this fast-growing student population (Dayton, Gonzalez-Vasquez, Martinez, & Plum, 2004). It is important for the well-being of Latinos and society at large that we understand the important role HSIs play in the educational advancement and overall success of Latino students. To be able to serve students, institutions must first enroll them and help them graduate. Although student enrollment depends on access, the successful retention and completion of students depends on the institutional support provided. Therefore, serving Latino students goes well beyond enrolling them; it is the specific mission to serve these students that should distinguish HSIs. It is in this
respect that the history of HSIs is problematic and differs from that of Historically Black Colleges and Universities and tribal colleges serving their respective diverse student populations. For a brief history of HSIs, see Laden (2004). It can no longer be assumed that the growth of Latino students at a given institution will translate into increased efforts by the institution to adapt its mission to better serve this student population. In fact, there are colleges and universities that meet the criteria for an HSI designation but whose administration and leadership have not articulated what it means to “serve” Latino students. As discussed by Villalpando (2004), universities and their employees need to recognize the diversity that Latino students bring to a university and prepare and create new programs that specifically address the differences Latino students bring with them.

On March 17, 2009, a symposium was held at New Mexico State University (NMSU) focused, in part, on determining how well Latino students are served, and uncovering the HSI experience through the eyes of students, administrators, and faculty. Questions posed to students explored their perception of the campus climate and issues of student retention and accountability. In addition, students reflected on the various programs and services available to them. Overall, the benefits and challenges of attending an HSI like NMSU from the viewpoint of students, faculty, and administrators became the primary focus of this discussion.

EXPERIENCES OF NMSU STUDENTS AT AN HSI CAMPUS

NMSU students were empanelled to discuss their experiences of working and attending an HSI college. The seven Latino students were of traditional college age (between the ages of 18 and 24) and ranged from freshmen to graduating seniors. This panel of students represented a variety of majors on campus, including biology, business, criminal justice, engineering, math, and sociology. Some of the students had participated in existing programs for Latino students, primarily the ENLACE and Latinos for Exito programs, which serve as catalysts to bring together various stakeholders who work collaboratively to create and support a more responsive, accountable, accessible, and supportive educational system for Latino students. No formal question protocol was used; however, students were asked questions about their individual experiences at an HSI like NMSU. Research has found that the institutional missions of several HSIs and minority-serving institutions do not directly address the specific needs of students of color (Contreras & Bensimon, 2005; Lane & Brown, 2003). Thus, what HSIs should be challenging and altering is the “Whiteness as norm” underlying structure that often serves to exclude non-Whites implicitly, if not explicitly (Guess, 2006).

Dealing with Cultural Challenges

Many of the students who participated in the panel were first-generation college students, like most Hispanic higher education students nationwide (Fischer, 2007). Not having a parent or role model to turn to for advice about attending college is common among Latino students (Dayton et al., 2004) and a challenge that a supporting environment with the right programs can help students overcome. For example, one student noted,
Being involved with ENLACE and Latinos for Exito has helped put me in different leadership positions. When I got to my classes it was total culture shock. I stuck to one of my high school friends like glue because I was going through total culture shock. Many of us who were of Latino descent also happen to be first-generation college students.

A second student concurred, saying,

Acclimating to university life was a culture shock. I felt like I didn’t fit in. I felt like I just had to deal with it. However, I got involved with Exito and connected with students with similar backgrounds, a similar culture.

A third student talked about certain cultural expectations that affect college-going Latino students. The student said,

My parents wanted me to stay close to home. I was ashamed that I wanted to drop out. I had made it this far and here I was, wanting to drop out! I started working, I started cleaning houses, I started cleaning yards, and I decided that I wanted to stay in college. Family values are so important. If they (faculty and administrators) have some type of background with the “cultura,” they might understand about that.

The conflict between family and academic responsibilities was commonly mentioned throughout the symposium. As Dayton et al. (2004) noted, “These struggles and challenges can be seen repeatedly throughout Latino student populations in higher education. The cultural value of a strong family unit can sometimes be at odds with achieving a college degree” (p. 33). Although family remains a strong source of support for college achievement (Hernandez, 2000), it also poses challenges toward college achievement when students feel the need to work to support their families or when they feel ill prepared to be the first in their family to take that next step to higher education (Hurst, 2009).

**Campus Climate**

The support and comfort that Latino students feel while attending a university with a positive campus climate can be beneficial to their psychological well-being and college achievement (Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005). If students have negative feelings or perceptions about their campus, then students of color may be more likely to fail (Gloria, Hird, & Navarro, 2001). Students who perceive a positive campus climate may gain a valuable support system in which they have opportunities to interact with their peers, reach out to faculty and staff, and therefore achieve academically (Booker, 2007; Dayton et al., 2004; Edman & Brazil, 2007). Therefore, the level of support received enhances the campus climate, making it more conducive to learning, as the following student explained:

I finally picked a major. At first we didn’t know what we were doing. I have been put in a lot of leadership positions, in areas I would have never seen or been involved in. I see other people just like me. It was a culture shock for me and with hundreds of students, I wasn’t sure what to expect. Other people felt the same way too. It seemed as if the Hispanic population felt that they didn’t know what was going on. We used peers to help us adjust. Now, I am able to speak my mind and become more involved.
Yet another student who had graduated from a local public school emphasized the importance of peer mentoring and had the following to say:

I was very happy coming to NMSU and I thought I knew about NMSU. I had no idea what to do. What saved me was Mr. Marquez with ENLACE. He spoke my language. I didn’t tell anyone about the problems I was having because I was ashamed. Come December, I decided to register, but I was not sure if I was coming back. Now, I’ve blossomed into a student leader, someone who is trying to make a difference and now I want to help the struggling freshman, that’s why I want to be a teacher. There is no other method that is worth it unless you have peers.

In addition, students expressed the desire to have more cultural events and activities. Students stated that college-life activities sponsored by the three different programs on campus serving Black, Chicano, and American Indian students helped to foster a positive campus climate. Dayton et al. (2004) noted the importance of community as an important element in Latino student success, stating,

Latino students appear to thrive in environments where there is continual support and concern for their well-being. They need to feel that they matter and are valued members of the campus environment. Tight-knit communities with other Latino students help create a supportive climate in which students can share similar experiences. (p. 38)

Overall, the student panel expressed the need to “promote what we already have” and stated that existing programs at NMSU that focus on Latino students are crucial to academic success.

**RETENTION OF STUDENTS AND FACULTY**

Student and faculty retention has become an important issue for all universities today. No longer is enrolling students enough; many states are demanding that universities raise their retention and graduation rates. How students perceive social support from their peers as well as their institution affects student persistence (Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005; Laden, 2001). Issues focusing on the retention of both students and Hispanic faculty were voiced throughout the symposium. For example:

In the state, the dropout rate is over 50%. In our community alone, in Doña Ana County, the dropout rate is over 50%. That is a crisis! We have to be active. We have to get involved. We have to do more.

Students noted the need for better advising at both the high school and college levels as well as a more supportive environment to aid their transition. The role of university comfort as a predictor in student success has been documented in the literature (see Constantine, Robinson, Wilton, & Caldwell, 2002; Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, et al., 2005). A better bridge from the kindergarten–Grade 12 system to college was noted by the following student, who said,

My high school counselor did not seem to care I was graduating. I was involved in high school but I was also a first-generation student. I never spoke to a counselor until my last semester. I didn’t know what to do. I have now become more comfortable as a result of ENLACE. We have to promote and recruit in high school. At first I was frustrated because I didn’t know who to turn to.
There is a need for recruiters from NMSU to recruit locally. Scholarship in this area has found that Latino students and their families stand to benefit from universities that proactively recruit students and help them deal with any fears they may have about going to a university (Laden, 2001). Students also expressed the need to incorporate multiculturalism into existing curricula.

Lastly, students noted that the presence of Latino faculty and mentors was most important in their college experiences and success. At the NMSU symposium, both students and administrators voiced the importance of having faculty and staff know the campus’s demographics. An institutional commitment to recruiting and retaining Latino faculty was noted as a critical factor in ensuring a diverse faculty and staff that reflects the larger student body. Latino faculty and staff are viewed as role models and advocates for students to help ensure a positive campus climate, responsive that is to the needs and concerns of Latino students (see Gándara & Osugi, 1994; Hernandez, 2000). Similarly, Dayton et al. (2004) found that Latino faculty serve as “ambassadors of comfort” for the students, stating, “the ability to comfort students was seen as a significant component in establishing an atmosphere of trust, understanding, and acceptance on campus. This was seen as essential in helping students to become successful in all educational endeavors” (p. 34). Other factors that can influence retention rates of students include social support from students’ families (Hernandez, 2000) and peers (Gloria & Segura-Herrera, 2004).

ACCOUNTABILITY: IMPROVE LATINO STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES ON CAMPUS

Targeted funding allows for the improvement of existing programs and student support services and the opportunity to create new ones, not only for Latino students but also for the entire campus (Laden, 2001). It is important to note that serving Latino students serves as a best practice that will work for the larger student body as well.

As the Latino population in the United States continues to grow, it creates a new responsibility for HSIs. The need to find a variety funding sources is extremely important. Funding sources like the Free Application for Federal Student Aid—much like programs like the College Assistance Migrant Program—are important for Latino students (Laden, 2001).

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, this symposium illustrates the need to educate others about the importance of HSIs and the increased role HSIs are playing in communities across the country. HSIs are projected to grow as the Hispanic population moves rapidly into higher education (Laden, 2001; Santiago, 2011). The testimonies reveal the many challenges and opportunities facing the Latino student population (Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005).

Recommendations include the continued support of programs that target and assist Hispanic students (Laden, 2001). Successful programs such as the ENLACE Fellowship Program at Northeastern Illinois University and the College Assistance Migrant Program may result in increased Hispanic student retention at HSIs (Laden, 2001; Nealy, 2008; Stern, 2006). These programs engage the families of potential students and help demystify aspects of university life that can be challenging to first-generation Hispanic students. It will require restructuring priorities in American universities to make them truly diverse and inclusive (Burke & Johnston, 2004; Guess, 2006).
A key to retention is creating that relationship or bond that helps tie the student to the institution (Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005). Suggestions include helping all faculty members adjust to the cultural needs of diverse students entering HSI institutions (Villalpando, 2004). Peers can help navigate the unfamiliar territory (Constantine et al., 2002; Gloria & Segura-Herrera, 2004; Hernandez, 2000).

REFERENCES


