Hispanic-Serving Institutions: A Critical Pipeline to Graduate School for Latinx Students

July 2020
JoAnn Canales

Closing the Gap in Graduate Degree Attainment for Latinx Students

To remain a global leader in graduate education, the U.S. will need to draw talent from the diverse communities that have long been the wellspring of American innovation. However, as the U.S. Latinx community continues to grow, Latinx graduate students remain disproportionately underrepresented in U.S. higher education. According to the Educational Trust's analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2016 American Community Survey data, only 11% percent of Latinx adults had attained a bachelor's degree, as compared with 23.7% of White adults (Schak & Nichols, 2018).

This gap is even more pronounced at the level of graduate degree attainment. Table 1 illustrates that only 4.1% of Latinx adults had earned a master's degree as their highest degree, compared to Asians (17.5%), Whites (9.5%), and African Americans (7%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Likewise, for professional degrees (Table 2,) only 0.7% of Latinx adults earned a professional degree as their highest degree, compared to Asians (2.6%), Whites (1.5%), and African Americans (0.7%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Only 0.6% of Latinx adults earned a doctorate as their highest degree, compared to other demographic groups (Table 3).

Table 1: Master's Degree Attainment in 2018 by Ethnicity 25 years and older (In Thousands)

Ethnicity	Degrees	Percent
Asian Pacific Islander	2,395	17.5%
White	16,417	9.5%
Black	1,898	7.0%
Hispanic	1,385	4.1%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2018 Annual Social and Economic Supplement

Table 2: Professional Degree Attainment in 2018 by Ethnicity 25 years and older (in Thousands)

Ethnicity	Degrees	Percent
Asian Pacific Islander	351	2.6
White	2576	1.5
Black	188	0.7
Hispanic	221	0.7

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2018 Annual Social and Economic Supplement

Table 3: Doctoral Degree Attainment in 2018 by Ethnicity 25 years and older (in Thousands)

Ethnicity	Degrees	Percent
Asian Pacific Islander	683	5.0
White	3390	2.0
Black	323	1.2
Hispanic	221	0.6

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2018 Annual Social and Economic Supplement

A Role for Hispanic-Serving Institutions

How can the postsecondary education community address this gap? While institutions of all types have a role to play, Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) are in a strong position to catalyze change since, as of 2017, they enrolled 41% of Latinx graduate students in the United States. Data in Figure 1 below, based on Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU)'s analysis of IPEDS data, illustrate the remarkable growth of institutions carrying the HSI, Emerging HSI (eHSI), and HSI with Graduate Programs (HSI-G) designations.

Figure 1: Evolution of HSIs, eHSIs, and HSI-Gs
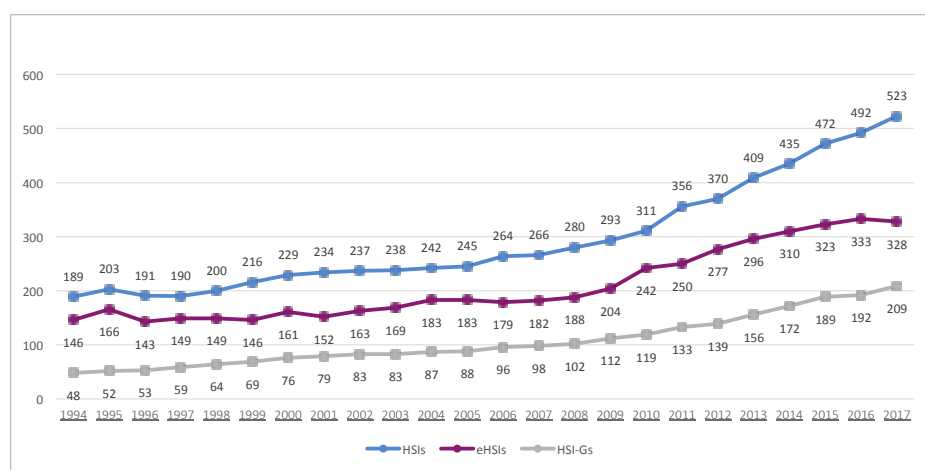
Source: Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) analysis using 2017 Institutional Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data.

To better understand this potential, CGS conducted a year-long inquiry into Latinx student recruitment and retention practices at graduate degree-granting HSIs. Using a combination of surveys and structured interviews, the study focused on soliciting promising practices for recruiting and retaining Latinx graduate students. This brief reports our findings from a cross-section of HSIs with attention to geographic, public/private status, legal constraints on recruiting for diversity, and Carnegie classification. It also recommends a systems approach to the graduate education enterprise, and provides some promising practices, tools, and principles for supporting the enrollment and success of Latinx graduate students.

While this study and the ensuing recommendations, practices, tools and principles was designed to address increasing the Latinx graduate pipeline at HSIs, many of these strategies are applicable to Latinx recruitment at other types of institutions.

What is an HSI?

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) grants the Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) designation to accredited, degree-granting, and public or private non-profit institutions with at least 25% full-time equivalent (FTE) undergraduate students who identify as Hispanic. The most recent list of eligible HSIs is available on the ED website. While the federal definition offers *enrolling* criteria for institutions to qualify as HSI's, the recommendations highlighted in this brief offer institutions criteria for better *serving* the undergraduate and graduate Latinx students they enroll.

HSI-Gs

Hispanic Serving Institutions that grant graduate degrees have been called gHSIs, GHSIs or HSI-Gs. However, this designation is not formally recognized by the Department of Education and does not indicate whether an institution has a large number of Latinx graduate students. For a recent list of HSI's that grant graduate degrees, see Excelencia, 2020.

Graduate Education Ecosystem

The study findings indicate that a traditional graduate student life-cycle as typically conceived, including recruitment, enrollment, retention, and completion, must be revised in order to better address the pipeline issue of the Latinx population. Greater attention must be given to two stages at either end of the spectrum: graduate school readiness at the front end, and career transitions at the back end. In identifying support strategies for each of these stages, it became clear that there was overlap in the strategies needed for recruitment and enrollment and retention and completion, which resulted in reconceptualizing the Graduate Student Life-Cycle into the following four stages:

| Graduate School Readiness | Recruitment/ Enrollment | Retention/ Completion | Career Transition |

HSIs can play a vital role in leading the postbaccalaureate cultural transformation in higher education by undertaking a systems approach to supporting graduate students along the graduate student life-cycle. This will entail creating an ecosystem comprised of partners, both internal and external to the institution. Also critical is an advisory body that reflects graduate student demographics to provide oversight and ensure a graduate education culture that is inclusive, sustainable, and transformative.

Role of an Advisory Body for Latinx Graduate Student Success:

- Convene, on a regularly scheduled basis, units across campus and agencies within the community who currently provide, or could provide, services for graduate students.

- Analyze aspects of cultural and climate assessment data as well as trend data on administration, faculty, and students. Analysis should focus on a five-year period, and include formative and summative assessment, which together can gauge efficacy of the initiatives undertaken.

- Review a proposed inventory of strategies along the graduate student's life-cycle from a diagnostic perspective to determine if they exist, partially exist, or do not exist.

- Determine the components of the *Ecosystem Implementation Plan* based on the recommended strategies. This plan should identify the internal units and the external partners that can provide needed services and consider specific budget and accountability goals to maximize resources and opportunities.

Themes:

A synthesis of the responses from the survey and the telephone interviews indicated that the survey of institutional practices had sparked greater awareness of, and reflection about, underutilized strategies for supporting undergraduate pathways to graduate education. Several specific themes emerged from these conversations:

- There is not always a strong connection between the Hispanic-Serving designation and the level of attention given to supporting the Latinx graduate student population. The HSI designation did not always inform an institution's larger programming goals or the university mission.

- The faculty and administration of the HSIs engaged in this inquiry do not reflect the diversity of their students.

- Certain basic retention strategies, such as graduate student orientation, were not uniformly or consistently in place. Such a lack of orientation has the potential to undermine the smooth transition and acculturation of non-traditional students who were not residential undergraduate students or had no time to participate in on-campus activities.

- Sources of funding for Latinx students, and knowledge of how funding allocations are determined, were generally unknown.

- Despite the disconnect between the demographic make-up of the faculty and their students, there was an absence or inconsistency in institutionally-driven cultural sensitivity training.

Principles of Practice

To facilitate the diagnostic and implementation phases of the systemic plan, CGS developed four *Diagnostic Tools* provided in our supplementary "toolbox" to support Latinx students at the graduate student life-cycle. The strategies included in the checklists are primarily organized into seven broad categories of action. These categories reflect the principles of practice needed to undergird the systemic approach to the graduate education enterprise.

- **Understanding Needs:** *Conduct a needs assessment to identify areas where activities and resources should be focused.* A five-year needs assessment should, at a minimum, focus on factors such as administrator/faculty diversity; student outcomes based on demographics (e.g. time-to-degree for Latinx students); funding available to, and used by, Latinx students; and outcomes of any existing programs designed to recruit and support Latinx students. Ideally, assessment of needs should be part of a broader assessment of an institution's climate for diversity and inclusion. The checklists provided for each stage of the life-cycle can also contribute to understanding needs.

- **Goal-Setting:** *Develop goals for recruiting, enrolling, and supporting Latinx graduate students that are based on identified needs.* Examples of goals might include increasing the yield of Latinx students from application to enrollment and developing targeted partnerships with undergraduate programs on campus. Institutions will be more likely to have an impact if they develop "stretch" goals: objectives that are achievable but require some effort.

- **Accountability and Assessment:** *Develop methods and metrics for assessing progress towards the identified goals.* Ideally, this assessment should take place at multiple levels (e.g. institution, program, etc.) The checklists provided can be utilized for formative and summative monitoring of strategies implemented to address needs.

- **Culturally Sensitive Marketing Strategies:** *Develop program marketing materials and strategies that are sensitive to the interests and needs of Latinx students and their families.* Consider developing materials in multiple languages (English and Spanish). This multi-lingual approach should be extended to all student support services including publications, promotional materials, social media, and websites.

- **Direct Student Outreach:** *Reach out to students directly.* Traditional marketing of programs is not always successful for first-generation students. Help students build networks by connecting them to faculty mentors, staff, other graduate students, and alumni. Connecting Latinx graduate students with Latinx faculty and staff mentors may be particularly valuable.

- **Culturally Responsive Programmatic Support:** *Integrate support structures into graduate programs.* The graduate program is the place that most graduate students consider their institutional "home." Vital is an institutional infrastructure to ensure that Latinx students can successfully navigate an unwelcoming and unsupportive program culture. Mechanisms are needed to identify the campus-wide and community resources that can be leveraged to address the specific academic and socio-cultural challenges faced by Latinx students.

- **Internal and External Partnerships:** *Develop partnerships built on trust.* Relationships with your institution's internal and external communities can be a successful way to recruit Latinx graduate students, and a valuable source of information and advice. If these relationships are built on trust and are mutually beneficial, they are more likely to be sustainable.

References

Nichols, A.H. and J.O. Schak (2018). *The State of Higher Education Equity.* New York: The Education Trust.

Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU). (n.d.) Unpublished analysis of 2017 Institutional Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), U.S. Department of Education.

U.S. Census Bureau (2018). 2018 Annual Social and Economic Supplement. Retrieved May 18, 2020: *https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/techdocs/cpsmar18.pdf.*

Excelencia in Education. (2020). Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs): 2018-19—Graduate Programs. Washington, D.C.: *Excelencia in Education.* Available at *www.edexcelencia.org/research/data/hispanic-serving-institutions-hsis-graduate-programs-2018-2019*