

Hispanic Education in the United States

By Adriana D. Kohler and Melissa Lazarín*

Introduction

Hispanics** have become the largest and fastest-growing minority group in the U.S., rising from 12% of the population in 2000 to 14% of the total U.S. population in 2004.¹

While in some areas there has been improvement in the status of Latino education over the past decade, the data continue to show that Hispanic educational attainment does not match that of non-Hispanics. Participation in all levels of education continues to be low, while dropout and retention rates are still high. Insufficient financial aid and inadequate access to rigorous courses and educational resources are among the challenges in improving the educational status of

Latinos. Also, as immigrant and English language learner (ELL) students become a growing segment of the Latino student population, educational gaps between Latinos and other U.S. students have become increasingly apparent. From early childhood through higher education, Latinos continue to be underserved by educational programs designed to help the most disadvantaged students. This statistical brief provides a summary of the key data concerning Latinos in the educational pipeline.

Demography of the Hispanic Student Population

Latino children under 18 years of age are the second-largest group of students after Whites. Latino school-aged children are also among the fastest-growing student populations. Furthermore, although Latino students are still concentrated in “traditional” Latino states, such as Texas and California, their presence is growing in nontraditional states in the Midwest and Southeast.

■ **Latinos are a significant and growing proportion of the United States student population.** In

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** The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this paper to identify persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race.

particular, 32.1% of the Hispanic population is enrolled in our nation's schools.² In 2005, Hispanics accounted for more than 10.9 million students enrolled in U.S. prekindergarten through 12th grade public schools and 1.9 million students enrolled in institutions of higher education, representing 17% of total student enrollment.³

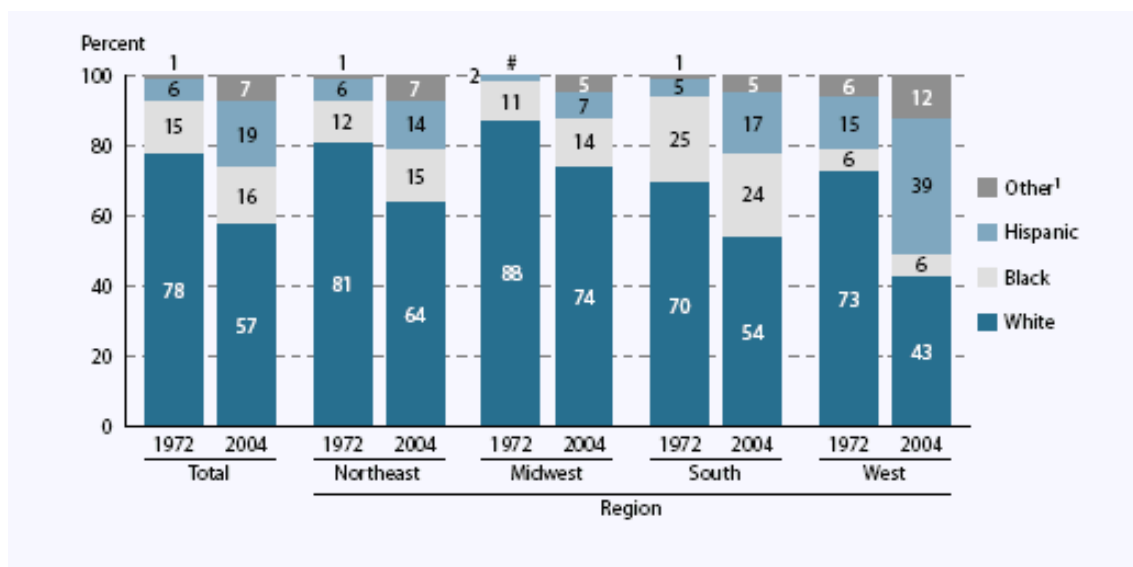
■ **The growth among the Latino student population has significantly surpassed that of other ethnic/racial groups.** Between 1993 and 2003, the proportion of Hispanic students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools increased from 12.7% to 19%, while the proportion of White students decreased from 66% to 58% and the proportion of

Black students increased slightly from 16.6% to 17.2%.⁴

■ **Hispanic students are a growing presence in K-12 public schools in every region of the United States.** Between 1972 and 2004, the proportion of Hispanic K-12 students in the West grew from 15% to 39%, with minority enrollment exceeding White enrollment by 2003 (see Figure 1). Also, for

FIGURE 1

Minority Enrollment: Percentage Distribution of the Race/Ethnicity of Public School Students Enrolled in Grades K-12, by Region: Fall 1972 and 2004



¹ Includes Asian/Pacific Islanders

Rounds to zero

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, "Racial/Ethnic Distribution of Public School Students: Indicator 5," *The Condition of Education 2006*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 32.

that same period, the Hispanic student population increased in the South from 5% to 17%, in the Midwest from 2% to 7%, and in the Northeast from 6% to 14%.⁵

■ **Hispanic children represent a large proportion of school-aged immigrant children.**

Specifically, Hispanic immigrant children account for more than half (58%) of all immigrant youth in the U.S.⁶ In considering this statistic and its relationship to Latino students, it is also important to note that there is a larger share of foreign-born immigrants in the upper grades than in the lower grades. Specifically, foreign-born children* account for 3% of children in grades preK-5, and approximately 5.7% of students in grades 6-12 are foreign-born.⁷ Moreover, a significant number of children are undocumented immigrants, or have parents who are undocumented immigrants; approximately 1.6 million children under age 18 in the U.S. are undocumented

immigrants, and an additional three million children are native-born U.S. citizens but have parents who are undocumented.⁸

Hispanics and Early Childhood Education

Access to early childhood education programs has a positive impact on the school careers of children. However, while Latino children account for more than one in five (22%) of all children under the age of five, they are underrepresented in early childhood education programs.⁹

■ **There is a greater likelihood that Black and White three- to five-year-olds will be enrolled in center-based preschool education compared to Hispanic children of the same age group.** In 2005, 66% of Black children and 59% of White children participated in such programs, while only 43% of Hispanic children participated.¹⁰

■ **Hispanic three- to five-year-olds below the poverty line are less likely than their Black or White peers to be enrolled in preprimary programs.**

Among Hispanic children ages three to five who are living in poverty, fewer than four in ten (36%) are enrolled in early childhood care and education programs. In contrast, 65% of Black and 45% of White children of the same age group living below the poverty line are enrolled in these programs.¹¹

■ **Hispanic children under the age of five are underserved in Head Start programs.**

For example, the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) program reaches only 19% (31,400 out of 161,400) of eligible farmworker children.¹² In addition, the Early Head Start (EHS) program, which provides learning opportunities for infants and toddlers in the U.S., served a mere 2.8% (22,115 out of 789,857) of eligible Hispanic families during the 2003-2004 program year.¹³

* These data include both Hispanic and non-Hispanic foreign-born children.

- **There has been significant growth in the number of Spanish-speaking Head Start participants.** While in 1993 17.5% of Head Start children were Spanish-speakers, by 2004 the proportion had grown to more than 23%.¹⁴

Hispanics and High School Education

Approximately 2.9 million Hispanics are enrolled in U.S. high schools, representing 17% of all secondary public school students.¹⁵ Yet, Hispanic students are less likely than their non-Hispanic peers to complete high school, and high school dropout rates are highest among recent Hispanic immigrants. Furthermore, Latinos are underrepresented in advanced science and mathematics high school courses and in gifted and talented education programs.

High School Dropout and Completion Rates among Latinos

- **Grade retention among Latinos is linked to high school dropout rates.** Hispanic 16- to 19-year-olds who drop out of high school are more likely to have been retained than youth who had completed high school. In 2004, for example, 11% of Hispanic youth who had dropped out of high school had been retained in a grade at some point in their school career, compared to 4.3% of Hispanic youth who completed high school.¹⁶

FIGURE 2

National Graduation Rates by Race and Gender (Percent)

Race/Ethnicity	National	Female	Male
White	74.9	77.0	70.8
Black	50.2	56.2	42.8
Hispanic	53.2	58.5	48.0
American Indian	51.1	51.4	47.0
Asian/Pacific Islander	76.8	80.0	72.6
All students	68.0	72.0	64.1

Source: Orfield, Gary, Daniel Losen, Johanna Wald, and Christopher B. Swanson, *Losing our Future: How Minority Youth Are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis*. Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University. Contributors: Advocates for Children of New York, Civil Society Institute, 2004, p. 4.

■ **Hispanics are significantly less likely to complete high school than their White peers.*** Although the high school graduation rate for White students is 75%, only an estimated 53.2% of Hispanic students and 50% of Black students who enter 9th grade will complete the 12th grade and graduate with a regular diploma. In addition, these rates are lower among minority males; only 43% of Black and 48% of Hispanic male students graduate from high school (see Figure 2).¹⁷

■ **High school dropout rates are particularly high for 16- to 24-year-old foreign-born Latinos.** Foreign-born Hispanic dropouts account for 25.3% of all dropouts in the United States. In 2004, the status dropout rate** of Hispanic 16- to 24-year-olds born outside of the United States was 38.4%, which is significantly higher than the

status dropout rate for first-generation*** Hispanics of the same age group (14.7%). Latinos who are second-generation or greater**** drop out at a rate of 13.7%, which is slightly lower than for first-generation Latinos.¹⁸

■ **Educational attainment is significantly lower among foreign-born Hispanics 25 years and older than among native-born Hispanics of the same ages.** In 2005, there was a significant difference in high school graduation rates between native- and foreign-born Hispanics. While 75% of native-born Hispanics completed high school, only 46% of foreign-born Hispanics were high school graduates.¹⁹

Rigorous Academic Programs

■ **Hispanic and Black high school students are less likely than Whites to be enrolled in advanced**

mathematics and science classes. An estimated 47.4% of White high school graduates complete advanced mathematics courses, compared to only 32.4% of Black and 31.1% of Hispanic students.²⁰ Also, while 63.7% of White high school students complete advanced science courses, 60.8% of Blacks and 56.2% of Hispanics complete these courses (see Figure 3).²¹

■ **Schools serving Hispanic and other minority students offer fewer rigorous academic courses.** According to a study by Achieve Inc., although 74% of minority girls want to enroll in advanced courses, only 45% of their schools offer these courses. Similarly, although two-thirds of minority boys have an interest in taking advanced mathematics courses, fewer than half attend schools that offer these courses.²²

* There are various methods of calculating high school graduation rates. Graduation rates are calculated here using the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI), which is a widely cited method developed at the Urban Institute for computing graduation rates. In this analysis, students receiving standard diplomas are taken into account, and GED enrollees are excluded from graduation rate calculations.

** "Status" dropouts are persons who are not enrolled in school and who are not high school graduates. People who have received GED credentials are counted as graduates. Data are based upon sample surveys of the civilian noninstitutional population.

*** Individuals defined as "first generation" were born in the 50 states or the District of Columbia, and one or both of their parents were born outside the 50 states or the District of Columbia.

**** Individuals defined as "second generation or greater" were born in the 50 states or the District of Columbia, as were both of their parents.

FIGURE 3

High School Graduates Who Completed Advanced Science and Mathematics Courses in 2000 by Race and Ethnicity (Percent)

Race/ ethnicity	Advanced chemistry, physics, or biology	Advanced mathematics
White	63.7	47.4
Asian/Pacific Islander	79.7	68.6
Black	60.8	32.4
Hispanic	56.2	31.1
American Indian	43.1	29.2

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, *The Condition of Education 2004*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2004, Table 22-1 and 22-2.

■ **Hispanics and Blacks represent a small proportion of the student population enrolled in gifted and talented (GT) programs.***

Black and Hispanic students are generally less likely than their White peers to participate in GT programs. In comparison to White students, Blacks and Hispanics are less than half as likely to be enrolled in GT programs, and Asian/Pacific Islanders are one-third as likely to be placed in GT programs.

Specifically, an estimated 7.5% of White and 10% of Asian/Pacific Islander students are identified for placement in gifted programs; however, only 3% of Hispanic and 3.5% of Black students are placed into GT programs. Furthermore, studies have identified possible reasons for these ethnic/racial disparities, including failure of Black and Hispanic students to be nominated to GT programs, the grade in which students are nominated, the qualities of

the GT program, and information considered during the screening process.²³

Hispanics and English Language Learners

Given the predominance of Latinos among the English language learner student population, it is no surprise that the rapid growth and the geographic distribution of

* Students are identified for placement into GT programs by standardized measures of cognitive abilities and score among the top two percent on nationally standardized intelligence tests. Existing class grades and work samples along with additional information on achievement, creativity, and leadership are taken into account. GT programs are designed for students who display exceptional qualities, whose needs may not be sufficiently served in regular education programs, and who are likely to benefit from specialized education and related services.

the ELL student population mirror that of the Latino student population. Likewise, educational outcomes for ELLs are intrinsically tied to Latino student achievement. Thus, inadequate access to rigorous courses and persistent gaps in academic achievement are important indicators in evaluating academic outcomes among Latinos.

Nativity and Ethnicity of the Population

- **ELL students represent a significant portion of the Latino student population.** Nearly four-fifths (79%) of ELL students are Hispanic native Spanish-speakers.²⁴ Also, nearly half (45%) of all Latino children are ELL students in our nation's public schools.²⁵
- **Hispanic immigrants are more likely than non-Hispanic immigrant groups to be ELL students.** Although Latino immigrants make up 58% of the total population of immigrant children, they represent more than 75% of ELL students. In contrast, Asian immigrants make up 22% of total immigrant children, yet represent only 13% of ELL students.²⁶

- **In both elementary and secondary education, most ELL students are native-born and many have native-born parents.** Specifically, at the elementary level, 59% of ELLs are U.S.-born children of immigrants, or second generation, and 18% are children of U.S. native-born parents, or third generation. Only 24% of ELL elementary school children are foreign-born. In secondary schools, 27% of ELLs are second generation and 29% are third generation, compared to 44% of ELL students who are foreign-born. Thus, although there is a larger share of foreign-born Hispanic ELLs in the upper grades than in the lower grades, in both elementary and secondary levels the majority of ELLs are native-born students (see Figure 4).²⁷

Growth and Size of the Population

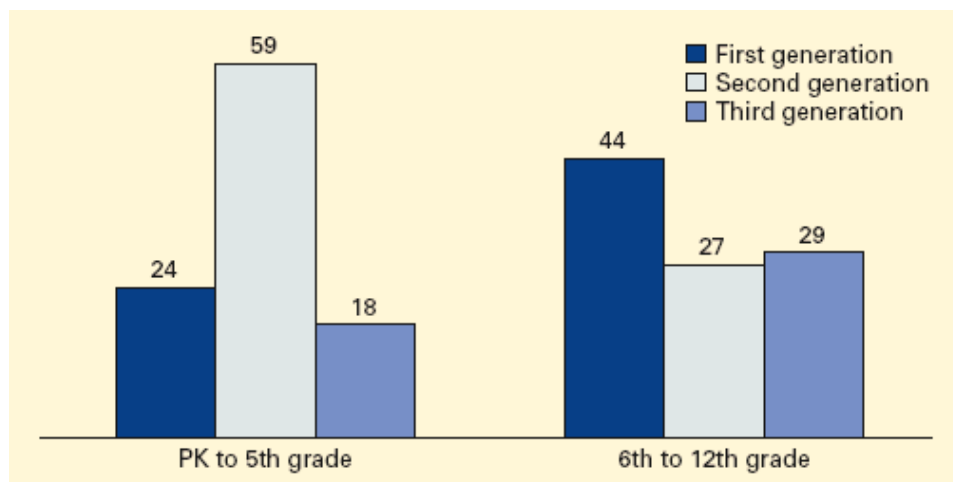
- **The number of ELLs enrolled in U.S. schools has increased substantially in the past decade.** During the 2004-2005 academic year, there were an estimated 5.1 million ELL students enrolled in preK-12 public schools, representing 10.5% of the total public

school student enrollment and demonstrating more than a 56% increase between 1994-1995 and 2004-2005.²⁸

- **There is a larger share of LEP students in the lower grades.** Approximately 52.6% of all LEP students are enrolled in grades preK-5, and 47.4% of LEP children are enrolled in grades 6-12.²⁹
- **The LEP student population is mainly concentrated in metropolitan areas.** An estimated 91% of LEP students live in metropolitan areas, compared to 79.5% of non-LEP students who live in metropolitan areas.³⁰ In fact, nearly 70% of the nation's LEP elementary school students are enrolled in 10% of metropolitan-area schools.³¹
- **LEP student enrollment is concentrated in states with traditionally large Hispanic populations.** During the 2004-2005 school year, the states with the highest percentages of LEP students in their public school classrooms were California (25.7%), New Mexico (22.4%), Nevada (18.1%), Texas (15.5%), Alaska (15.1%), and Arizona (15.1%).³²

FIGURE 4

Nativity and Generation for English Language Learner Children by Grade Level, 2000 (Percent)



Source: Capps, Randy, Michael Fix, Julie Murray, Jason Ost, Jeffrey S. Passel, and Shinta Herwanto, *The New Demography of America's Schools: Immigration and the No Child Left Behind Act*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2005.

- **LEP student enrollment has significantly increased in nontraditional Latino and immigrant states.** Between 1995 and 2005, states that experienced the largest growth rates in ELLs included South Carolina (714%), Kentucky (417%), Indiana (408%), North Carolina (372%), and Tennessee (370%).³³
- **ELL students attend schools that are segregated linguistically.** According to 2003 data, the degree of

linguistic segregation appears to have risen in the previous five years. Although ELL students represent a small share (10.5%) of the total student population, more than 53% of ELL students are concentrated in schools where more than 30% of their peers are also ELLs. In contrast, only 4% of non-ELL students attend schools where more than 30% of the students are ELLs.³⁴

Education of ELLs

- **The majority of ELLs are in schools that receive federal education dollars targeted to ELLs.** In the 2003-2004 school year, schools that received federal funding to support LEP students served 78% of all ELL students.³⁵
- **States use a variety of education programs to instruct ELL students in public schools.** All 50 states, the District of Columbia, and

Puerto Rico have schools that use some type of English-as-a-second-language instructional program. Forty states have schools that use bilingual as well as English-only programs. Twelve states have schools that use only English-medium programs. Finally, no state uses only one program type.³⁶

- **There are differences in the achievement scores in reading and mathematics between ELL students and non-ELLs.** According to the 2005 National Assessment for Educational Progress, only 29% of ELL 8th-grade students scored at or above the basic achievement level for mathematics, compared to 71% of non-ELL 8th graders. Also, only 29% of ELL 8th graders scored at or above the basic achievement level for reading, compared to 75% of non-ELL 8th-grade students.³⁷
- **Educational achievement among ELL students is linked to high school dropout rates.** Specifically, Latino ELL students are less likely to complete high school than

Hispanics who are fluent in English. While 15% of Latinos ages 16-19 who are fluent in English do not graduate from high school, more than 59% of Latino ELLs of the same age group are high school dropouts.³⁸

Hispanics and School Resources

Latino children are more likely to attend schools that serve largely low-income students and have fewer resources available for students. In many cases, these schools also tend to have a disproportionately high concentration of minority students.

- **Latino and Black students are more likely to attend schools that serve a large concentration of low-income students.*** Among 4th graders, 49% of Hispanic and 48% of Black students are enrolled in schools with the highest measure of poverty,** compared to 5% of White and 16% of Asian/Pacific Islander 4th-grade students.³⁹ Moreover, there is a strong relationship

between percent poor and percent minority populations in a school. Specifically, 88% of high-minority schools (more than 90% minority) are high-poverty schools.⁴⁰

- **Significant gaps in per-student expenditures between highest- and lowest-poverty districts include states with large Latino communities.** For example, such states include New York with a gap of \$2,927 per student and Illinois (\$2,355).*** In 34 states, the highest-poverty districts receive fewer cost-adjusted dollars than the lowest-poverty districts (see Figure 5).⁴¹
- **States that have considerable funding gaps between low- and high-minority districts include states with large Hispanic communities.** For example, school districts with the highest percentage of minority children receive significantly less funding than districts with the fewest minority children in states including California, with a gap of \$499 per student, Arizona

* Levels of poverty can be measured by percentage of students eligible for national free or reduced-price lunch programs (FRL): very low= <5%, low=6-25%, medium= 26-50%, and high= 51-100%. Eligibility criteria for these programs are based on family size and income. In educational research, FRL eligibility is a widely employed measure of poverty and socioeconomic disadvantage.

** Schools with more than 75% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

*** Dollar amounts have been adjusted to account for regional cost differences, the additional cost of educating students with disabilities, and the additional cost of educating low-income students.

(\$680), Texas (\$1,167), Illinois (\$1,524), and New York (\$2,636). Although race and poverty are often highly correlated, certain states have a significantly larger funding gap for minority students than for low-income students, including Colorado, Kansas, Texas, and Wisconsin (see Figure 5).⁴²

Hispanics and Higher Education

Although Latino enrollment in institutions of higher education has increased, Latinos are still less likely than non-Latinos to be enrolled in or graduate from college. For many Latinos, Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs)* play a significant role in providing a college education.

Hispanic Enrollment in Higher Education

■ **Latino and Black students are less likely than their White peers to be enrolled in institutions of higher education.** In 1974, 38% of young Whites participated in postsecondary education, which was higher than the rates of Blacks and Hispanics

FIGURE 5

State and Local Poverty Funding Gaps and Minority Funding Gaps

State	Gap between revenues available per student in the highest- and lowest-poverty districts (in dollars)	Gap between revenues available per student in the highest- and lowest-minority districts (in dollars)
Arizona	-736	-680
California	-259	-499
Colorado	-440	-1,032
Illinois	-2,355	-1,524
Kansas	-885	-1,630
New York	-2,927	-2,636
Texas	-757	-1,167
Wisconsin	-742	-1,270
<i>United States</i>	<i>-1,307</i>	<i>-1,213</i>

Source: Wiener, Ross and Eli Pristoop, "How States Shortchange the Districts that Need the Most Help," *Funding Gaps 2006*. Washington, DC: Education Trust, 2006.

* Hispanic-Serving Institutions are defined as those with full-time undergraduate enrollment of Hispanic students at 25% or more of total enrollment.

(26% and 22%, respectively). Between 1974 and 2003, participation rates for all three groups increased; however, in 2003 Whites continued to have higher participation rates than both Blacks and Hispanics. The White-Hispanic gap increased from 16 percentage points in 1974 to 26 percentage points in 2003.⁴³ In fact, while 41.7% of Whites and 31.8% of Blacks ages 18 through 24 were enrolled in postsecondary institutions in 2004, only 24.7% of Hispanics of the same age group were enrolled in higher education institutions.⁴⁴

- **Hispanics and Blacks constitute a small proportion of undergraduate students in the U.S.** Latinos compose 18% and Blacks make up 17% of the total college-age population. However, only 10.4% of all 2002 undergraduate students were Hispanic and only 12.4% were Black, while 69% of undergraduates that year were White.⁴⁵
- **Hispanic and Black undergraduate students are more likely than their White**

peers to attend a two-year college. Of the 1.7 million Hispanics pursuing undergraduate study, approximately 38% attend two-year institutions. In contrast, 28% of White, 28% of Asian, and 36% of Black undergraduates are enrolled in two-year colleges (see Figure 6).⁴⁶

Higher Education Graduation Rates for Latinos

- **Hispanics age 25 and older are less likely than Blacks and Whites to receive a bachelor's degree.** In 2005, 12% of Hispanics age 25 years and older had received a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 17.7% of Blacks and 30.5% of comparable Whites.⁴⁷
- **Hispanics are less likely to have expectations of completing higher education and receiving a bachelor's degree or higher.** In 2003, 28.2% of Hispanic 12th graders had expectations of attaining a bachelor's degree, compared to 35.1% of White and 32% of Black 12th graders.⁴⁸

Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs)

- **HSIs enroll half of all Latino students pursuing higher education.** In 2003-2004, although the 334 HSIs in the U.S. accounted for only 5% of all institutions of higher education, they enrolled 51% of all Hispanics pursuing higher education degrees in the U.S.⁴⁹
- **Hispanic undergraduate students at HSIs are more likely to work full-time compared to the overall undergraduate student population.** Specifically, 44% of Latino HSI students worked full-time compared to 39.3% of students overall. Moreover, although tuition is generally lower at HSIs than at non-HSIs, students who attend HSIs are generally less able to contribute to the cost of their education than are students from nonminority-serving institutions.⁵⁰

FIGURE 6

**Type of College Enrolled for Students 15 Years Old and Over,
by Race and Ethnicity: 2005 (Numbers in Thousands)**

Race/Ethnicity	Total number of students enrolled in undergraduate study	Number of students enrolled in two-year colleges	Number of students enrolled in four-year colleges	Percent of students who attend two-year colleges
Non-Hispanic White	9,418	2,664	6,754	28.3%
Hispanic	1,671	641	1,030	38.3%
Black	1,972	701	1,270	35.5%
Asian/ Pacific Islander	795	223	571	28.1%

Source: Calculations tabulated by NCLR based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau, "School Enrollment – Social and Economic Characteristics of Students: October 2005," *Current Population Survey*, Table 10. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, 2006.

Financial Aid for Hispanics in Higher Education

- **Hispanics are more likely than Whites yet less likely than Blacks to receive financial aid to pay for an undergraduate education.**

During the 2004-2005 academic

year, 63% of Hispanic undergraduates received some form of financial aid,* compared to 62% of White and 76% of Black undergraduate students.⁵¹

- **Hispanic undergraduates receive less in financial aid on average than their Black**

and White undergraduate peers. During the 2004-2005 academic year, although the average amount of financial aid received by an Hispanic full-time undergraduate was \$4,622, White students received on average \$4,837 and Black students received \$4,908 in financial aid.⁵²

* Financial aid can be in the form of grants, loans, and work-study.

Conclusion

The status of Latino education suggests a number of missed opportunities from early childhood education through higher education. Compared to their peers, Latinos are more likely to start school later and leave school earlier. Especially concerning is that Latinos are the second-largest student population enrolled in our nation's schools, and improved

educational outcomes for Latinos have not kept pace with their rapid growth.

Ensuring that our nation's public schools and universities improve their capacity to adequately serve Latino students, as well as immigrants and English language learners, is one of our country's most significant challenges.

However, it is also one that must

be overcome. At the federal level, Congress and the Administration have an opportunity to reverse these trends as they consider the renewal of the Head Start Act, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Higher Education Act, and funding for federal education programs, all of which must be addressed in the 110th Congress.

Endnotes

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