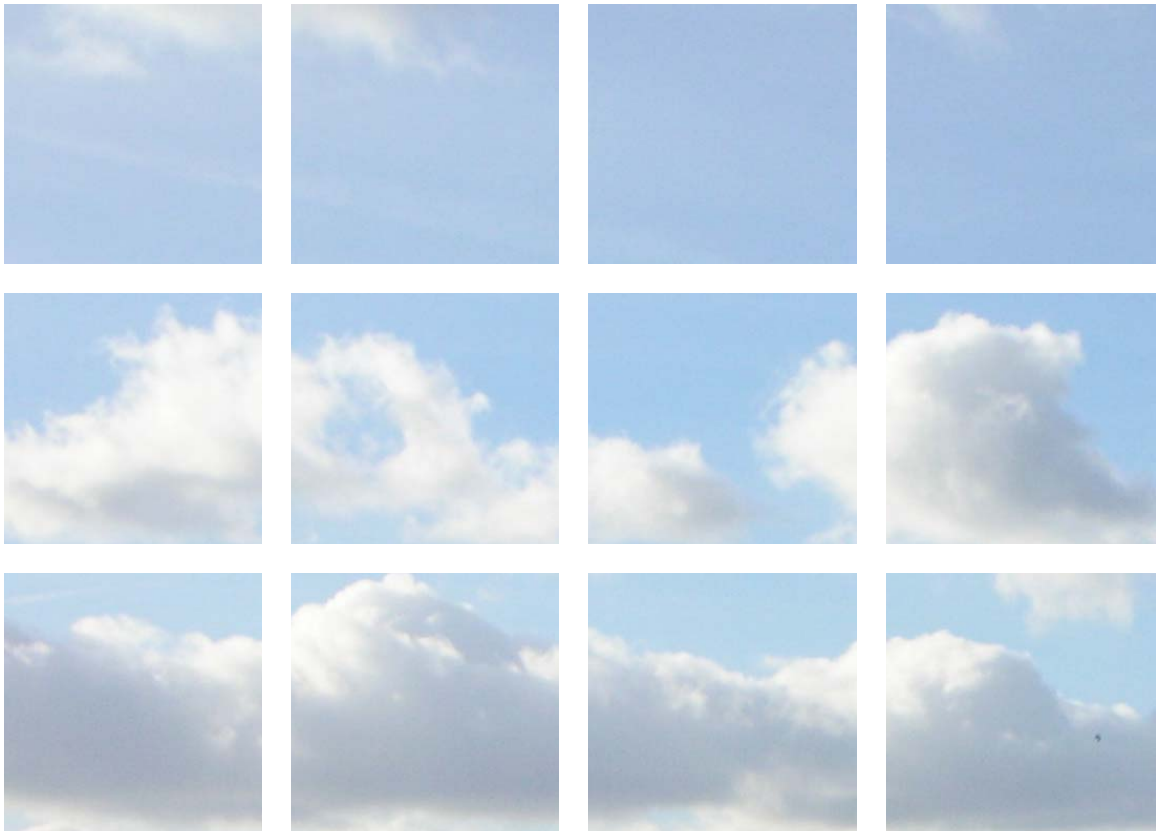


CHOOSING

HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTIONS (HSIs):

A CLOSER LOOK AT LATINO STUDENTS' COLLEGE CHOICES





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Excelencia in Education aims to accelerate higher education success for Latino students by providing data-driven analysis of the educational status of Latino students, and by promoting education policies and institutional practices that support their academic achievement. A 501(c)(3) organization, *Excelencia* is building a network of results-oriented educators and policy-makers, adding value to their individual efforts with the means and momentum to address the U.S. economy’s need for a highly educated workforce.

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FOREWORD

In this second brief of our three-part series on Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), we examine Latino students' college choices. While Latino students may not be aware of the HSI designation, they are in fact converting existing colleges and institutions into HSIs simply as a function of their own decisions—a trend that shows signs of continuing for several more years.

This brief maintains *Excelencia* in Education's commitment to apply knowledge to public policy and institutional practice. To examine Latino students' college choices, we blended analysis of national enrollment patterns with data from focus groups conducted with Latino college students from different institutions across the country. The results show the impact of Latino students' emphasis on selecting colleges near their homes. This emphasis, coupled with the concentration of Latino housing patterns, leads to the concentrated enrollments of Latino students that form HSIs. Other important decision factors, from lower sticker price to friendly atmos-

phere, buttress these choices—and present higher education decision makers with new information to use in choosing policies to adopt and programs and services to provide.

Choosing Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs): A Closer Look at Latino Students' College Choices is being released in 2007, a year when higher education is coming under intense scrutiny. In terms of the higher education of Latino students, that scrutiny should apply to public policies and institutional practices that serve Latino students' academic goals and provide the most valuable and practical support that will lead to success. That kind of higher education accountability will be strategic and help to ensure the high caliber of tomorrow's workforce and leadership. *Excelencia* will focus on policy and practice issues in the final brief in this series, *Modeling HSIs: Campus Practices that Work for Latinos Students*.

Sarita E. Brown
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tions include: *How Latino Students Pay for College: Patterns of Financial Aid in 2003-04* and *California Policy Options to Accelerate Latino Success in Higher Education*.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2003-04, almost half of Latino undergraduate students were concentrated in the 6 percent of institutions of higher education in the United States identified as Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) (236 institutions). This concentration reflects an increasing trend for Latino students first highlighted in the 1980s.

To understand why so many Latino students are concentrated in so few institutions, analysis of data on HSIs was combined with findings from focus groups and interviews with a sample of students at HSIs and non-HSIs. While the findings of this study are not representative of all Latino students, they do provide insights about Latino college students and share an important perspective rarely integrated into policy considerations about what influences their college choices.

Latino student choices create HSIs. The classification of a campus as an HSI shows no evidence of influencing Latino student college choices. However, most HSIs have institutional characteristics that align with Latino student priorities and needs and explain why many students choose HSIs. For example, many Latino students at HSIs identified low college costs, proximity to where they lived, and an approachable campus as their priorities in choosing a college. In tandem with Latino student priorities, HSIs are generally less expensive than other institutions, are located in large Latino communities, and tend to be more accessible compared to other institutions.

The factors Latinos prioritized for choosing a college contrasts with the conventional wisdom that students will

choose the most selective institution that will accept them. However, in order to understand the college choices Latino students make, it is critical to recognize the high degree of intentionality involved in the current patterns of Latino student enrollment. This is especially relevant for those institutions seeking to increase their Latino outreach activities or improve access to their campuses.

Findings

- Latino students' college choices create HSIs. However, most Latino students enrolled at HSIs did not know their institution was an HSI.
- Latino students at HSIs prioritized college costs, proximity to where they lived, and an accessible campus as decisive factors in their college choice.
- Latino graduates who did not attend HSIs were more likely to prioritize financial aid, institutional prestige, and academic programs as critical factors influencing their college choice.
- Latino students at HSIs believed they would receive a quality education at any college they chose, as long as they were motivated.
- HSIs were lower in cost and more accessible than comparable institutions and were located in communities with large Latino populations.
- Many Latino students at HSIs chose their institution based on the "sticker price" of tuition and related costs without significantly factoring in financial aid.



OVERVIEW

This policy brief is the second in a series on Hispanic-Serving Institutions. The first, *Inventing Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs): The Basics*, provided an overview of the history and characteristics of HSIs as a group (See Appendix A for a summary). This second policy brief had three guiding questions:

1. *Why do half of all Latino students enroll at HSIs?*
2. *What influences the college choices of Latinos at HSIs?*
3. *How do these influences compare with those of Latinos at other institutions?*

The findings of the study are not representative of all Latino students; rather, they provide insights about Latino college students and present an important perspective rarely integrated into policy considerations—the views of Latino students themselves. As the youngest, second largest, and fastest growing ethnic group in the country, Latinos are a critical group to

American society. This policy brief is intended to inform policymakers and institutional leaders as they make policy and program decisions to improve student outreach, college enrollment, retention, and graduation in higher education.

Following the introduction, this brief describes the methodology used to gather students' views on college choice and describes the institutions and students that participated in the focus groups and interviews for this study. Then, in discussing why Latino students might enroll at HSIs, the brief considers national data and summarizes findings from focus groups about the college choices of Latino students who selected HSIs, as well as those who chose other institutions. The brief continues with recommendations from Latino students for institutional outreach efforts to increase the enrollment of Latino students, and concludes with a summary of the research findings about Latino student college choices.

INTRODUCTION

College choices are both influenced and constrained by educational expectations, knowledge of options, financial resources available, and the quality of academic preparation in high school. Recent research has examined these factors separately for Latinos in higher education. For example, studies have shown that Latinos are more likely than other ethnic groups to value higher education (Public Agenda, 2003) but have lower educational aspirations than other groups (Ingels, Planty, Bozick, 2005). Studies have also found that Latino students and parents have limited knowledge about choosing and paying for college (Tómas Rivera Policy Institute, 2003; 2005) and that, on average, Latino students receive less financial aid to pay for college than any other ethnic group (Santiago and Cunningham, 2005). National data also show that less than half of high school Latino students are academically prepared for college (NCES, 2005). Still, Latino enrollment in higher education is increasing. Latino undergraduate enrollment increased 130 percent from 1990 to 2004 and today represents about 11 percent of the total student enrollment in higher education (NCES, 2005).

Other factors influence college choice. A recent national survey of high school seniors found that the most important feature in choosing a college was whether the institution had a degree in their chosen field. Beyond this common choice, features deemed “very important” to high school seniors differed on the

basis of race/ethnicity. For Latino and African American high school seniors, the next most important factor in their choice of college was the availability of financial aid. For white and American Indian high school seniors, the next important factor in college choice was the availability of specific courses or curriculum. For Asian and Pacific Islander students, the institution's strong academic reputation was the next “very important” feature in choosing a college (Ingels, Planty, & Bozick, 2005).

Looking at college choices is important because college choices affect college completion. For example, a study by the Pew Hispanic Center found that Hispanics at all preparation levels are more likely to enroll at less selective institutions than their white (Caucasian, non-Hispanic) peers. Nearly 60 percent of Latinos—compared to 52 percent of equally prepared white students—attend a less selective institution (Fry, 2004). This study and others confirm that Hispanic students are more likely to earn a bachelor's degree if they attend a highly selective institution than if they attend a non-selective one (Alon and Tienda, 2004; Fry, 2004). Since degree completion is lower at nonselective institutions and Latino students are generally choosing non-selective institutions, these studies suggest that Latinos are not making the most strategic choices possible for their higher education. This brief considers the choices Latino students make to enroll at HSIs and how strategic these choices are.

WHY DO LATINOS ENROLL AT HSIs?

About half of all Latino undergraduates in 2003-04 chose to enroll in the 6 percent of institutions of higher education known as Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) (Santiago, 2006). In 2003-04, there were 236 institutions meeting the federal definition of HSIs. These institutions are identified in federal legislation because of their concentrated Latino enrollment, not their mission. HSIs are defined as public or not-for-profit institutions of higher education that enroll 25 percent or more undergraduate Hispanic full-time equivalent (FTE) students (Higher Education Act, as amended in 1998).

Data provide some hints as to why Latino students enrolled in college might concentrate at HSIs. The majority of HSIs (60 percent) have open admissions,¹ 70 percent are public institutions, and the majority are located in communities with large Latino populations. Further, the average tuition and fees at HSIs are lower than those of comparable institutions (Santiago, 2006). These three factors—access, location, and affordability—may explain why so many Latino students choose to concentrate in so few institutions. However, these data hints require verification and explanation because these factors do not conform to conventional wisdom that students

will choose the most selective institution that will accept them. Given the projected growth of the Latino college population, it is important for policymakers and institutional leaders to understand why so many Latino students enroll at HSIs. Analysis of these choices is critical to improving Latino student access to and success in higher education, as well as improving institutional outreach and higher education policy.

There are over 3,000 institutions of higher education in the United States. Why are so many Latino students choosing to enroll in such a small number of institutions (HSIs)? While research is increasingly recognizing the phenomenon of Latino concentration in higher education, little research exists on why Latinos are choosing to enroll at HSIs. Do the college choice priorities of Latinos who enroll at HSIs differ from those indicated in national data? The analysis in this study is more agnostic than other research. It asks students directly why they chose their institution and the rationale for their selection. The current findings amplify information about Latino student trends and provide a textured report from a rare source—Latino students themselves.

TAPPING LATINO STUDENTS' VIEWS

To capture Latino student perspectives on college and to better understand the influence of these and other factors on college choice, *Excelencia* in Education conducted focus groups and interviews with Latino students across the country. The research design was built on established relationships with community colleges and baccalaureate-granting institutions across the country; *Excelencia* had previously worked with them in examining Latino student success.

Each of the six baccalaureate-granting institutions in the current project had also participated in a FIPSE-funded demonstration project led by *Excelencia* in Education entitled “Latino Student Success at Hispanic-Serving Institutions.”² The project examined what it means to academically serve Latino students (Santiago, Andrade, Brown, 2004) and led to a subsequent, parallel project with community colleges—where many Latino students begin their higher education—entitled, “Starting Point: Community College.”

For the current research, in 2005 and 2006, researchers conducted seven focus groups, which included more than 80 Latino college students at six baccalaureate-granting HSIs and 19 Latino graduates at one Hispanic organization (see text box). Researchers also interviewed more than 35 Latino graduates of institutions that were not HSIs. We conducted the focus groups at public institutions located in three states with large and growing Latino populations.³

Excelencia worked with campus administrators and institutional researchers to identify and recruit degree-seeking Latino students at each of the six HSIs to participate in a two-hour focus group that examined both general factors influencing their college choices and specific questions about the institution where they were currently enrolled. Each focus group included a majority of Latino students identified as “high achievers” — students with a high school grade point average of 3.1 or higher (on a 4.0 scale) whose academic profiles made them admissible to more selective institutions.

Overall, 103 students participated in focus groups. The students' average age was 22. Men and women were fairly evenly represented, and about 75 percent of participants were enrolled as juniors or higher. Less than 20 percent had transferred from a community college, and over 80 percent were commuting students. Further, slightly less than half of the participants were first-generation college-goers, and a vast majority had enrolled in college directly from high school. Almost two-thirds of participants worked while enrolled. Appendix B summarizes the characteristics of each focus group and the aggregate of all the groups.

While about half of the country's Latino college students attend HSIs, the other half are enrolled in a variety of diverse institutions across the country. To bring their

perspectives into the analysis, *Excelencia* conducted a focus group of Latino graduates who had not attended an HSI and conducted individual interviews of additional non-HSI Latino graduates. This additional focus group comprised members of the 2005 Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute (CHCI) Fellows Program. CHCI Fellows are recent Latino college graduates who hold internships at federal agencies or congressional member offices. The majority of the 2005 CHCI Fellows had graduated from non-HSI institutions. In addition, selected Latino college graduates in the workforce were interviewed. Just over half of the selected graduates had chosen colleges outside of their state of residency, and most had applied to at least three institutions for admission.

PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS/ORGANIZATIONS

California State University – Dominguez Hills is a comprehensive urban university that opened in 1965. It is located in the city of Carson and primarily serves the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area. In 2003-04, 36 percent of undergraduate students (FTE) were Latino.

California State University – Los Angeles is a comprehensive institution located in Los Angeles and founded in 1947. The Nation's first Chicano Studies department was established here in 1968. In 2003-04, 47 percent of undergraduate students (FTE) were Latino.

City University of New York, Lehman College was founded in 1968 as part of the City University of New York and is the only senior public college in the Bronx. The College is committed to meeting the educational needs of its urban population and to be especially responsive to the needs of the Bronx and its contiguous region. In 2003-04, 48 percent of undergraduate students (FTE) were Latino.

City University of New York, New York City College of Technology, located at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge, is the designated college of technology of the City University of New York. It offers degrees, as well as specialized certificates, in diverse fields. In 2003-04, 27 percent of undergraduate students (FTE) were Latino.

The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) was founded in 1914 and is part of The University of Texas System. UTEP is the only major research university in the country whose students are predominantly Mexican-American. In 2003-04, 73 percent of undergraduate students (FTE) were Latino.

The University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA) is located in the rapidly growing region of South Texas and serves the higher education needs of the rapidly growing international, multicultural population in the region. In 2003-04, 94 percent of undergraduate students (FTE) were Latino.

Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute (CHCI) was established by members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus in 1978 as a nonprofit, non-partisan educational organization dedicated to developing the next generation of Latino leaders. The CHCI Public Policy Fellowship Program offers Latinos from across the country the opportunity to gain hands-on experience in public policy at the national level.

LATINO STUDENTS DEFINE THE “BEST” INSTITUTION FOR THEM

Conventional wisdom assumes that students choose to enroll in the “best” institution where they are accepted. In conventional circles, “best” institution is defined as one with high academic ranking, prestige, and highly selective admissions. While national data indicate that a proportion of Latino students appear to follow this approach, a significant proportion of academically prepared Latino students appear to be using factors other than academic prestige, institutional ranking, or graduation rates to identify the best institution for them.

In several focus groups, students spoke at length about their views on more expensive and “selective” institutions that offer specific academic programs. One student stated that she did not assess an institution based on its “alleged prestige.” In her view, a college’s reputation did not matter as much as “the will of individual students to get the education they needed” from an institution. She further said that, despite general disdain from those who choose selective institutions, selecting a community college would be fine if a student were committed to getting a college education. Another student mentioned that, while she liked the idea of going to a “famous” school, she was also conscious that students might perform poorly and consequently not get the education they sought because prestigious institutions could be “overwhelming.” Still another student reported that he knew some students at “high profile” and expensive institutions who were “book smart,” but lacked common sense and the ability to interact with others. In describing their college decision making, most participants in the HSI focus groups did not recognize qualitative differences between institutions and expressed the view that they could get as good an education at their college as at institutions with “higher profiles.”

All of the high-achieving students in this study had been accepted at more than one institution (predominately other public baccalaureate-granting institutions in their home state). When describing the factors of primary importance in their college choices, these students identified smaller size, affordability, proximity to home and family, and a positive campus environment. Students also noted that making their college choices based on practical considerations (such as cost, location, and campus cli-

mate) also served their academic goals. Students said they believe that the quality of education they receive at the institutions where they enrolled was comparable to that of other, more costly, institutions where they had been accepted but did not enroll. Their chosen institutions were the “best” ones, given their priorities. The researchers recognize that focus group and interview students may be rationalizing their choices. Nonetheless, this trend of choosing institutions that align with priorities different from conventional wisdom is strong among Latino students and needs to be better understood.

Unlike the national data, most of the high-performing participants at HSIs indicated that the quality of the academic pro-

grams was not the determining factor in their college choice. Many students in the HSI focus groups had entered college either undecided about what they would study or with general ideas about their potential majors and an interest in exploring a variety of academic disciplines and fields of study. As previously mentioned, the students explained their belief that the education they received at their chosen institution would be equivalent to the education they could have gotten elsewhere, as long as they were motivated enough to work hard and pursue their highest academic goals. Given their expressed determination to stay close to home and to avoid going into debt for their undergraduate degree, they voiced confidence that their chosen institution would help them achieve their stated educational goals.

In contrast, data gathered from Latino students who did not attend HSIs indicate that their choices were more aligned with conventional practice. These students considered the institutions’ national reputation and the quality of academic programs as critical criteria in making their college choices. Further, these Latino students had chosen more selective institutions, most of them outside the region where their family lived.

If Latino students at HSIs did not adhere to conventional approaches in making their college choices, what factors did influence their choices? For the Latino students at HSIs in this study, those factors were cost, location, and campus accessibility.

What you put into your education is what you get out of it.

(Student, CSU-Dominguez Hills)

I don’t think students should look at school[s] because of their “prestige.” The school doesn’t matter as much as the student having the will to get the education they need out of the institution; for example, going to a community college doesn’t matter if a student is committed to getting a good education.

(Student, California State University, Dominguez Hills)

COST VS. FINANCIAL AID

College costs include the “sticker price” of tuition and fees plus related costs, such as books, housing, and transportation. Financial aid provides funds to help students pay for college and is thus perceived as expanding student college options. Student college choice is generally influenced by both college costs and financial aid. For the high-achieving students in our study, those who did not attend HSIs were more likely to have received financial aid, especially in the form of both grants and loans, and they tended to enroll in more selective and expensive institutions. High-achieving Latino students at HSIs were more likely to either not apply for or not accept financial aid in the form of loans. Those who did accept financial aid generally only accepted grants and tended to enroll in institutions near where they lived that were lower in cost than other options.

Costs

Latino students at HSIs in the study often made college choices based on the “sticker price” of tuition and fees instead of the total cost after integrating actual or potential financial aid offered.

Initially, few students said cost was a factor in their college choice. However, after more probing questions, it became clear that cost was a major consideration. At each HSI focus group, students stated that they chose their institution because they believed they could get a quality education there without having to go into debt.

In tandem to this priority, national data show that HSIs, in general, cost less than similar institutions. HSIs also tend to have a high enrollment of needy students and low educational and general expenditures. In 2003-04, the average in-state tuition at public four-year institutions (\$3,400) was more than double the tuition at public four-year HSIs (\$1,590) (Santiago, 2006). Further, the average in-state tuition at public two-year institutions (\$1,977) was 35 percent higher than that of public two-year HSIs (\$1,273). For part-time students, who paid tuition per credit hour, there were similar differences in tuition between HSIs and other institutions by sector (Santiago, 2006).

There is growing national concern about the increasing levels of student debt borne by young college graduates. In this

context, it is important to note the practical nature of Latino students’ college choices. The conventional strategy is to attend the best school that will accept a student, regardless of price, and then worry later about how to pay for that education. In contrast, Latino students at HSIs either stated or implied that every dollar less in college costs is a dollar less that a student or their family has to borrow or pay up front for their education.

When discussing costs, students were clear that they considered expenses beyond tuition and fees in choosing a college. They also included as part of their education expenses the cost of books, parking, rent as an alternative to living at home, and travel to work. In 2003-04, one-third of Latino undergraduate students lived with their parents, compared to about one-quarter of all undergraduates. Further, Latino undergraduates were half as likely to live on campus (7 percent) than all undergraduates (14 percent) (Santiago and

Cunningham, 2005). Most students in the focus groups said it was more economical to live at home with their parents because they did not have to add housing to their college education expenses, and they could continue the jobs they currently held. In fact, the students in New York and California noted that housing costs were so high that they doubted they

could work, afford their college education, and also pay rent. In line with these pragmatic decisions, another student said that she had been accepted at a more prestigious and expensive college but had enrolled at a school that was close to her family because there was not enough money to pay for costs beyond tuition and fees, such as her living expenses (clothes and food) and traveling home for holidays or family emergencies.

College is college. I can get the same education anywhere, so why would I pay more to go elsewhere when there are institutions nearby that cost less?

Student, California State University, Dominguez Hills

I chose my school because it was cheaper than other options; I would rather take out loans for graduate school instead.

(Student, CUNY – Lehman College)

Financial Aid

One factor in college choice for Latino students at HSIs is cost; another is financial aid to pay for college. Just over half of the students in the HSI focus groups reported participating in financial aid programs to pay for college. Of those who did not participate, many

worked and reported that their salaries were the primary source of funds for their education. Some students only accepted grants; others reported that they had been offered

loans to pay for college but had not accepted them because they were concerned that if they dropped out or did not finish, they might be repaying the loans “for the rest of their life.” A few students stated that they would rather take out loans for graduate school or other purposes, rather than for their bachelor’s degree.

In general, parents are expected to provide guidance and support in financing their children’s college education. In fact, when applying for financial aid, an “expected family contribution” is calculated to determine the amount of financial aid a student may be eligible to receive. The majority of students in the HSI focus groups indicated that they received some financial support from their family to pay for college. Students included the provision of housing, food, funds to purchase books, and help with transportation expenses as examples of parental financial support.

However the majority of students in the HSI focus groups figured out how to pay for their education without direct guidance from their parents. For example, approximately 70 percent completed the Federal Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) without their parents’ help. In most instances, students said that their parents did not understand how to complete the form. This aligns with findings from a survey conducted by the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute that showed Latino parents have a low level of knowledge about college preparation or financial aid to pay for college (TRPI, 2004). Many students in the study either decided it was easier for them to complete financial aid applications themselves or decided not to apply for aid.

I am concerned that if I drop out or don’t finish, I may be paying back the student loans “all my life.”

(Student, CUNY – Lehman College)

Students said that they had limited sources for advice about paying for college. A few mentioned counselors being helpful as well as others they knew who had gone to college. One surprising source of information students cited consistently was military recruiters. The overwhelming majority of the students participating in the HSI focus groups said they

had either been encouraged by counselors to join the military to help pay for their education or had been contacted directly by the military to enlist in order to help pay for their education.

Although these students did not choose to pursue this alternative, they were impressed with the recruiting techniques

used, and many had friends who had chosen this option. This financing option might dissuade some students from enrolling in college directly out of high school.

For Latino students who attended non-HSI institutions, cost was also one of the most critical factors in their college choice, but ultimately, their decision was based on the total level of financial aid offered by an institution rather than the “sticker price” or basic college costs. These graduates generally chose the institution where they had the lowest college costs after factoring in the total financial aid offered. Only in one case did a student’s parents pay entirely for the student’s education without any financial aid; all other students reported receiving extensive financial aid packages of loans and grants. Unlike the HSI participants, the majority of these students did not have financial obligations at home or elsewhere (beyond their immediate needs). Further, the majority of these students mentioned having parental and family support in selecting and paying for college.

College costs and location are interrelated. The majority of the students in the HSI focus groups selected colleges close to their family home because it made college more affordable. They commuted to campus and worked either on or off campus, and most students lived at home with their parents/family. Overwhelmingly, they stated that they chose to enroll at their institution either because they did not want to leave their family, their family did not want them to leave, or they had current responsibilities in the area (work or relationships) that required them to choose an institution nearby.

Attending a college close to home also helped students juggle work and school, cutting overall commuting time. In this regard, campus parking and other transportation costs figure importantly in a student's choices. Commuting students must be able to get on and off campus efficiently to fulfill their multiple obligations.

Since HSIs are defined by their enrollment, not their mission, institutions located in communities with large and growing Latino populations may see an increase in the number of Hispanic students and thus become HSIs. Analysis from the first brief in the HSI series showed that HSIs were located in 12 states and Puerto Rico in 2003-04. These 12 states contain about 85 percent of the country's Latino population (U.S. Census, 2004). HSIs are even more concentrated. More than 75 percent of HSIs (180) are located in three Southwest states (California, Texas, and New Mexico) and Puerto Rico. However, HSIs are also growing in states not traditionally known for having large Latino populations, such as Kansas, Massachusetts, and Washington.

HSIs also enroll a large percentage of the local Latino student population. For example, the 12 HSIs in Arizona enroll over 40 percent of all Latino undergraduates in the state.

For a small number of Latino college students, college choice is linked to their immigrant residential status. One student in the HSI focus groups described his experience in a national program through which he visited New York University, Fordham University, and Sarah Lawrence College. While interested in these institutions and academically eligible for admission, he concluded that they were not viable choices for his college education. As an undocumented resident, he would have been admitted as an international student and would have had to pay international student tuition rates without the benefit of federal financial aid. He could not afford to attend these institutions and chose one near where he lived, in Texas, where he knew that his immigrant residency status would not be an issue in securing some financial support. It should be noted that Texas is one of 10 states that offer in-state tuition at some public institutions for undocumented students who have met the state law's requirements regarding length of residence and graduation from an in-state high school.

Further, the 68 HSIs in California enroll 55 percent of Latino undergraduates, and the 37 HSIs in Texas enroll almost 60 percent of Latino undergraduates in the state (Santiago, 2006).

In the focus group of non-HSI graduates and among the non-HSI graduates interviewed separately, an institution's location was not a critical factor in their college choice. In fact, the majority enrolled at institutions outside of their home region, and many enrolled at institutions outside their state.

CAMPUS ACCESSIBILITY

In addition to being close to home, another critical factor for Latino students at HSIs was how accessible the institution is. The focus group participants acknowledged that there were multiple affordable institutions near their home. In choosing among these, they said that location was less a factor and campus environment was more important.

While most of the high-achieving students in the HSI focus groups had applied to other institutions, the students generally characterized the atmosphere at their chosen college as “small,” “familiar,” and/or “comfortable.” Students noted that the small campus size and “approachable” and “helpful” faculty influenced their choice to attend the institution. For example, several students stated that the small size of their campus allowed professors to get to know students individually. This made it easier to discuss educational goals, get information about events for networking in the discipline, and request letters of recommendation for work or advanced levels of education. The small size also made students feel comfortable so that they could focus on their educational needs. Students also stated that they had positive experiences with other students on the campus they ultimately chose and also with people they spoke with to get information about the campus.

Although almost all of the students were commuters, many of them still participated in campus activities, such as sororities/fraternities and student civic and cultural organizations, or they worked on campus. These students highlighted the importance of having a student union or other location on campus where commuting students could mingle with other students. This made them feel more connected to the campus and helped them set up study groups or get needed support and campus information.

In contrast, several participating students had visited other campuses and thought the institutions were too crowded,

Students should go where they feel comfortable and safe.

(Student, California State University – Los Angeles)

I went to Cornell my first year of college, which was about “2 percent” Latino. There was no “menudo” at the cafeteria like at this campus; this is “more my own people.”

(Student, California State University – Los Angeles)

I had a friend who went to a big prestigious campus and she became depressed because the only Hispanics she saw were the cleaning staff.

(Student, California State University – Los Angeles)

uninviting, and limited in parking (for a student who commutes and holds a job, parking is not a frivolous factor to consider). For example, students visiting nearby campuses had difficulty finding parking and locating the appropriate buildings. One student said he drove to one campus he was interested in but could not find parking after driving around for 45 minutes. So he went to another campus 30 minutes away, and when he found parking, he decided to enroll there. Further, some students had negative experiences with someone on campus or heard from other students that the campus was not supportive. All this “turned them off” the institution. Students who traveled out of state to consider other institutions stated that, after leaving home to visit other campuses, they either “felt out of place,” missed their family, or encountered students who were not very positive about their experiences on those campuses.

Most of the HSI focus group students stated that their decision to attend their institution was not due to the large concentration of Latino students enrolled (although characterizing their college of choice as “familiar” or “comfortable” could be a tacit recognition that a friendly campus environment implied some critical mass of Latino population). Further, most students had never heard the term “Hispanic-Serving Institution” or “HSI” or were aware that their institution was an HSI. A few had heard the term HSI but did not know what it meant. Students at only one of the participating campuses knew their institution was an HSI because the institution overtly identifies itself as such in all of its material. One student thought this acknowledgement breaks the norm of being predominately white and opens the institution to being Hispanic-serving. The students were clear that this acknowledgement did not mean that the institution did not “serve” all students, but rather that it highlighted its service to Latinos and recognized the strong Latino presence in the region.

When prodded further about the impact of a concentration of Latinos on campus, a few students said there were some potentially negative connotations to being perceived as being a “Hispanic institution.” For example, one student thought that others might infer that the institution was inferior because it enrolled so many Hispanics. At the same time, other students countered with examples of the benefits of being at an institution with a large concentration of Latino students.

While there are some exceptions, HSIs provide more access to higher education than many other institutions. In 2003-04, 60 percent of HSIs (140) had an open admissions policy, compared to 44 percent of all U.S. degree-granting institutions of higher education. Of the HSIs with more selective admission

I knew I wanted to go to a small school because teachers know you by name and can help you prepare for graduate school.

(Student, CUNY – City Tech)

In a way, there is a negative connotation to the HSI term too; I remember hearing people outside of the institution refer to our campus as the “University of Taco at El Paso.”

(Student, The University of Texas at El Paso)

policies, 28 percent required completion of a college prep program, and 84 percent required admission test scores. In the country as a whole, 42 percent of all institutions with more selective admission policies required the completion of a college prep program, and 89 percent required admission test scores (Santiago, 2006).

Most HSIs are not selective institutions; they have open admissions, have missions to serve their region, and are accessible to many in their community. This characterization of HSIs as nonselective should not be taken to mean that HSIs are not quality institutions of higher education. A philosophy of open admissions, community development, and academic

preparation allows HSIs to be uniquely community institutions of first choice for Latino students.

USEFUL INFORMATION

Countless national studies have confirmed the importance of information in preparing for and choosing to attend college. Institutions and community organizations work to provide information, and students and parents work to get it. In the focus groups, Latino students at HSIs gave details about the information they received to make their college choices. High-achieving Latino students in this study had multiple college options and made practical college choices with the information available to them.

The three main sources of information for the focus group participants were programs offered at their high school (such as college fairs or visits), high school counselors, and outreach from colleges. The Internet and family/friends were not meaningful sources of information about college options for Latino students who enrolled at HSIs. Less than 25 percent of students had accessed information from the Internet. Further, few said they had received information about college options from family, friends, or teachers.

Many of the high-achieving students had been contacted by other schools to apply for admission; thus felt they had

options. While the vast majority of these institutions were public and in-state, several students had received information from private or out-of-state institutions. They attributed this recruitment effort to their participation in honors programs and college fairs. About 15 percent of the students received offers from out-of-state campuses to visit their campuses (airfare plus room and board for a weekend), but few accepted. The students either had other commitments, such as work, or decided that it was too far to travel.

Compared to students in the HSI focus groups, the non-HSI graduates exhibited sophisticated knowledge about college and the various options available to them. Their primary sources of information about college were high school counselors, the Internet, and/or programs provided at their high school. They had also spoken with other students about college options and done some of their own research to determine the “quality” of a potential school. Many of these students had taken the PSAT and had subsequently received information from colleges and universities that invited them to consider attending and explained how to apply.

OUTREACH RECOMMENDATIONS FROM LATINO STUDENTS

Reflecting on their experiences, the focus group participants (both HSI students and non-HSI graduates) offered suggestions for improving recruitment of other Latino students. Their recommendations fell into three categories:

1. *Recruiting students as information resources*
2. *Engaging and reaching out to entire families*
3. *Providing reliable and quality information*

Recruiting students as resources

Latino students thought that institutional outreach to Latinos could be improved by giving high school students a chance to hear directly from students who had made it to college and to talk with them. For example, they suggested the following:

- Have graduates of a particular high school who are currently in college return to the school to share their experiences and talk to potential college students about applying to college. In this way, students would have a better idea of what to expect. It would also help if these students were from similar backgrounds and if they went to different colleges.
- Create a mentoring program between colleges and high schools so that students who have questions about college preparation or options can talk directly—and in a consistent environment—to those involved.

Engage and reach out to entire families

Participating students reinforced the importance of family. While many said that their parents had not helped extensively in their college choices, they did want their parents informed and engaged so they could better understand the higher education system and possibly help their siblings or others. For example, the students suggested the following:

- Develop and disseminate an information sheet that potential college students can take home to their parents that explains what the student will be doing in college. This could include the college mission and expectations along with courses of study for a student's chosen discipline, and information similar to that provided in student orientations, such as availability of academic support services, financial aid, and extracurricular activities.
- Have campus recruitment efforts reach out to parents in the community when their students are in middle school or younger, rather than waiting until senior year in high school.

- Offer college fairs for the whole community and target families with young children (not just high school seniors).
- Create college forums for the community that provide information about college generally, like different college types, financial aid options, different majors, and tradeoffs for determining which college options are the best fit.

We should get information about college in our freshman or sophomore years so that we can think about college options earlier. In our senior year we are bombarded with too much to do to then figure out our options.

(Student, CUNY – New York City College of Technology)

- Learn from the recruitment techniques of military recruiters. They are persistent, provide information to students on a one-on-one basis, and are aggressive in getting students to enlist.

Provide reliable and quality information

Students in the HSI focus groups seemed to have a general mistrust of information they had received from some sources and

stressed the importance of accurate and useful information when making college choices. For example, a few students mentioned getting incomplete information from counselors about college options and from recruiters who made unrealistic promises about campus resources. The students suggested the following:

- Provide sufficient numbers of quality high school guidance counselors so that more than the “top 5 percent” of students get real college guidance.
- Be honest with the information shared about a campus.
- Provide more information about scholarship opportunities so that students can include this in making their decisions about colleges.
- Increase the number of graduate advisors at community college transfer centers to disseminate valuable information on how to continue education.
- Make campuses more attractive for students who are not sure they know what they want to study as freshmen. Students identified the availability of academic advisors, student mentors, and information on career opportunities as useful resources that would appeal to students.
- Involve college faculty more in outreach such as in providing college workshops and student support activities. This makes them less intimidating and exposes them to their prospective students.

SUMMARY

By enrolling at institutions that meet their needs, Latino students create HSIs. The Latino students at HSIs who participated in our focus groups chose institutions that best met their needs. These institutions cost less than comparable institutions, were located near where students lived, and had a more accessible campus.

Although HSIs are identified in federal legislation, the classification is not yet familiar to many Latino students, and many HSIs do not promote themselves by this classification. Therefore, many Latino students choose HSIs because of the institutional characteristics that mirror the factors influencing choice, not because of the federal classification as an HSI. One can conclude that, as the number of Latino college students increases, so too will their representation at institutions that meet their needs and priorities. As a result, there will be more institutions that meet the basic definition of an HSI. It remains to be seen if institutions will be ready to embrace this new classification.

The factors most important to Latinos in choosing a college contrast with the conventional wisdom that students will choose the most selective institution that accepts them. However, in order to understand the college choices Latino students make, it is critical to recognize the high degree of intentionality involved in the current patterns of Latino student enrollment. This is especially relevant for those institutions seeking to increase their Latino outreach activities or improve access to their campuses. The focus groups indicated that, for HSI students, the priorities regarding higher education and college choice were different from the conventional priorities. Nonetheless, the HSI students did make strategic decisions using their priorities and the best information they had available.

Findings

For Latino students at HSIs, the decisive factors in their college choice were college costs, proximity to where they lived, and an accessible campus. While high-achieving Latino students at HSIs were admitted to several colleges, they

made strategic college choices based on practical concerns like costs and location, using the best information available to them. For them, affordability was valued over prestige.

For Latino graduates who did not attend HSIs, the critical factors influencing college choice were more likely to be financial aid, institutional prestige, and academic programs. The majority of these students had applied to multiple schools with high-ranking academic programs in which they were interested, and they ultimately chose the most affordable option, incorporating their financial aid package.

Many Latino students at HSIs chose their institution based on the “sticker price” of tuition and related costs without factoring in potential financial aid. Many students made their college choices without relying on potential financial aid because of concerns about consistent financial aid support throughout their education. In general, data show that the “sticker price” of HSIs is lower than comparable institutions. Latinos who attended non-HSIs received more parental guidance—and also more financial assistance from parents—than students at HSIs.

Most Latino students enrolled at HSIs did not know their institution was an HSI. Campus classification as an HSI did not influence participating Latino students’ choices to attend these institutions. Although HSIs are identified in federal legislation, the classification was unfamiliar to many Latino students, even those enrolled at an HSI. Further, few institutions that met the basic definition of HSIs publicly represented themselves by this classification.

Latino students at HSIs believed they would receive a quality education at any college they chose, as long as they were motivated. Many of these students expressed the view that receiving a quality college education depended more on their motivation than on the ranking of the institution’s academic programs or its prestige.

Data show that HSIs are lower in cost and more accessible than comparable institutions and are located in communities with large Latino populations.

APPENDIX A. Summary of “Inventing Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs): The Basics”

Definition

Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) are defined in federal law as accredited and degree-granting public or private nonprofit institutions of higher education with 25 percent or more total undergraduate Hispanic full-time equivalent student enrollment.⁴

History

The concept of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) surfaced in the 1980s. Leaders at the federal, state, and institutional levels recognized that a small set of institutions enrolled a large percentage of Latino students but had low levels of resources. The classification of HSIs formally recognized these institutions for capacity-building and other support.

Overview

- In 2003-04, there were 236 HSIs located in 12 states and Puerto Rico, representing 6% of all institutions of higher education.⁵
- Overall, almost half (46%) of Latino undergraduates were enrolled at HSIs in 2003-04.
- The number of HSIs grew from 131 to 236 between 1995 and 2004.

Location

- HSIs are very concentrated geographically. Over 75% of HSIs are located in three states and Puerto Rico. California has the most HSIs (68), followed by Puerto Rico (52), Texas (37), and New Mexico (23). HSIs are also growing in states not generally known for having large Latino populations, such as Kansas, Massachusetts, and Washington.

Governance

- The majority of HSIs are community colleges. Almost half (46%) of all HSIs (109) are public two-year institutions. Just over 20% of HSIs (50) are public four-year institutions. Only 26% of HSIs (62) are private, not-for-profit institutions granting baccalaureate degrees or above, and 8% (15) are private not-for-profit institutions granting associate degrees.

Admissions

- HSIs provide more access to Latinos and other students than other degree-granting institutions of higher education. In 2003-04, 60% of HSIs (140) had an open admissions policy, compared to 44% of all degree-granting institutions.

Tuition & Fees

- HSIs were much more affordable than comparable institutions of higher education. The average in-state tuition at public four-year institutions (\$3,400) was more than double the tuition at public four-year HSIs (\$1,590). The average in-state tuition at public two-year institutions (\$1,977) was 35% higher than that of public two-year HSIs (\$1,273).

Graduation

- While HSIs only represented 5% of all two-year institutions in the United States, they awarded 42% of all associate degrees earned by Latinos in 2003-04. While HSIs made up only 2% of all four-year institutions, they awarded almost 40% of all baccalaureate degrees earned by Latinos in 2003-04.

Appendix B. Focus group participant summary characteristics

Appendix B. Focus group participant summary characteristics								
Summary characteristics	CSU-DH	CSU-LA	CUNY-City Tech	CUNY-Lehman	UTEP	UTPA	CHCI	Total: All
Total Latino participants	14	9	15	21	15	9	19	103
Percentage of each focus group (%)*								
AGE								
18 to 21	71	33	40	52	73	56	—	46
22 to 40	29	67	60	48	27	44	100	54
GENDER								
Female	64	44	80	29	67	56	47	55
Male	36	56	20	71	33	44	53	45
ACADEMIC LEVEL								
Freshman	7	—	20	14	27	0		12
Sophomore	36	11	20	19	13	22		16
Junior	28	11	20	33	47	11		23
Senior	28	44	40	33	13	67		25
Graduated w/bachelor's	—	33	—	—	—	—	100	24
HIGH SCHOOL GPA								
3.6 to 4.0	28	11	—	19	47	44	68	30
3.1 to 3.5	43	11	67	52	40	22	21	43
2.6 to 3.0	28	55	33	29	13	33	11	25
2.0 to 2.5	—	22	—	—	—	—	—	3
Transfer	21	22	20	19	13	33	16	20
Commuter	100	100	93	100	100	22	21	77
First-generation college-goer	57	89	40	33	33	44	42	48
Enrolled directly from high school	86	—	53	—	93	100	89	84
Took SAT in high school	100	—	67	—	87	—	79	83
Worked while enrolled	71	89	67	86	53	—	26	65

* percentages rounded

NOTES

1 The Institutional Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) defines an open admission policy as one whereby the school will accept any student who applies.

2 The Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) is a unit within the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Education. It awards grants to support innovative educational reform projects that can serve as national models for the improvement of post-secondary education.

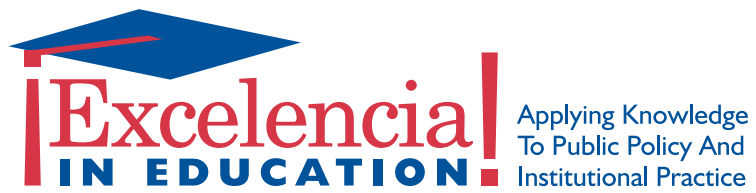
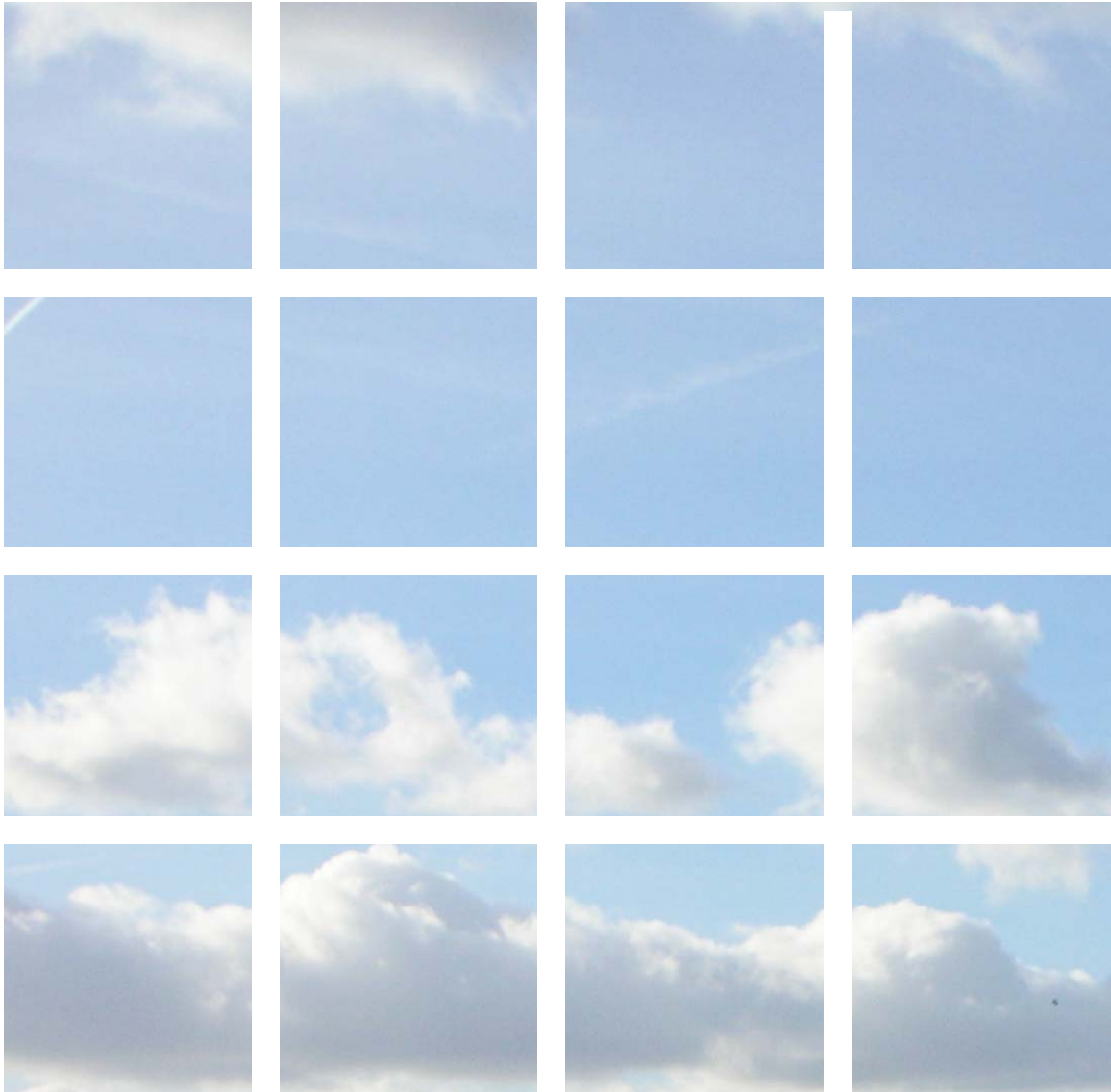
3 To date, focus groups have not been conducted with students on the six community college campuses involved in the "Starting Point" project, but these would be important in expanding our understanding of the college choices of Latino students.

4 Summary of Title V of the Higher Education Act, as amended in 1998. To be eligible for the "Developing HSIs Program," the law further requires that an HSI have a high enrollment of needy students and low educational and general expenditures.

5 Institutions of higher education are defined as public or private not-for-profit degree-granting institutions.

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