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Latino Males: Improving College Access and Degree Completion — A New National Imperative

INTRODUCING PERSPECTIVAS.

PERSPECTIVAS is produced in partnership with the American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education (AAHHE), Educational Testing Service (ETS) and the Center for Research and Policy in Education, The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA).

The purpose of PERSPECTIVAS is to provide a venue for policy formulation, to highlight best practices and to disseminate cutting-edge research to improve access, retention and graduation of Latina/o American students in higher education. The first policy brief, co-authored by Victor B. Sáenz and Luis Ponjuán, is based on the 2011 AAHHE/ETS Latino/a Student Success Institute.

The vision of PERSPECTIVAS is to be recognized by the P-20 education community as the premier publication addressing research and policy related to Latina/o student success and solutions to improve access, persistence, retention and college completion.

Executive Summary

The educational future for Latino male students is in a state of crisis, a trend that has been especially evident at the secondary and postsecondary levels in recent years. In 2010, three out of every five associate or bachelor's degrees granted to Latinos were earned by females, and the degree-completion gaps are growing across all critical junctures in higher education. The question of why Latino males are struggling to succeed in America's colleges is complex, and this brief explores some key factors that may be perpetuating this trend at two- and four-year institutions. Specifically, we highlight key findings from our most recent research to inform how institutions can reshape their campus and academic life programming, as well as retool their efforts in outreach and education. We also provide a review of promising institutional practices.

AUTHORS

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The University of Texas at Austin

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University of Florida

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Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education
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Introduction

A critical yet under-acknowledged problem in American higher education is the declining presence of Latino¹ males as compared to that of Latinas and other racial/ethnic male groups. We first highlighted this pressing and critical educational issue in our article on *The Vanishing Latino Male in Higher Education* (Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2009). Even as the number of Hispanics attending college and attaining degrees has increased steadily in recent years (Fry, 2011), the proportional representation of Latino males continues to lag behind that of their female peers (Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2009). Latino males have the lowest high school graduation rates and the lowest college enrollment and completion rates of any subgroup. In 2010, two of five associate or bachelor's degrees granted to Latinos were earned by males, and the degree-completion gaps are growing at all critical junctures in higher education. What we know can be summed up succinctly: Latino males are struggling to keep pace with their male and female peers at key transition points along the education pipeline. This is why we are calling for a new national imperative to improve the academic success for Latino males.

In 2010, two of five associate or bachelor's degrees granted to Latinos were earned by males, and the degree-completion gaps are growing at all critical junctures in higher education.

The plight of Latino males remains a challenging and complex educational problem, which is exacerbated due to the inattention of policymakers and social science researchers who continue to ignore the unique socio-cultural challenges surrounding the Latino male experience (Noguera, Hurtado, & Fergus, 2011). In addition, the term *Latina/o or Hispanic* includes so many distinct pan-ethnic and intergenerational groups and immigrant experiences that often lead to simplistic understandings or explanations of Latino students' educational experiences. Moreover, we argue that because our national and state policy priorities over the past four decades have successfully advanced equal educational opportunities for female students (e.g., Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and Title IX of the Equal Opportunity in Education Act), the educational progress of young men has been largely ignored and, consequently, not kept pace.

Meanwhile, 2010 census data clearly demonstrate that the Latina/o community will continue to drive U.S. population growth throughout the rest of this century. This stark demographic reality imparts even greater urgency to addressing Latino males' circumstances in education, particularly in higher education. Even with significant progress made in college enrollment among Hispanics in recent years (Fry, 2011), the reality remains that both Latino males and females continue to lag behind their non-Hispanic peers on key academic success outcome metrics (e.g., degree completion) while leading their non-Hispanic peers in key academic deficiency metrics (e.g., high school dropout rates). However, Latina females are excelling in their higher education participation and success rates compared to their male peers. The juxtaposition of these demographic and educational realities for Latino

1 This brief uses the words Latino and Hispanic interchangeably. While it would be preferable to further disaggregate these groups by national origin (e.g., Mexican origin, Puerto Rican, etc.), it is often difficult given the inherent limitations within the reporting data that are available for research use. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Whites or African Americans refer to non-Hispanics.

males may portend difficulties for the future economic prosperity of this country and, particularly, for our Latino communities.

The purpose of this policy brief is to describe and analyze the growing educational attainment gap between Latino males and females, highlight key research findings from two case studies that examine the educational pathways of Latino males in college, and describe promising best practices that can help Latino males in finding success in their journey into and beyond higher education. Specifically, we:

1. Illuminate the Latino student gender gap by discussing the historical education trends that show how proportionally fewer college-age Latino males are completing high school and enrolling in college. We also highlight the fact that postsecondary degree-attainment gaps between Latinos and Latinas are widening at both two- and four-year institutions (NCES, 2010).
2. Present key findings from our recent multi-institutional research efforts in Texas and Florida to inform how educational institutions can focus their student and academic life policies and programming, and revise their outreach and education efforts at both two- and four-year institutions to engage and assist Latino males.
3. Review promising practices across various educational and outreach programs that foster success for Latino males, and provide recommendations for policy and practice as well as directions for future research.

The issues of how and why Latino males are struggling to access and succeed in college are complex. Yet if we are to make significant progress on the ambitious national college completion goals that continue to shape our higher education agendas, these questions must be answered. The sobering reality of Latino males' dire status in educational attainment should serve as a call to action for educators, researchers, policymakers and communities to proactively address the growing gender gap in Latina/o academic success. This policy brief provides a clear discussion of the data and offers salient, timely and research-informed solutions focused on improving Latino males' educational outcomes.

Where is the Latina/o Achievement Gap between Genders?

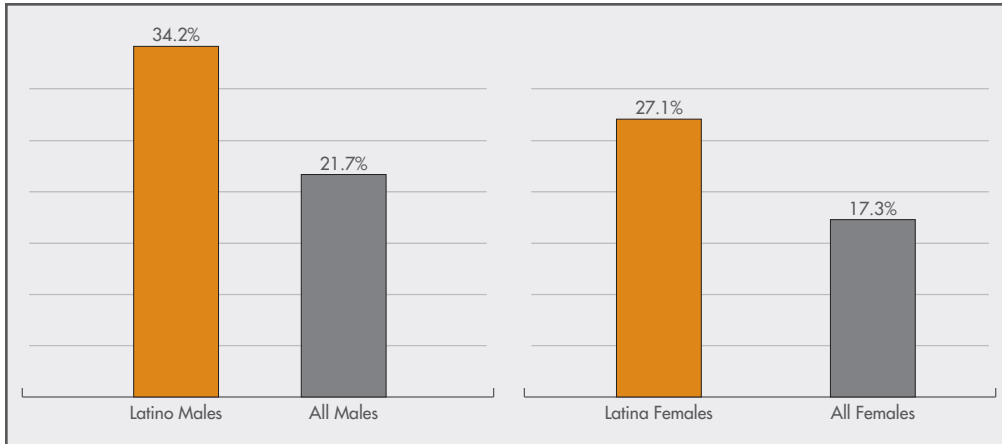
We begin with a discussion of the Latina/o achievement gap between genders — a trend also apparent within other racial/ethnic groups. The gap can be described from a variety of different perspectives and it exists at multiple points along the educational continuum. Indeed, these differences by gender can be observed in early educational milestones.

Early Childhood & Primary Education

Gaps in enrollment rates between male and female students begin to appear in early childhood education, especially among Latina/o and African-American children. In 2009, 44.4 percent of Latina girls under the age of five were enrolled in school on a full- or part-time basis, compared with 39.4 percent of Latino boys (Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2011). In addition, most boys are being educated within a system that does not fully acknowledge the potential mismatch of the male learning style in current educational practice (Gurian & Stevens, 2005), a reality that is further complicated by the one-size-fits-all accountability regimes that have reformed our educational practice in recent years. By the third grade, boys are an average of a year to a year and a half behind girls in reading and writing abilities (NCES, 2000), and boys in grades four through eight are twice as likely as girls to be held back a grade (NCES, 2006). Boys of color are more likely to experience significant disparities with respect to school suspension and expulsion, and they are severely overrepresented in special education tracks (Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2009) and referrals to juvenile justice agencies (Justice Center of the Council on State Governments, 2011).

These trends in early education no doubt have implications for educational policy and practice further down the education pipeline. Latino males are more likely than their female counterparts to drop out of high school, join the workforce rather than attend college or leave college before graduating (Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2009). Indeed, males from all racial/ethnic cohorts are increasingly falling behind their female peers at key secondary and postsecondary education milestones. More specifically, when comparing Latino males with other racial/ethnic male groups, they lag further behind in rates of high school graduation, college enrollment and degree attainment. The gaps between Latino male and female students, moreover, are widening at various points along their educational pathways.

Figure 1. Comparison Within Gender and Ethnicity of 18- to 24-Year-Olds With Less Than a High School Diploma



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS), “Fall Enrollment in Colleges and Universities” surveys, 1976 and 1980; and 1990 through 2009 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), “Fall Enrollment Survey” (IPEDS-EF: 90), and Spring 2001 through Spring 2010, Table 235.

Latino Males and High School Completion

The high school dropout issue has been a major source of contention among policymakers and educational practitioners, partly as a result of the varied metrics that are used to define a dropout. In this brief, we utilize the metric of high school completion, and these data for Latino males have shown significant gaps as compared to those of their female counterparts and other peers. Among 18- to 24-year-old Latino males in 2010, the proportion who had not completed high school or its equivalent was 34.2 percent, compared to 27.1 percent for Latina females.

Each of these rates is well above the rates for their all-male and all-female counterparts within this age range (see Figure 1). Despite a decade’s worth of diligent campaigns to enhance school accountability and high school completion, these data indicate that much work remains to be done in addressing this pressing issue for males.

Latino Males and College Enrollment

Latino males also are lagging behind their Latina peers in college enrollment at both the undergraduate and post-baccalaureate levels, a gap that has only widened in recent years. These findings speak to the “vanishing” trend faced by Latino males in higher education (Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2009). Even as the actual numbers and proportions of Latino males enrolling in college have increased over time, their rates have not kept pace with Latinas. In 2009, Latina female enrollment in two- and four-year institutions outnumbered Latino male enrollment counts by almost 368,000 students.

Upon closer review, we found a troubling portrait of Latino male and female enrollment trends at the undergraduate and post-baccalaureate levels (see Table 1). The enrollment numbers at the undergraduate level were most equivalent in the early 1980s, and since that time there has been a growing gap in college enrollment by gender. A more careful analysis shows that post-baccalaureate enrollment data reveal similar trends, with Latinas now comprising 62.6 percent of all Hispanic graduate students enrolled.

Table 1. Latina/o Postsecondary Enrollment Trends by Gender, 1975–2009

		1976	1980	1990	2000	2009
Undergraduate	Males	191.7	211.2	326.9	582.6	997.3
		54.3%	48.8%	45.1%	43.1%	42.2%
	Females	161.2	221.8	397.6	768.4	1,365.2
		45.7%	51.2%	54.9%	56.9%	57.8%
Post-Baccalaureate	Males	18.1	20.4	27.0	44.5	69.0
		58.5%	52.7%	46.7%	40.2%	37.4%
	Females	12.8	18.3	30.9	66.3	115.2
		41.5%	47.3%	53.3%	59.8%	62.6%

Source: NCES, 2010. Numbers are in thousands.

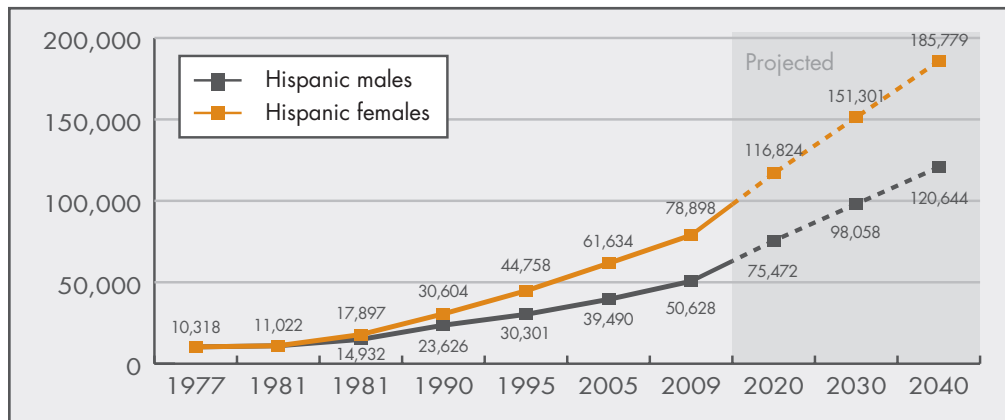
Latino Males and College Degree Completion

With the current national discourse focused intently on the college completion agenda, it is unfortunate that less than 40 percent of degrees earned by all Latinas/os in 2010 were conferred upon males, a gap that has been widening for the past 20 years (NCES, 2010). Until the early 1990s, Latino males outpaced their female counterparts in bachelor's and associate degree completion, but these trends have since changed dramatically.

In terms of overall educational attainment, the proportion of Latinas with a bachelor's degree or higher within the general population has almost doubled from 8.4 percent in 1995 to 14.9 percent in 2010. Latino males also have seen a modest increase in this trend (from 10.1 percent to 12.9 percent), but they have been eclipsed by their female counterparts in the last decade. Nonetheless, both groups lag significantly behind the degree completion rates among the total U.S. population (29.9 percent), a reality that poses current and future challenges within our educational discourse (U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2010).

As mentioned earlier, recent data highlight the gender gap in degree completion, as Latinas earned more than three of every five (61.6 percent) degrees among all Hispanics in 2009 (see Figure 2). The gender disparity is telling, yet the disparity in raw numbers of degrees vividly highlights the growing degree completion gap. Latinas earned a combined 140,080 of associate or bachelor's degrees in 2009, or 52,713 more than their male counterparts.

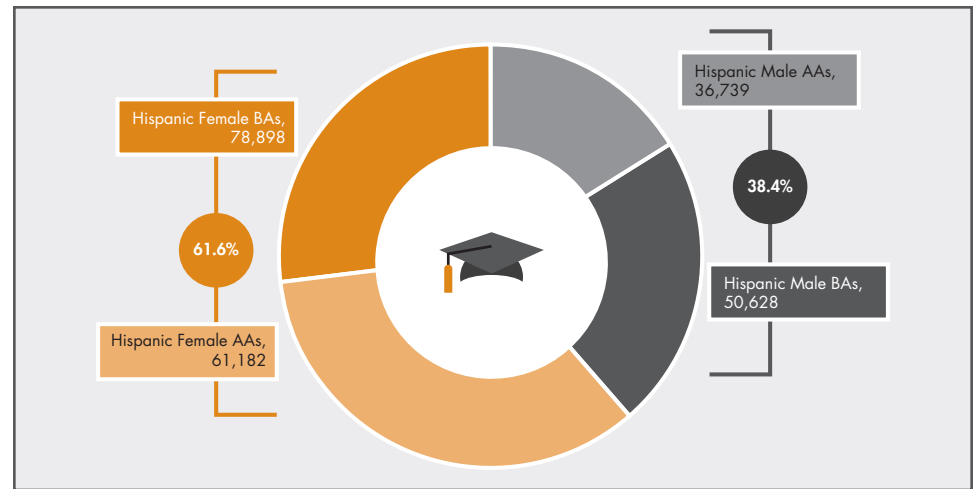
Figure 3. Bachelor's Degrees Awarded to Latinas/os by Gender, 1977–2040



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2010 Annual Social and Economic Supplement. Projections from 2011–2040 are based on authors' linear interpolation calculations. The projections are estimates and are meant for illustrative purposes only.

degree attainment between Latino males and Latina females could more than double over the next few decades. Meanwhile, the social and cultural consequences of this forecast are not being adequately discussed by communities or policymakers nor are they being investigated by empirical research. To that end, we turn our attention to recent research findings focused on the plight of Latino males as they navigate their higher education pathways.

Figure 2. Associate (two-year) & Bachelor's (four-year) Degrees Earned by Hispanics by Gender, 2009



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2010 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

The difference in bachelor's degree attainment between Latino males and Latina females could more than double over the next few decades.

These ratios are in fact growing apart, with Latinas increasingly outpacing males in bachelor's degree attainment. Perhaps ratios also highlight projected degree completion rates by 2020 and beyond (see Figure 3). For example, by 2040, we forecast that Latina females may earn over 65,000 more bachelor's degrees annually than their male counterparts.

In other words, if this trend continues, the difference in bachelor's

Research on Latino Males in Higher Education: Case Studies in Texas and Florida

Why are so many young Latino males struggling to keep pace with their counterparts in secondary and postsecondary education? In this section, we share evidence based on qualitative research that illuminates key factors that respond to this critical question of attainment. In 2010–11, scholars from the University of Florida (UF) and the University of Texas at Austin (UT-Austin) conducted several interviews and focus groups with administrators and students at K–12 and postsecondary institutions to examine Latino males' participation and success in higher education. The Texas researchers conducted focus groups with more than 75 Latino male college students and interviewed about 40 high school and postsecondary administrators as well as faculty members at various institutions across the state. The Florida researchers conducted interviews with three Latino male college students and 11 high school or postsecondary faculty members and administrators.

The qualitative analyses provided important new evidence about the current status of educational practices and support structures for Latino males in secondary and postsecondary institutions. The findings explored themes pertinent to Latino male educational pathways and are of use to researchers, administrators, faculty and the community. Although not an exhaustive reporting of our findings, we share four emergent themes that can be of great use to these stakeholders.

I. Misguided Perceptions of Masculinity

We found that Latino males tend to believe that “real men” avoid expressions of fear, do not ask for help and maintain a façade of confidence even when they are deeply fearful of the consequences of their actions. Perhaps this pattern of behavior may deter Hispanic males in secondary and postsecondary educational settings from reaching out for help and taking full advantage of programs and services designed to promote academic success, a phenomenon that scholars refer to as “help-seeking behaviors” (Gloria, Castellanos, Scull, & Villegas, 2009). These perceptions of masculinity, moreover, may

be undermining their opportunities for engagement both in and out of the classroom, a claim other scholars have more fully explored in their recent work on this student population (Figueroa, 2004).

II. Complex Influence of Peers and Family

We also found that peers play a complex role for Latino males, sometimes abetting misguided notions of what it means to be masculine. Students reported that some peers encouraged them to join the workforce as opposed to studying or channeling their energy into educational endeavors. Yet Latino males who indicated that they had positive peer support were likely to have stronger aspirations for attending and succeeding in college.

Family influences appear to play a challenging role in Latino males' decisions to attend and persist in college. On the one hand, Latino males feel supported and motivated to attend college and live better financial lives than their parents. On the other hand, family financial hardships often influence Latino males to work instead of going to college. Parents generally value the pursuit of higher education, yet Latino males often face pressures to contribute to family finances. Furthermore, language barriers for Latino parents might deter family involvement in the K–12 educational process, especially on behalf of their sons. This strong affinity and loyalty to family — sometimes referred to as *familismo* (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995) — needs to be re-examined as a cultural asset by our institutions, perhaps by finding creative ways to fully exploit this value toward the academic success of Latino male students.

III. Low Community Awareness

Of great concern is the fact that high school and college administrators are having few conversations relating specifically to Latino male student success. Rather, conversations and resources tend to focus on broader issues such as the educational success of under-represented groups. Some administrators seem to have quality conversations regarding the Latino gender gap; however, awareness and resources are still limited. For faculty, there is minimal but growing awareness of the issue, suggesting that faculty may be an untapped resource for promoting the issue and encouraging initiatives for Latino male success at the classroom level.

Latino students, both male and female, seemed keenly aware of the low performance of Latino male students and reinforced many of the other findings regarding barriers that Latino male students face. Finally, according to those interviewed, local community stakeholders lack awareness of the Latino male achievement issue. The overall trend toward lack of awareness is sobering in light of the potential consequences it could portend.

IV. Program Outreach and Partnerships

While collaboration among educational institutions regarding access and opportunities for Latino males is important, more action is needed. Outreach to Latino families by postsecondary institutions is critically important to create a welcoming and nurturing environment in colleges and universities. Providing specific group opportunities based on culture can be a helpful source of support (e.g., school clubs, university affinity groups for Latinos, male-focused groups). Some community colleges have begun to institute mandatory orientation for new students and their families, a practice that can go a long way toward establishing trusting and nurturing bonds among Latino male students, their families and their institutions.

Participants also spoke about the need to diversify faculty and staff ranks at each level of education so that Latino male students have more potential role models and mentors. Indeed, intentional mentoring opportunities were deemed to be a critical avenue for Latino male academic success. Whether there is a formal program (desirable but not always available) or informal mentoring by school counselors, teachers, administrators or peers, mentoring can offer ongoing encouragement, support and resources for Latino male students. Perhaps even more important, institutions with a strong commitment to mentoring Latino male students can begin to transform the institutional culture and climate such that students begin to feel a greater sense of connectedness, engagement and validation at their institutions.

Promising Practices

In this section, we highlight promising practices from various educational and community programs throughout the country focused on helping and guiding Latino males

into higher education. This list is not meant to be an exhaustive inventory of programs, nor have all of these programs been shown to empirically improve educational outcomes for Latino males. Rather, this list of programs represents a promising starting point for efforts that are focused on Latino male educational success, especially as momentum builds toward proactive interventions and services for these students.

- *Fathers Active in Communities and Education.* Funded by a GEAR-UP grant, this collaborative program engages fathers with information and opportunities to support their students' academic success. Working primarily with Hispanic communities in South Texas and in partnership with K–12, higher education and local businesses, the program promotes intervention and support for academics through essay contests, hands-on activities, college tours, and many community- and family-focused events throughout the year. **www.fathersactive.com**
- *Encuentros Leadership.* This program, located in Northern San Diego County, was formed to address the critical educational, social and economic issues affecting the quality of education and life opportunities for Latino boys within the community. *Encuentros* hosts an annual summer leadership academy and an annual career and education conference for Latino male students. The program leaders also developed a textbook that they incorporate as part of a classroom program that targets the educational needs of Latino male adolescents. **www.encuentrosleadership.org**
- *XY-Zone.* Built within the expansive network of Communities in Schools (CIS), the *XY-Zone* program actively works with male students in high schools to help them navigate the challenges associated with their school issues, healthy personal relationships and academic futures. Similar to other K–12 educational programs, this program offers a small-scale, community-based approach to an educational problem that is approaching epidemic levels. The initial *XY-Zone* chapter was started in Austin, Texas, in 2000, and it has since expanded throughout the CIS network to other sites across the country. **www.cisaustin.org/page-xy-zone.cfm**

■ *Puente Project*. Located in California, the *Puente* (“bridge”) *Project* is specifically designed to “increase the number of educationally underserved students who enroll in four-year colleges and universities, earn degrees, and return to the community as leaders and mentors for future generations.” For more than 25 years, the *Puente Project* has been shown to improve college-readiness and college-enrollment rates for Latino students (Gándara, 1998). While not focused solely on Latino males, the *Puente Project* provides a strong academic, counseling and mentoring model that has been proven to help facilitate college pathways for underrepresented students.

www.puente.ucop.edu

■ *Project MALES, UT-Austin*. *Project MALES* (Mentoring to Achieve Latino Educational Success) employs a two-pronged approach to addressing the emerging Latino gender gap. The program utilizes mixed-methods research strategies to investigate the phenomenon of the Latino gender gap and then infuse research findings into the development of an intergenerational mentoring model focusing on Latino male educational success. This model aims to cultivate a multi-faceted support network for Latino male college students within local and regional universities, school districts, and throughout Texas by bringing together Latino male professionals as role models, current Latino male college students and younger Latino male students within local high schools. www.projectmales.org

Next Steps: Recommendations for Policy, Practice and Future Research

Drawing from our research as well as a critical review of existing programs and promising practices, we share recommendations in six key areas focusing on creating and maintaining Latino male students’ access and success in postsecondary institutions. While not meant to be exhaustive, this list offers a critical set of starting points for institutions, practitioners, policymakers and scholars that are committed to Latino male educational success.

I. Focused Institutional Policies

Long-term institutional policies are needed to focus on establishing sustainable commitments to Latino males’ academic success. Some strategies to consider include:

- redesigning financial aid policies to increase awareness of and educate Latino males and families about available resources to pay for college, especially because of the strong draw of employment decisions for males
- instituting academic policies, such as mandatory or intrusive academic advising, for academically at-risk Latino male students
- instituting recruitment and retention policies that focus on recruiting and retaining Latino faculty, administrators and professional staff, all of whom can serve as important positive role models for Latino males on campus

II. Proactive Academic Life Programming

Academic program development that is intentionally focused on Latino males would be helpful to offer support for retaining these students, as well as guiding and monitoring their academic progress. Here are key strategies to consider:

- enhancing opportunities to engage high-achieving Latino males in early immersion research apprenticeship programs with faculty members across academic disciplines
- providing proactive and purposeful programming linking academic advising with potential career options
- strengthening academic peer tutoring efforts between first-generation Latino male students and academically successful Latino males

III. Supportive Student Life Programming

Institutions should provide more meaningful opportunities for student life programming targeting Latino male students, especially for students who are first generation. Some strategies to consider include:

- designing transitional programs (e.g., first-year and sophomore experience programs) that include a year-long orientation format

- providing non-fraternity, living-learning communities focused on Latino males
- encouraging the development of institutionally recognized student organizations (e.g., affinity groups) that can promote positive Latino male support networks on campus
- creating “safe spaces” through institutionally funded or supported Latino student centers or leadership councils

IV. Essential Outreach and Community Education Programming

Communication among colleges and universities, families, local communities and nonprofit organizations is critical to foster access, degree completion and employment opportunities. Some key strategies to consider are:

- developing an outreach public service announcement campaign to foster Latino male students’ college access and success and to raise awareness about career opportunities
- identifying school districts with low Latino male high school degree completion rates, and creating college outreach programs for Latino males and families to encourage college readiness and high school graduation
- improving organizational communication among local schools, two-year institutions and local industries to create academic fast-track programs for Latino males

V. Additional Research on Latino Males

Limited research documenting the underlying factors leading to poor Latino male educational attainment across the P–20 pipeline is available, partly as a function of inadequate data systems that fail to do enough to fully disaggregate student data across key ethnic and national origin characteristics. The Latino male educational experience merits increased research that should be nuanced, theoretically driven, and thoughtfully

disseminated and translated for educators, policymakers and scholars. Here are key strategies to consider:

- improving national data collections to examine Latino male academic progress and educational outcomes at key points in the P–20 educational pipeline
- conducting quantitative and qualitative research that documents the educational experience and outcomes of Latino males, especially at critical transition points from middle school to high school to college
- examining the outcomes of specific educational policies and practices targeting male students of color (e.g., Closing the Gaps in Texas)

VI. Enhanced Regional and National Public Awareness

Finally, there is a dire need to create highly visible regional and national awareness campaigns to address Latino male students’ educational issues. For example, at the regional level, Texas institutions such as UT-Austin, South Texas College in McAllen and the Lone Star College System in Houston have developed annual meetings focusing on Latino males, where multiple stakeholders are invited to share ideas and best practices for working with this student population. Hillsborough Community College in Tampa, Florida, hosts an annual Black, Brown and College Bound conference where participants — including students, parents and educators — discuss potential solutions to address the growing educational crisis facing young men of color. At the national level, the Advocacy and Policy Center at the College Board® has made the crisis facing young men of color in education a national priority, and it continues to convene national meetings, as well as to commission books and policy briefs shedding much-needed light on this critical issue. Offering these activities is just the beginning, and they should be instituted — particularly in localities with large Hispanic populations — to reap optimal success.

Conclusion

The title of this brief calls for a bold new national imperative to improve the educational outlooks for Latino males. There is compelling evidence to assert that the state of Latino males in education is in jeopardy and warrants a significant response. To fully address the vanishing Latino male in higher education, education imperatives will require the concerted effort of many stakeholders, including researchers, educational leaders, policymakers, elected officials, foundations, private sector leaders, and Latino families and communities. This policy brief highlights critical trends in education attainment, new multi-institutional research on Latino male college students, and promising practices and strategies borrowed from both K–12 and higher education settings. Our primary intention is to shape the direction of new policies and practices to ensure that Latino males complete a postsecondary education alongside their Latina peers, and thereby strengthen our communities and the overall well-being of our nation.

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All questions regarding this Policy Brief may be directed to:

Editor, *Perspectivas*

Center for Research and Policy in Education

The University of Texas at San Antonio

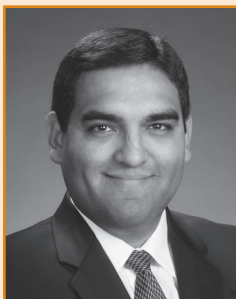
One UTSA Circle, MB 3.444

San Antonio, TX 78249

Phone: 1-210-458-6503

Fax: 1-210-458-5848

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Victor B. Sáenz is an assistant professor of Higher Education Administration in the Department of Educational Administration at UT-Austin. He holds affiliate status with the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, and the Center for Mexican American Studies and the Division of Diversity & Community Engagement at UT-Austin. His research interests include chronicling the educational benefits of diversity

on college campuses, as well as college readiness, access, transition and retention issues for underrepresented students. His current research examines the experiences of Latino males at two- and four-year institutions as they successfully navigate college pathways. In 2010, he was recognized as an ING Professor of Excellence at UT-Austin and he was a 2009 Faculty Fellow for AAHHE. Sáenz received a Ph.D. in 2005 and a master's degree in 2002 from UCLA in higher education and organizational change. He also holds a master's degree (1999) from the LBJ School of Public Affairs and a bachelor's degree (1996) in mathematics from UT-Austin. Sáenz was born and raised in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas.



Luis Ponjuán is an assistant professor in the College of Education and the Director of the Institute of Higher Education at UF. He holds graduate faculty member status in the College of Education and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and is a faculty affiliate in the Center for Latin American Studies. He has developed a comprehensive research agenda focused on access and equity in higher education for

underrepresented students and faculty of color. He was awarded the 2012 NEA New Scholar Prize for his research on Latino faculty members. Ponjuán was recognized as a 2009 Faculty Fellow for AAHHE and was a 2008 ASHE and Ford Foundation Fellow for the Institute on Equity Research Methods and Critical Policy Analysis. He earned a Ph.D. in higher education from the University of Michigan, a master's degree in higher education-student affairs from Florida State University and a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of New Orleans. Ponjuán is a first-generation Cuban immigrant and the first college graduate in his family.