A Profile of Hispanic-Serving Institutions

everylearner everywhere

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Every Learner Everywhere is a network of partner organizations with expertise in evaluating, implementing, scaling, and measuring the efficacy of education technologies, curriculum and course design strategies, teaching practices, and support services that personalize instruction for students in blended and online learning environments. Our mission is to help institutions use new technology to innovate teaching and learning, with the ultimate goal of improving learning outcomes for Black, Latino, and Indigenous students; poverty-affected students; and first-generation students. Our collaborative work aims to advance equity in higher education centered on the transformation of postsecondary teaching and learning. We build capacity in colleges and universities to improve student outcomes with digital learning through direct technical assistance, timely resources and toolkits, and ongoing analysis of institutional practices and market trends. WCET (the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies) and WICHE (the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education) serve as the intermediary organizations for the Every Learner Everywhere Network. For more information about Every Learner Everywhere and its collaborative approach to equitize higher education through digital learning, visit everylearnereverywhere.org.

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Introduction

Every Learner Everywhere was awarded a grant to collaborate with other higher education service providers to offer professional development for historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), tribal colleges and universities (TCUs), Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), and other minority serving institutions (MSIs). In order to help providers of services better understand the needs of these institutions, Every Learner Everywhere has been tasked with providing profiles of each type of institution based on current literature, government and advocacy organization publications, and conversations with faculty, staff, and students. A special emphasis of this series of profiles is opportunities and challenges of digital learning at each institutional type.

OF SPECIAL NOTE

Names: Throughout our publication you will notice some names and institutions have been omitted from quotes and first-hand experiences. This is due to the scrutiny that some are facing amid anti-DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) legislation. Omitting names keeps our sources safe while still sharing their first-hand accounts and opinions on their institution's efforts to serve Latino students.

Hispanic: Hispanic is the legal term used by the United States (U.S.) Department of Education to describe institutions of higher education whose student population is 25 percent or more Hispanic. Hispanic is a term that suggests a Spanish language heritage. However, it is important to note that not all people who identify as Hispanic and/or Latino speak Spanish. Latino is a term that refers to the peoples of Latin America, including those who are not Spanish speaking.[1] While these terms are not the same, in common usage they are often used interchangeably. In this report we will use both terms in reference to culture. Every Learner Everywhere uses the term Latino for peoples who identify as Hispanic or Latino, regardless of their language heritage or their cultural heritage. Latine appeared in print in the early 2000s. It provides an alternative to the Latino/Latina binary. Latinx is a word coined in the early 2010s and seen in Spanish-language academic publications by 2014. It is used to refer to people of Latin American cultural or ethnic identity in the United States. The gender-neutral 'x' is a remedy to the Latino/Latina binary in the tradition of use of 'x' in inclusive, progressive terms such as Xicanisma and Womxn. Latinx has come under scrutiny for being created by academics and not a term that is pronounceable in Spanish.[2] According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), Hispanic identity includes persons "of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race."[3]

Intersectionality: Intersectionality is a theoretical framework for understanding how aspects of a person's identities might come together to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege.[4] It is important to acknowledge that many students at Hispanic-serving institutions hold intersectional racial identities. A significant subset of the Latino population in the United States identify as Afro-Latino.[5] Former Every Learner student intern Kiara Williams writes of her own intersectionality, "I am a Latina. I am a Black Latina. I never have fit into a singular box, but that's fine. To be Hispanic is to be a part of one of the most diverse and rich and beautiful cultures in the world."[6]

Hispanic-Serving Institutions: *Cultura, Comunidad, e Intención*

This profile examines the culture at HSIs as well as opportunities and challenges around digital learning at HSIs. Scholar of HSIs Gina Garcia coined the term *servingness* with her colleagues Anne-Marie Núñez and Vanessa A. Sansone to describe the intentional set of services and experiences HSIs provide to their Latino students. However, servingness is difficult to define, as Garcia writes: "HSIs themselves are most often the ones to define *servingness* in practice."[7] Roberto Montoya, Associate Vice President of Partner Success at InsideTrack and HSI alumnus, defines servingness as "*comunidad* (community), *cultura* (culture), and accountability" to acknowledge the minimal accountability standards set by the federal government in defining HSIs. He writes that HSIs "must operationalize servingness as a broad range of experiences

BY THE NUMBERS

600
INSTITUTIONS[11]

5 MILLION
STUDENTS AND 2/3 OF ALL HISPANIC UNDERGRADUATES[12]

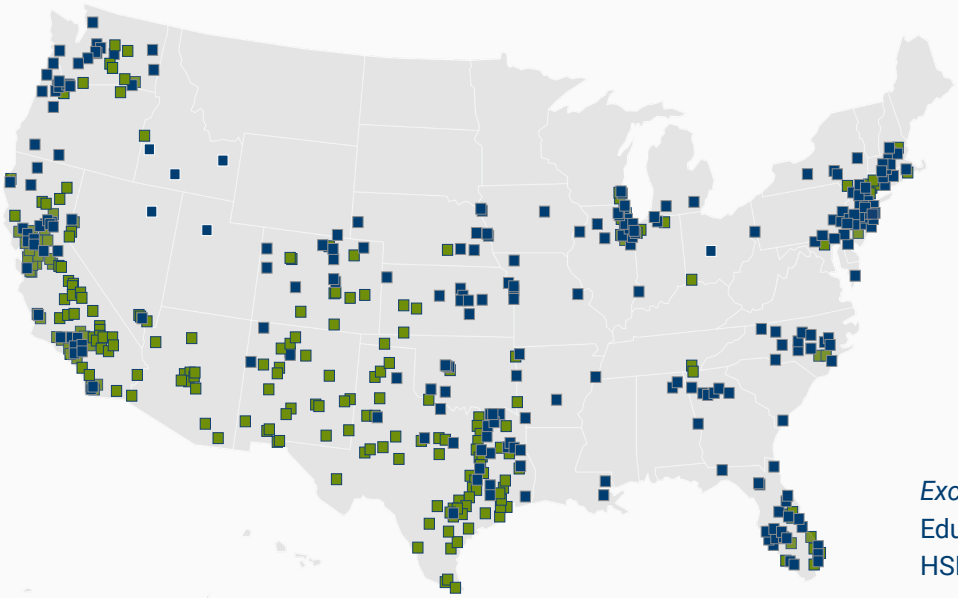
that foster a sense of belonging and representation. The essence of servingness is about more than just enrollment."[8]

We are not using "servingness" to frame our characterization of HSIs. Rather, we listened to the students, faculty, and academic leaders at HSIs whom we interviewed for this report and determined that, while accountability is a key factor for institutional relationships with government and nonprofit programs, it does not characterize the experience of students at HSIs. Our research uncovered that students at HSIs valued experiences that celebrate Hispanic and Latino ***culturas*** (cultures), nurture bonds among and service to the Hispanic ***comunidad*** (community), and demonstrated the institution's ***intención*** (intention) to serve Latino students.

Hispanic students are thriving at HSIs that are intentionally serving their Latino students. When compared to their peers attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs), those attending HSIs report a multitude of differences in their experiences. Those attending HSIs reported more of a supportive environment and greater levels of satisfaction than their peers at PWIs. These positive feelings about their chosen school can increase a sense of belongingness,[9] which in turn contributes to higher retention and graduation rates.[10]

HSI LOCATIONS

- *indicates existing HSIs*
- *indicates emerging HSIs (schools with rising enrollments of Hispanic students that put them close to the 25 percent threshold)*



Excelencia in Education, Map of HSIs 2021/2022

Definition of HSIs

The United States Department of Education defines an institution as Hispanic-serving if it is an accredited, nonprofit, degree-granting institution with 25 percent or more of the student body identifying as Hispanic/Latino and enrolled as undergraduate full-time equivalent (FTE) students.[13] Additionally, 50 percent or more of the students receive financial aid through a federal program.

According to the Pew Research Center, "Hispanic enrollment at postsecondary institutions in the United States has seen an exponential increase over the last few decades, rising from 1.5 million in 2000 to a new high of 3.8 million in 2019 — partly reflecting the group's rapid growth as a share of the overall U.S. population."[14] Despite an overall decline in enrollment during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly at two-year colleges, Latino enrollment in four-year institutions rose. According to a 2021 article in the Chronicle of Higher Education, there were just 189 HSIs in 1994 and only 25 years later that number stood at 569, a 300 percent increase in one generation.[15] Excelencia in Education identified 600 schools in 2022/2023 that met the HSI threshold and 412 additional schools with a Latino population at 15.0–24.9 percent or more, with expected growth rates in that population.[16] *Excelencia* in Education developed the emerging-HSI (eHSI) category to track the growth of potential HSIs.[17]

While most existing HSIs are located in regions of the country colonized by Spain over a 300-year period between 1519 and 1821, some existing and most emerging HSIs are located in large urban areas. The largest populations of Latino Americans live in California, Texas, and Florida, and over half of all HSIs are located in these three states. Metro areas across the country also have large populations of Latino Americans and host many HSIs. Much of the Latino American presence in these regions is due to immigration and intra-national migration. Except for those of Mexican heritage, who make up over 60 percent of Latino Americans, the top three other heritage groups are Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Salvadorans.[18] Unlike other MSIs such as HBCUs and TCUs, HSIs were not established with the mission to serve the educational needs of the Latino community. For this reason, an institution may meet enrollment requirements to be an HSI but not be required to provide services for or preserve the culture of Latino students.

Through empirical data, Garcia[19] developed a matrix describing the different possible HSI identities. They are as follows:

- Latinx-enrolling,[20] where the institution enrolls the required 25 percent Latinx student population but does not produce equitable outcomes or enhance or support the students' development.
- Latinx-producing, where the institution enrolls the required 25 percent Latinx student population and produces positive outcomes for them, but lacks the support and development for their Latinx students.
- Latinx-enhancing, where the institution meets the required 25 percent Latinx enrollment rate, and enhances and supports the culture of its Latinx students, but does not produce positive equitable outcomes for them.
- Lastly, we have Latinx-serving institutions that enroll the required 25 percent Latinx student population, enhance and support their Latinx student population culturally, and produce positive equitable outcomes for them after graduation.

HSI IDENTITY MATRIX[21]

Regardless of their identity, deemed by Garcia's matrix, HSIs qualify for three grants through the U.S. Department of Education: the Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions (DHSI) Program; the Hispanic-Serving Institutions — Science, Technology, Engineering, or Mathematics (HSI STEM) and Articulation Programs; and the Promoting Postbaccalaureate Opportunities for Hispanic Americans (PPOHA) Program.[22] While these grants are designed to benefit Latino students, grant reporting does not require institutions to provide evidence that the grant program actually did benefit Latino students.[23] This unique feature of HSIs makes characterizing them as a block impossible. For that reason, this report will focus on HSIs that intentionally serve their Latino students.

Characteristics of HSIs

Although there is no formal difference between them, in this section we will distinguish between Hispanic-enrolling institutions and Hispanic-serving institutions.[24] Hispanic-enrolling institutions meet baseline enrollment and financial aid guidelines for Latino students established by the U.S. Department of Education. Some advocacy organizations, such as the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU), define HSIs in line with the U.S. Department of Education criteria based on enrollments. Their mission focuses on legislative action to support funding programs for HSIs. Excelencia in Education's Seal of Excelencia encourages HSIs to go beyond enrollment numbers by analyzing the data, practices, and leadership in regards to an institution's financial support, retention and transfer, graduation, representation of Latinos in the institution's administration, faculty, and staff, and an institutional culture of serving Latino students.[25] The Seal of *Excelencia* highlights the potential for institutions to transcend merely meeting an enrollment threshold and actively cultivating an environment conducive to Latino student success.[26] As of January 2025, 46 institutions have earned the Seal of *Excelencia*, 44 of which are HSIs.

Cultura

Intentional HSIs recognize the role cultural relevance plays in student learning. Many of them offer classes, programs, and activities that resonate with the diverse backgrounds of Hispanic students. While it is far more likely that students attending an HSI will have access to degree programs centered on Latino language and culture, there are also many predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and emerging HSIs (eHSIs) that offer such programs. The Latin American Studies Association lists 150 U.S. colleges and universities that offer programs in Latin American Studies.[27] Approximately a third of these schools are HSIs. The College Board's Big Future college search lists 968[28] schools that offer a Spanish Language and Literature degree. There are currently 358 four-year HSIs and a majority of them (over 50 percent) offer a degree in Spanish Language and Literature. BigFuture lists 67[29] schools that offer an undergraduate degree in Hispanic American Studies.[30] Of those 67 schools, 35 are HSIs. As of January 2025, of the HSIs that have earned *Excelencia* in Education's Seal of *Excelencia*, over 70% offer programs in Latino Studies and have one or more Latino student organizations, and more than half of them offer an associate's or bachelor's degree in Spanish Language and Culture. However, the majority of U.S. colleges and universities do not offer such programs or degree pathways. According to a study published in 2023, "less than 4% of all four-year colleges and universities have an established Latino studies program."[31]

In comparison to their non-Hispanic peers, Hispanic students identify more collectively,[32] meaning that they have the desire to maintain close relationships, particularly within kinship groups. Courses regarding Hispanic/Latino studies and Latino-focused student organizations can help Hispanic students feel included in their college community and make those desired connections with students with similar ethnic backgrounds.[33]

Another factor in cultivating students' sense of belonging is student–faculty interaction.[34] Intentional HSIs strive to enhance diversity among faculty and staff, providing students with role models who share similar cultural backgrounds.[35] HSI advocate Roberto Montoya writes: "Investing in diversity among faculty, staff and administrators is a critical component. Part of making good on the promise of college access and completion is about ensuring Latine students feel a deep sense of belonging and support."[36] A 2018 Hechinger Report noted that, "at some schools, such as The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, over 30 percent of faculty are Latino. At others, such as California's Mount Saint Mary's University, less than 10 percent of faculty are Latino. On average, about 21 percent of faculty at Hispanic-Serving Institutions identify as Latino."[37] While these numbers are low in terms of faculty–student ratios, they are encouraging against the national average. According to the NCES, only 6 percent of college faculty in the U.S. were Latino in 2021.[38]

One of our interviewees, a First-Generation Center assistant director, mentioned the following in regards to student–faculty interactions: "Regarding mental health support specifically tailored to Hispanic Students, our most significant resource is our Hispanic Staff/Faculty. Their understanding of the culture, shared backgrounds, and traditions makes them relatable and approachable. For instance, as a Hispanic Staff member at [our institution], I personally embrace conversations in Spanish with Hispanic students, recognizing the significance of communicating in our heritage language."

Regardless of whether students feel represented by the faculty or not, overall positive student–faculty interactions are just as important for a student's sense of belonging. As aforementioned, providing a space for Hispanic students to exist culturally promotes a sense of belonging and can lead to their academic and social success.

Marshall Saludo, graduating senior of San José State University in California, mentions an example of such a space: "There's a specific place in the library we have. There's eight floors [of the library]. On the fifth floor, there's a Latinx section where it shows our culture a little bit and sometimes I go and study there, it provides a quiet space for us."

Graduate of Georgia State University's J. Mack Robinson College of Business and former president of Georgia State's student chapter of ALPFA (Association of Latino Professionals for America) Eddie Frausto benefited from internship and leadership opportunities for Latino students at Georgia State. He wrote in a blog post for Every Learner Everywhere, "I feel fortunate to serve as the president for our chapter of ALPFA. It is also a responsibility. We want to bring more people into the chapter, seek out internships for students, and create networking opportunities. We also want to make sure our members have financial and academic support."[39] Research indicates that students gaining the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and discuss their beliefs and values helps them create their professional identity. In addition, when students participate in internships they have the opportunity to build on their social skills and development, which in turn prepares them for life after college.[40]

Promoting leadership development keeps students involved and connected to their college until completion. Student leadership also increases educational outcomes and adds to the students' life experience. HSIs promote leadership development through fraternities and sororities, internships, and student groups and clubs.[41]

Many HSIs have a career center or a center to promote research and internships. One such example is Sam Houston State University's (SHSU) Enhancing Undergraduate Research Experiences and Creative Activities (EURECA), which offers how-to guides and a search portal for students to find funding for research projects.[42] HSIs often partner with employers and professional organizations to offer internships, career fairs, and job placement assistance to Latino students. In 2018, the California Community College system launched a Spanish-language version of its Career Education website to serve students whose primary language is Spanish. A 2020 brief by *Excelencia* in Education highlighted four HSIs that work with employer partners to prepare students for careers. These four institutions, Felician University (New Jersey), Florida International University (FIU), CUNY (City University of New York) Lehman College, and Texas Woman's University, have a unique approach to workforce preparation in that they have established a "goal across campus, not just the role of the career services offices."[43] A key strategy in this work is offering more experiential and hands-on learning to students both on and off campus in partnership with local employers.[44]

When asked what their institution does to connect students to career opportunities, a Title V director at a Texas institution responded, "We offer speakers panels each semester with Hispanic professionals from certain fields."[45] While not all universities offer speaker series that are tailored to their Hispanic student body, it is becoming a trend, especially within HSIs and universities with a significant Hispanic student population. Bringing Hispanic professionals to speak to Hispanic students promotes the students' sense of belonging through representation on campus and in the workforce.

In February 2024, SHSU invited Census Bureau Director Robert Santos to not only tour the campus but hold a dialogue with first-generation and Hispanic students, where the students were free to ask about his personal life and how he built his career. This event allowed students the opportunity to engage with a person who shared a similar lived experience, culture, and background as them while being a role model and exemplar. John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, an HSI, had a slightly different approach with a speaker series of its own in 2018. It wanted its series to cover the topic of developing policies and best practices to help Hispanic students succeed. It invited people such as David Rice and Gina Ann Garcia, who spoke about the importance of the visibility of people of color in the campus climate and how, by implementing anti-racist policies, institutions can create equitable learning spaces for their Latino students.[46]

Comunidad

According to The Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS), Latino students are the least likely of any ethnic population to travel long distances for their education. Their 2023 brief reports that the average distance Latino students travel to a community college is less than 10 miles.[47] The authors posit: "This is likely because college students balance working full-time, caring for dependents, and have important family/community ties that make it undesirable to uproot and go to college far away."[48] Latino students more often enroll in community college,[49] but even those who attend public four-year institutions or transfer to them do not travel more than 10 miles on average.[50] Supporting the theory of family ties, a 2009 Pew Research study found that Latinos prioritize family over friends[51] and the American Heart Association reported in 2023 on the "Hispanic Paradox," which theorizes that, despite lower levels of education and income than their white and Black counterparts, Latinos have better health outcomes and higher mortality because of their strong community ties, particularly their large family networks of support.[52]

In order to help students feel connected and part of a larger community, HSIs often have vibrant Latino student organizations and celebrate Latino cultural traditions. Latino student groups and clubs are often centered on Greek organizations; cultural, religious, and geographic communities; advocacy and scholarship groups; and pre-professional organizations. The National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations (NALFO) represents 11 Latina sororities, 5 Latino fraternities, and 1 coed Latino fraternity. Membership in NALFO organizations is currently 5,500 and over 30,000 alumni, and they tend to be concentrated in California, Texas, and New York.[53] The University of California, Los Angeles lists 24 Latino-focused student organizations including the Latin American Student Organization (LASO), the Latino Medical Student Association (LMSA), the Latinx Law Students Association, and the Latinx Pre-Law Association.[54] The University of Texas at San Antonio and the University of Central Florida (UCF) have 21 Latino-focused student

organizations each, many of which are centered on religion, the arts, and regional Latino identities.

While anti-DEI bills in some states may have impeded university-run Hispanic organizations that used state funding, student-led organizations are still permitted to be tailored to minority groups. Regardless of whether the group is university-run or student-led, there's evidence to support that Latino students joining these organizations increase their sense of belonging and community, have opportunities for peer mentorship and academic support, engage in leadership development, develop and maintain a strong cultural identity, and take part in advocacy.[55]

In an interview for the Every Learner blog, Eddie Frausto spoke about student club engagement. "My brother and sister told me about how much being involved in campus life changed their college experience," he notes. "They shared with me that being a first-generation college student can be lonely. Being able to find friends and create that 'second family' is really important."[56]

Student interviewee Marshal Saludo speaks about a Hispanic student organization he joined at his campus: "But I've joined the Latinos Business Association. I've taken advantage of that. That [Latinos Business Association] helps people with just networking, [and] gaining some experience in the professional world. Yeah, that's pretty much it that I know of [Latinx student organizations]."[57] When asked if he believes his student organization opened pathways for him he responded, "Yeah, 100 percent. I'd say without that initial interaction, I don't know if I'd be in those positions that I am now." He also mentioned:

> **"It makes me feel more confident knowing that somebody with similar backgrounds comes up to the same spot I'm going to go, goes and takes these leadership roles showing that this is possible. This can be achieved with just some networking, just some work. Yeah, after seeing that, I actually joined other clubs and now I'm the president of those clubs or treasurer."[58]**

Organizations such as HISPA (Hispanics Inspiring Students' Performance and Achievement) and Latinx Leads work at the national and institution level to provide leadership training and opportunity for Latino college students. Programs such as these increase a sense of belonging, which leads to increased retention and graduation.

Another form of campus engagement that can help Hispanic students' sense of belonging is cultural celebrations. Many campuses across the nation celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month (HHM) with arts events, issues forums, social gatherings, food fairs, and speaker series.

A First-Generation Center assistant director interviewed by the author believes that celebrations should be held throughout the year rather than solely during HHM. He states:

> **Celebrations honoring the Hispanic culture and student community ought to extend throughout the year rather than confining them to Hispanic Heritage Month. Upholding equity and equality within our institutions, I advocate for universities to continue these celebrations throughout the year instead of just one month for each ethnic group. This inclusive approach fosters a sense of belonging among diverse students, affirming their place within the university community.[59]**

These types of events demonstrate to Hispanic students that the institution values, affirms, and embraces them as an important population in higher education.

Another type of cultural celebration that is growing within HSIs goes by many names, *Florecemos*, *Celebracion de Graduacion*, and Latino Graduation Celebration. This is a graduation ceremony tailored for Latino students and their families. SHSU's Student Government Association and Mexican Student Association have been holding a Latino graduation ceremony called the *Florecemos* Ceremony where students who sign up get to walk a stage before their official graduation and have a *serape* stole (a traditional article of clothing in Mexican culture) bestowed on them. This is a time when Latino students get to celebrate their academic achievements and their culture with their friends and family. These celebrations and organizations help promote a sense of belonging to their Hispanic students and in turn contribute to the success of their Hispanic student body.

Intención

After being designated an HSI, HSIs have the opportunity to apply for federal grants through the U.S. Department of Education. These federal grants can be used in a multitude of ways that ultimately provide a better educational experience for students. Title V funding can be used toward course equipment, renovations to educational spaces, educational materials, faculty development, research opportunities, and/or starting/improving student support services.[60] When asking our interviewees about their campus climate on accessibility, a current Title V director mentioned, "We [their institution] translate documents into Spanish as requested by all departments and offer Spanish training to student service employees."[61] As any student whose parents do not speak English can understand, being not only a new student but a translator for parents can be taxing. So for a student to be met with documents or webpages in Spanish and perhaps some Spanish-speaking staff and/or faculty can be refreshing and even reassure them that they are meant to be there. A former Title V director interviewed for this profile supported this idea:

> **It would be helpful to include bilingual programming, marketing, events, and/or a parent newsletter. Not that all Hispanic students and their families speak Spanish, but it could be beneficial to those that do. Students whose parents do not speak English tend to be the family translator and having one less thing to do while they are preparing to enroll at a university or college would be a great resource. Especially when recruiting prospective students, because attending college is a family decision and parents and guardians will need to be included in a student's college choice.[62]**

As mentioned earlier, family is important to Latino culture, and schools that provide outreach to parents and students will likely do a better job of recruiting and retaining Latino students.

Another form of accessibility HSIs can provide for their students is giving them their own scholarship programs or promoting Latino scholarships for their students with financial need. Some examples of Latino scholarships are the Hispanic Scholarship Fund (HSF),[63] the NBCUniversal Media Scholarship,[64] and the EducationDynamics Minority First Generation Scholarship.[65] There are also organizations such as HACU[66] that have a page dedicated to showcasing scholarships that Hispanic students can apply for.

Research literature tells us that minoritized students tend to thrive and do better while staying at PWIs when they are integrated with first-year experience (FYE) programs and are more likely to utilize university resources.[67] Although there is no current research on the effects that FYE programs have on Hispanic/Latinx students at HSIs, one could conclude that good FYE programs can still help Hispanic students integrate better at HSIs and promote them to use university resources. This is because their FYE programs and departments are most likely the first point of contact at their institution.

Another support service that can make a positive impact on Hispanic student success is academic and mentoring support services such as Puente. Puente is a program that services middle schools, high schools, and community colleges throughout the state of California. Its mission is to help increase the numbers of underrepresented students in four-year institutions and to help them earn their degrees and return to their communities as leaders and mentors. Puente services these students by training educators and counselors in middle schools, high schools, and community colleges to implement rigorous instruction, focused academic counseling, and mentoring by members of their communities.[68] These types of support services are beneficial to Hispanic students as they address the inequities they have experienced in educational systems. Through intentional supports and programs students increase their self-advocacy, self-efficacy, and agency. This is why targeted support services and mentoring support are important for Hispanic student success. Another study has shown that these types of support services, along with learning communities and faculty interest, contribute to the students' sense of belonging, which in turn promotes better retention rates and overall college experiences.[69]

While the exact number of universities (including non-HSI) that offer tutoring support services is elusive, we can estimate that there is a large portion of universities that do. Regardless of how many there are, most are not targeted toward one type of student population; they are accessible and generalized for the entire student body.

Two interviewees' accounts support this notion. Our current Title V director mentioned: "[Our campus] offers a multitude of services to all students, including tutoring, mental health support and services, direct connections to community resources and scholarship/financial aid assistance."[70] And our previous Title V director backed this up: "Currently, services are not specific to Hispanic students. Instead, services are for all students. However, programs such as TRIO, First-Gen Center [and others] follow cohort models that target underserved and first-gen students … [and] the Counseling Center offered Latinx Support Groups."[71]

Having programs like Puente creating a space for Hispanic students to be mentored and educated not only prepares them to integrate into higher education but also builds their sense of belonging in higher education, which is just as important.

As mental health becomes less stigmatized and more prioritized, we've seen more colleges and universities offering counseling and therapy services either at reduced costs or as a service covered by student tuition. Some institutions have created tailored counseling services in the form of group sessions, as one Title V director mentioned above. Marshal Saludo noted that Latino students could benefit from counseling services tailored toward them:

> **I'd say I wish there was more concentrated therapy for Hispanics, Latinx students, because therapists, they're [non-Hispanic/Latinx therapists] good, but having somebody that comes from similar backgrounds that helps other people would probably help even more. … I'd just say more outreach towards communities like Hispanics, Latinx communities so that people know what's available, because freshman, sophomore year, I didn't know that. Actually half of freshman year, I didn't know that there was free transportation for us and I wasn't able to afford a car, so that would've been helpful to know. … If people from SJSU [San José State University] actually went to my high school and spoke about those things and what was available, things like that nature, that would've helped.**[72]

Intentionally serving Latino students means providing services grounded in Latino cultures, options for those more comfortable speaking Spanish, and scholarships and mentoring to Latino students.

Challenges for HSIs

Anti-DEI Legislation

DEI programs promote efforts toward diversity, equity, and inclusion. Even with evidence suggesting that Latino students thrive when attending HSIs, HSIs face challenges providing said benefits and services to their students due to state legislation against DEI programs. Anti-DEI bills are often written in non-specific language that makes compliance with them difficult. Until the law was overturned by a federal court as unconstitutional, Arizona's House Bill (H.B.) 228 banned ethnic studies courses.[73] The original version of Florida's H.B. 999 prohibited public colleges from funding clubs, activities, and events that promote DEI. This may have meant the end of student clubs based on Hispanic/Latino identities in a state with the third largest Latino population in the U.S.[74] These threats and actions to erase Latino culture and dissolve Latino community, along with HSIs already being historically underfunded, underresourced, and undervalued, have had a discouraging effect on Latino students.[75]

More recently, Texas' Senate Bill 17 has led to universities closing cultural safe spaces for not only Latino students but all students of color and queer students as well.[76] Writes a current assistant director of the First-Generation Center:

> **I think SB 17 restricts the educational environment that should be open for expression in academia. Texas boasts a rich cultural tapestry, particularly in cities like Houston, Austin, and Dallas, which showcase diverse cultural representations in culinary and local zones. I notice the broad impact of this bill across departments, requiring careful monitoring of speech and actions, which hampers community building efforts. Departments now face the need to restructure for funding and support on campus, and transitions during these periods are always the most challenging. It feels like we're at a point where we must reevaluate everything from the ground up, almost starting anew, to determine the necessary steps forward.[77]**

A Title V director interviewed for this profile, who asked their name and institution to be redacted for fear of reprisal under Senate Bill 17, told us,

> **"I think this bill will make it harder to directly serve minority students on campus because it will allow others to attack any specific services that exist, and to challenge these services in such a way that reduces their effectiveness. This makes me sad, as we are all trying to serve our students as much as we can, and in the ways they need the largest amount of help, and this will put up more obstacles and boundaries."[78]**

The fallout from Senate Bill 17 has led to dozens of layoffs at Texas public colleges as support services for Latino, Black, and Indigenous students are cut to ensure that schools are complying with the terms of the legislation.

Anti-immigration Legislation

Anti-immigration sentiment makes it difficult for aspiring citizens from Latino/Hispanic heritage nations to obtain legal residency. As of this writing, there are nearly half a million DACA recipients (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and 99 percent of them are between the ages of 20 and 42.[79] The Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and American Immigration Council reported in 2023 that there are 187,680 undocumented Latinos enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities and most of them are not DACA recipients.[80] Students who are aspiring citizens face several challenges that many HSIs do not have the resources or the legal authority to address. Although there are no federal legal barriers to undocumented students attending college, there are restrictions to enrollment and funding in several states. Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina bar undocumented students from attending public colleges and universities.[81] Some schools make exceptions for those with DACA status, but, because of restrictions on new enrollments, only 1 percent of DACA recipients are under the age of 20, which means that very few traditionally college-aged DACA recipients benefit from those exceptions.[82] DACA status also affects students' access to tuition benefits. Six states — Indiana, Missouri, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Wisconsin — bar undocumented students, including DACA recipients, from in-state tuition and state financial aid.[83] Five states — Arkansas, Idaho, Maine, Mississippi, and Ohio — allow only students who are DACA recipients to receive in-state tuition and state financial aid.[84] In addition to enrollment, tuition, and financial aid challenges, some states bar undocumented college graduates from obtaining a professional licensure or limit professional licensure only to DACA recipients.

There are nearly 19 million Latino children in the U.S., and the National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families estimates that between 25 percent and 28 percent of them have at least one undocumented parent.[85] Latino students with undocumented parents face challenges completing Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) forms,[86] receiving health insurance,[87] or obtaining a driver's license and REAL ID,[88] which allows individuals to board domestic flights. An even bigger challenge for Latino students with undocumented parents is the mental health impact of the threat of a parent being detained or deported. Family separation can lead to economic instability, food insecurity, housing insecurity, and feelings of loss and hopelessness.[89]

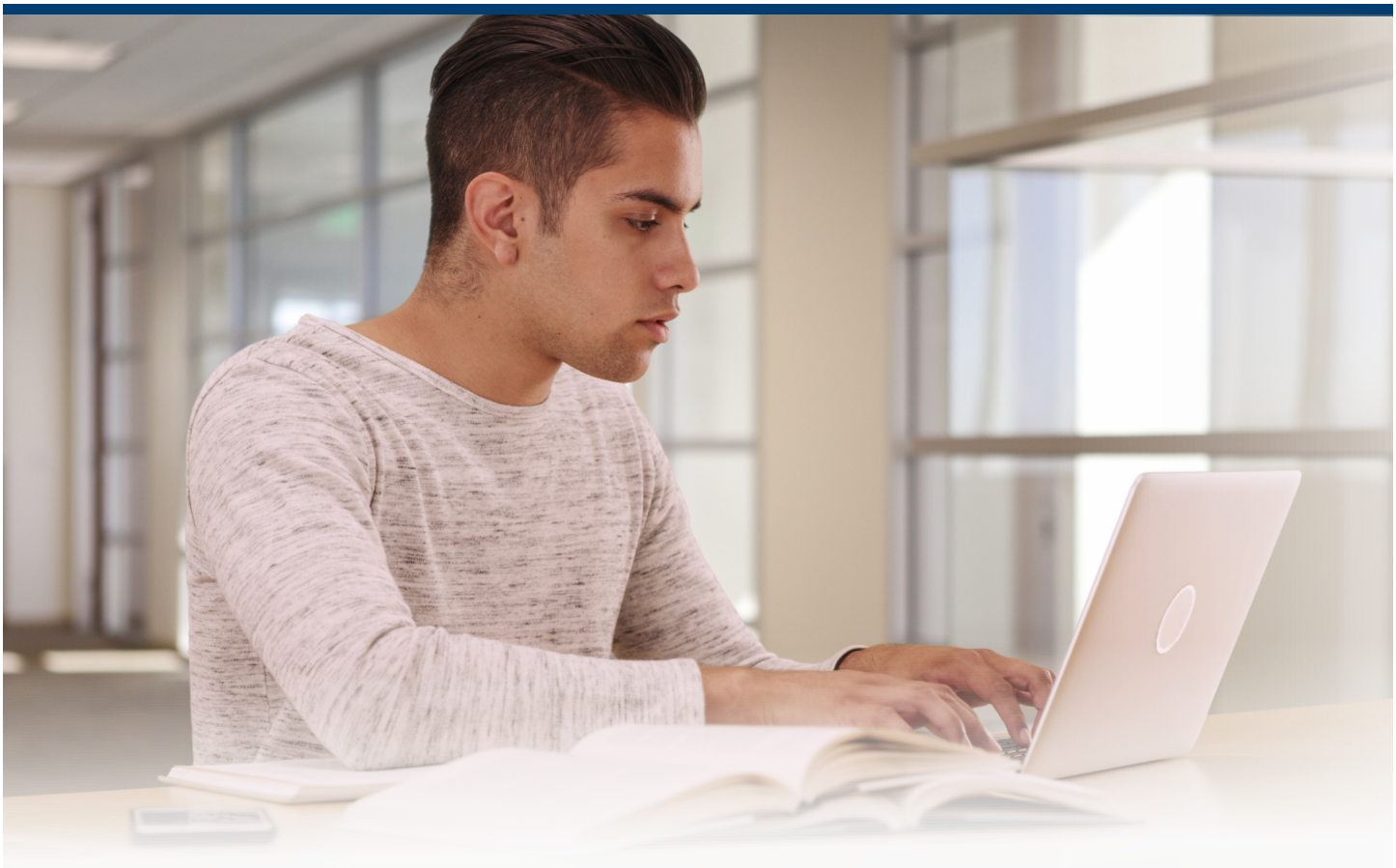
Funding

A recent report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) reveals that HSIs are suffering with infrastructure needs and delayed repairs to their campus buildings. Many advocates say that this report only confirms what we've already known, that HSIs are underfunded and need financial assistance.[90] It's important to keep in mind that even though there are better-resourced universities that have achieved HSI designation, the majority of HSI institutions were historically underfunded even prior to their designation. The topic of funding covers more than just infrastructure needs; it also covers scholarship grants for students and grants for programs for students.

Federal HSI grants were increased in 2024, but competition for these Title V funds has become increasingly competitive. Also, making up for the lack of funding with federal HSI grants cannot solve budget shortfalls long term. A former Title V director interviewee states:

> **Though I believe funding these efforts [knowing students, their problems, and the community] is necessary, the downside is that once funding ends some programming including staff funded by the grants are not maintained. The reason may be due to the limited amount of time of the grant funding but also the time it takes to develop and implement new initiatives on campus. I suggest higher education institutions start thinking about and planning for a shift in higher Hispanic student enrollment well before they apply and receive funds. Once funded, they should continuously work on institutionalizing programming and staff that were once funded by the grant.[91]**

Related to funding challenges is the challenge of Latino population growth outpacing institutions' ability to make changes that allow them to better serve their Latino students. These changes include hiring faculty who can teach Latin American Studies, hiring staff who speak Spanish and who have similar lived experiences as the students they are serving, and providing mentors for Latino students who can guide them through degree-to-career educational pathways.



Digital Learning at HSIs

Digital learning is the use of technology to enable pedagogical practices and strategies in teaching and learning. It includes a broad range of tools to engage and assess students across all learning modalities including face-to-face, blended, and online learning environments. Equitable digital learning takes an anti-deficit approach to teaching and learning, course design, and classroom climate. It prioritizes a sense of belonging in the class, in the discipline, and in the field for students historically excluded from these spaces. Equitable digital learning designs courses for inclusion, access, and success and utilizes teaching and assessment strategies that benefit racially minoritized and poverty-affected students. This section of the profile will explore the unique opportunities and challenges presented by digital learning at HSIs, while highlighting innovative ways in which HSIs are utilizing digital learning to improve access and learning outcomes for Latino students.

Opportunities of Digital Learning at HSIs

Digital learning can remove geographical barriers and offer flexible learning schedules for students at HSIs. According to an analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data by Tyton Partners, HSIs have a higher proportion of students using digital learning tools than other MSIs, and most HSIs expect similar rates over the next three years. In 2020, 71 percent of students at HSIs were enrolled in online classes, a much higher rate than the national average of 41 percent during that same time period.[92] According to a brief by Unidos

U.S., "Forty-seven percent of Latino undergraduates are independent students, meaning they are older than 24, married, have dependent children or were a veteran."[93] According to OnlineU, 74 HSIs offer at least one fully online bachelor's degree.[94] Of these, OnlineU highlights 25 schools it designates as affordable (annual tuition is $25,000 or less) and that offer undergraduate and advanced degrees through online programs. These are schools that cater to the needs of independent learners by providing flexible programs that allow students to take classes full-time or part-time, have both synchronous and asynchronous class schedules, and provide student support services for technology issues.

Some HSIs have dramatically expanded their online offerings in the last decade to meet the access needs of independent and traditional learners (students between the ages of 18 and 24). Arizona State University (ASU) offers 162 fully online undergraduate degrees, 131 fully online graduate degrees, and 40 fully online certificate programs. FIU has 54 undergraduate degree programs, 45 graduate degree programs, and 28 certificate programs online. And while UCF did not make OnlineU's list of best online colleges for Latino students, it offers 30 undergraduate degree programs, 70 graduate degree programs, and 43 fully online certificate programs.

In 2023, the Academic Senate of the University of California (UC) voted to require degree seekers to have an in-person campus experience in order to qualify for graduation. On February 14, 2024, the Board of Regents voted to overturn the Academic Senate requirement, opening the door to UC schools offering fully online degree pathways.[95] This is significant for Latino students, who make up 22.5 percent of the system's students. Five of the nine UC campuses already meet the 25 percent requirement for being designated as an HSI. In 2018, the UC launched the Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI) Initiative, which seeks to transition the UC system into a learning community that reflects the population of California,[96] which is over 40 percent Latino.[97]

Digital learning at HSIs can also personalize learning experiences for students by adapting to their individual learning styles. UCF has invested heavily in personalized learning systems that "customize the presentation of the content or present new concepts to the student based on their individual activities and responses."[98] Five digital learning specialists make up the Personalized Adaptive Learning (PAL) team at UCF. They support faculty in building and maintaining adaptive learning systems as well as providing student support such as onboarding and technical assistance.[99]

Between 2019 and 2020, four HSIs partnered with the Association of Public and Land-grant Institutions (APLU) to participate in the Adaptive Courseware for Early Success (ACES) Initiative, which provided grants for institutions to adopt and scale personalized learning in gateway courses.[100] These schools, FIU, UCF, the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, and the University of Texas El Paso, were part of a larger cohort of institutions, but the needs of Latino learners featured heavily in their work. In 2020, five HSI community colleges partnered with Achieving the Dream to use digital learning to increase pass rates in gateway courses, particularly for marginalized students. Again, these five institutions, including Amarillo College, Houston Community College, Broward College, Miami Dade College, and Indian River State College, were part of a larger cohort, but the personalized learning initiative was tailored to each institution. According to the executive report on the initiative, "Participating faculty and staff at these institutions implemented adaptive courseware – digital tools which provide personalized guided practice tailored to each student's progress – in 25 different courses across nine disciplines, serving more than 7,500 students."[101]

Digital tools provide cost-saving benefits of digital learning materials and resources compared to traditional textbooks. *Textbook Broke: Textbook Affordability as a Social Justice Issue*[102] reports on research exploring the impact of open educational resources (OER) and textbook pricing among racial/ethnic minority students, low-income students, and first-generation college students at California State University Channel Islands (CSUCI). Researchers found "textbook costs to be a substantial barrier for the vast majority of students.[103] However, those barriers were even more significant among historically underserved college students." In 2018, CSUCI launched two degree programs within its Z-Majors program, Communication, and Early Childhood Studies. In 2019 it added a third Z-Majors program in Health Science. According to the Open CI page on the university's website, "Z-Majors offer students a pathway through all of their major's required courses without the need to purchase a textbook. This is accomplished by replacing traditional textbooks with open education resources (OER), e-textbooks, library materials, government reports, online courseware, open access journals, etc."[104]

For the past eight years, the U.S. Department of Education has provided grants for its Open Textbooks Pilot Program, which "create new open textbooks and expand the use of open textbooks in courses that are part of a degree-granting program, particularly those with high enrollments."[105] OER grants are available through both government agencies and private organizations. In 2021, the California Consortium for Equitable Change in Hispanic-Serving Institutions Open Educational Resources was awarded grant funding to develop OER in 20 high-impact courses.[106] With funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Achieving the Dream has conducted several large OER initiatives that include HSIs.[107] Reported results from these grant programs mention not only cost savings to students taking classes with OER course materials but increased engagement in co-creating them with peers and instructors, adapting OER to make them culturally relevant, and even rendering some OER into Spanish.[108]

Two case studies published by Every Learner Everywhere highlight how faculty at HSIs are working with Latino students to make course content on digital tools more relevant. At emerging HSI Kingsborough Community College, biology professor Kristin Polizzotto ran an item analysis of her exams to uncover why her students were regularly failing exams even though their comprehension in class indicated that they had mastered the learning objectives. When she asked her students about the discrepancy, they told her that the language of the questions was confusing. Polizzotto understood immediately that her students, most of whom were not native English speakers, were struggling with unnecessarily complex exam question language. She worked with her students to rewrite the exam questions, and preliminary data indicated exam pass rates of over 80 percent.[109] At UCF, Spanish language instructors Anne Prusha and Kacie Tartt teach Elementary Spanish Language and Civilization I and II with adaptive courseware that includes a student feedback feature that allows them to flag questions for various problems. Hispanic students with roots in Cuba and Columbia used the feedback feature to help the instructors improve the authenticity of both the language and the example scenarios in the practice activities and quizzes, which were based on the language and culture of continental Spain. In a side note, Prusha and Tartt replaced the textbook in the two courses with OER, saving students $115,000.00 in just three semesters as well as achieving a 22 percent increase in student pass rates.[110]

Challenges of Digital Learning at HSIs

Despite the many successes of digital learning at HSIs, there remain several significant challenges. The digital divide is a term used to summarize the unequal access to technology and reliable internet among students, creating barriers to online learning and learning with many digital tools. Similarly, many HSI students have limited access to technology and the internet, making it difficult for them to take advantage of digital learning tools. Faculty training in digital learning tools needs to be incentivized and ongoing, particularly with the growth of online learning at HSIs and the growing proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in education. There needs to be institutional support in the digital infrastructure, funding for training and digital learning initiatives, and technical support for widespread adoption of digital learning at HSIs. Finally, Latino students make up nearly 20 percent of all college students and their numbers are increasing.[111] The rates of Latino students at HSIs ranges from 25 percent to 100 percent with an average across all HSIs of 46 percent. HSIs' faculty and faculty support staff should be designing digital learning experiences that represent the cultural backgrounds and learning preferences of students enrolled at HSIs.

Conclusion

HSIs are among the most diverse of the MSIs not only for the diversity of their student populations but also because, as institutions, they are two-year and four-year, private and public, urban and rural, and they span the nation in terms of location. HSIs are also becoming a significant number of U.S. institutions of higher education. There are currently just under 4,000 degree-granting, higher-education institutions in the United States. The number of HSIs has doubled in the last 10 years, with 600 meeting the enrollment minimum and 400 additional institutions projected to meet that enrollment minimum in the next few years. These numbers demonstrate how HSIs are on the verge of representing a quarter or more of all degree granting institutions of higher education in the U.S. The growth of HSIs is a direct result of the growth of the Latino population in the U.S., which stood at 19.1 percent in the 2020 census. That number is expected to reach 25 percent in the next generation. The growth in HSIs is an opportunity for those institutions to become more intentional in serving their Latino students through support services, culturally relevant education, and cultural community events. This growth is also an opportunity for state and federal government agencies to increase funding to expand Latino access to higher education, particularly through digital learning–supported programs and degree pathways.

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