

The Role of Social Capital in the Educational Decisions of Hispanic Students Attending Hispanic-Serving Community Colleges

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Abstract

The increase in the number of Hispanic students participating in postsecondary education produces an incomplete picture of their educational attainment in relation to their representation in the general population. Hispanic student enrollment in higher education has dramatically increased in number; however, their retention and degree attainment still lag behind all other population groups. This study incorporates the theoretical construct of social capital in an attempt to identify the individuals that influence Hispanic students' decisions to attend and persist in Hispanic-serving community colleges.

A number of policymakers have shifted their attention from the participation rates of Hispanics in postsecondary education to the percentage of this population that completes a certificate or degree program. Several reports stress that while participation rates have increased, there are continued disparities in outcomes between Hispanics and college students of other racial and ethnic groups (Council of Economic Advisers, 2000; Fry, 2002; President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 2003; Vernez & Mizell, 2002). In Fall 2001, 59% of Hispanic enrollments in higher education were at community colleges

(Harvey & Anderson, 2005), and few would dispute that the community college has significantly contributed to the increased participation of Hispanics. Yet Hispanic community college students have the lowest retention rates and the highest transfer losses (Harvey, 2002; Rendon & Garza, 1996), and Hispanics trail all other population groups in the attainment of degrees, especially the baccalaureate degree (Vernez & Mizell, 2002). As the title of Fry's (2002) report on Hispanics in higher education emphasizes, *Many enroll, too few graduate*.

In the 2003-2004 academic year, almost one-half of the Hispanic enrollments in higher education were at the 236 institutions meeting the definition of a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) (Santiago, 2006). Federal law defines HSIs as public or private nonprofit colleges and universities that are accredited and degree-granting with 25% or greater total Hispanic undergraduate full-time equivalent enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Based on the Fall 2005 IPEDS data, slightly more than half (50.5%) of HSIs are two-year institutions, and 46.5% of all HSIs are public, two-year institutions.

A number of studies have identified attributes that contribute to attrition, such as part-time enrollment, working full-time, and having children or dependents, and Hispanics have been identified as more likely to possess these attributes (NCES, 2002). Finances and financial aid seem to be especially important factors in terms of Hispanic community college persistence. A study by Nora (1990) found that Hispanic community college students who received higher levels of financial aid in the form of grants enrolled in more semesters, earned more credit hours, and received some type of credential. Hispanic students enrolled in community colleges with large Hispanic enrollments in Texas, Arizona, and California indicated that having to work to help the family survive and other financial pressures presented barriers to transferring to a baccalaureate institution (Rendon, Justiz, & Resta, 1988). McGlynn (2004) found that Hispanic community college students were often sidetracked into short-term economic success, a better job, or pay increase after completing courses or a certificate, rather than long-term economic success stemming from completion of an associate's or bachelor's degree.