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Public Policy and Hispanic-Serving Institutions: From Invention to Accountability

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Excelencia in Education

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A fundamental premise for creating the Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) designation assumes that a critical mass of students motivates an institution to change how it operates to better serve these students to degree attainment. Increasing Hispanic degree attainment is in the national interest, and programs created by public policy to support HSIs have the potential to meet this interest. Public policy is increasingly focused on holding recipients of public funds accountable for stated outcomes. This essay considers current public policy questions and limits of current measures for understanding the educational attainment of Hispanics at HSIs.

Key words: Hispanic-Serving Institutions, accountability, public policy, educational attainment

Fifty-four percent of all Hispanic undergraduate students are enrolled in just 9% of institutions of higher education in the United States (Excelencia in Education, 2011). This concentrated enrollment of Hispanic students was first recognized by educators and policy makers in the 1980s and resulted in the creation of the designation Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) in the 1992 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended (Santiago, 2006). The definition of *Hispanic-Serving Institution* (HSI) in federal legislation is a political construct. This construct reflects a national interest in addressing the low college-going and educational attainment of Hispanics in the United States along with the recognition that Hispanics enroll in a small number of institutions with limited resources (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008). The defining characteristic of HSIs is their concentrated enrollment of Hispanic students, not an overt institutional mission to serve Hispanics. A fundamental premise for creating the HSI designation is the assumption that a critical mass of students motivates an institution to change how it operates to better “serve” these students. Specifically, critical mass theory suggests that once a definable group reaches a certain size within an organization, group interactions transform the organization’s culture and norms (Dahlerup, 2005; Kanter, 1977). Although the size of the definable group required for organizational change varies, the enrollment size selected to define HSIs in federal legislation is at least 25% Hispanic undergraduate full-time equivalent enrollment.

Given the increased awareness of Hispanics’ demographic growth in the United States, the importance of an educated citizenry, and the need for a well-educated workforce to remain

economically competitive, the educational attainment of Hispanics is a critical public policy issue. In 2010, only 19% of Hispanics aged 25 and older had earned an associate's degree or higher compared to more than 40% of other populations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). In public policy, this critical mass theory translates into expectations that investment in HSIs will increase educational opportunities and attainment for the country's youngest and fastest growing population—Hispanics. As a result, public policy investment in HSIs since 1995 has increased significantly. Funding for HSIs at the U.S. Department of Education increased from \$12 million in 1995 to more than \$238 million in 2010 (U.S. Department of Education, 2011a). The explicit link between increased funding for HSIs and improved institutional efforts to overtly serve Hispanic students better and increase educational attainment needs clarification. Investing in efforts to increase Hispanic degree attainment is in the national interest, and programs created by public policy to support HSIs have the potential to increase Hispanics' educational attainment.

A combination of federal fiscal limitations, increased emphasis on college completion, and interest in measuring institutional effectiveness raises new questions in public policy about the impact of HSIs that should not be overlooked. *Is an institutional designation predicated on concentrated student enrollment sufficient to ensure accountability for federal funds to increase a population's educational attainment?* Responding to this question is beyond the scope of this essay. Nonetheless, this essay does consider current public policy questions relevant to the accountability of HSIs to increase the educational attainment of Hispanics.

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR HSIs

With regard to HSIs, an increased educational policy focus on accountability leaves both institutional leaders and policy analysts struggling to identify appropriate measures of institutional effectiveness. Given the diverse missions, admissions, tuition and fees, and student populations served by HSIs, identifying useful, valid, and universal measures of institutional success is a challenge. Adding to this challenge is the fact that the majority of HSIs are public institutions that are continually pressed to increase efficiency while managing growth in nontraditional student enrollment and a relative decrease in state financial support per student. The public policy question is to determine the effectiveness of HSIs in increasing Hispanic educational attainment. The following are guiding questions for consideration.

Has a public investment in HSIs increased Hispanic educational attainment?

Because enrollment is a prerequisite for educational attainment, it would be safe to conclude that investing in institutions that enroll more than half of Hispanic undergraduates helps increase Hispanic educational attainment. However, is this educational attainment the result of institutional efforts, or are Hispanic students graduating independent of institutional effort?

Although several federal agencies have programs targeting HSIs, the first and most recognized federal program to invest in HSIs is the Title V Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions program (discussed by Calderón Galdeano, Flores, & Moder, 2012/this issue). Although many HSIs are embracing their role in higher education to increase educational access and completion by Hispanic students, not all institutions meeting the enrollment criteria to be designated as an HSI are proactively and intentionally focused on increasing Hispanic educational attainment

(Contreras, Malcom, & Bensimon, 2008; Santiago, Andrade, & Brown, 2004). The development of monitoring milestones of increased opportunity, enhanced academic offerings, improved quality, and stability for HSIs aligned to educational attainment are critical areas for further exploration in public policy discussions of institutional accountability for the use of funds at HSIs. A more central discussion on the intentionality of HSIs in serving Hispanic students beyond enrollment must also be considered in accountability.

Enrolling Hispanic students by default without explicit institutional effort to recruit, retain, and graduate these students undermines the public policy intent and spirit of the HSI designation.

Revisiting the definition of an HSI beyond enrollment in public policy recognizes that the efforts of institutions that embrace serving Hispanic students are critical to developing appropriate accountability measures for these institutions.

Do increased graduation rates at HSIs represent increased Hispanic educational attainment?

Graduation rates as one measure of success are based on traditional students attending college in traditional attendance patterns (first-time full-time students) in a time-bound manner (up to 150% of the expected time; U.S. Department of Education, 2011b). However, HSIs serve many nontraditional students with diverse attendance patterns. For example, the educational attainment of part-time, transfer, and returning students is not included in the calculation of graduation rates, even though many Hispanic students at HSIs reflect these attendance patterns. Using graduation rates alone as an accountability measure can underestimate the institutional effectiveness of some HSIs that have modified their programs and services to better serve a nontraditional population not included in the current criteria used to calculate graduation rates.

Does an increase in the number of HSIs represent increased Hispanic educational attainment?

Given the projected growth of both the Hispanic population in the United States and Hispanic student enrollment in higher education, it is reasonable to assume that the number of HSIs will continue to increase. However, HSIs are defined by enrollment and not degree completion. Hence, an increase in the number of HSIs alone is not a measure of educational attainment. Enrollment is a necessary prerequisite for educational attainment, but institutions are not required to graduate the students who enroll. It is possible that an institution that enrolls a large percentage of Hispanics may not graduate those students and can merely enroll new Hispanic students each year. And given the concentrated youth and growth of the Hispanic population, an increasing number of institutions will inevitably meet the criteria of being identified as HSIs without having to overtly serve Hispanic students and support their degree attainment. Without conscious intentionality for an institution to graduate the Hispanic students it enrolls, an increase in the number of institutions that are HSIs does not ensure the increased degree attainment of Hispanics.

Does institutional intentionality in serving Hispanics, beyond enrollment, increase educational attainment among this population? If so, are other value-added metrics of students' educational experience aligned with degree completion?

It is generally assumed that HSIs adapt their institutional practices to better serve the Hispanic students enrolled and that such a response makes these institutions Hispanic "serving." Enrolling

students is merely a prerequisite for serving them. Serving Hispanic students is based on intentionality. It is demonstrated by broad campus awareness of the profile of the Hispanic population at an institution and in the community. It requires an understanding of the strengths and needs of Hispanic students on campus. It implies an institutional willingness to adapt curricular design, instructional practices, academic programs, and support services to increase retention or promote persistence for Hispanic students. It requires attention and investment of institutional resources, such as support services, academic advising, and faculty development, to better serve these students through degree attainment (Santiago, 2009, 2010). Although by themselves these institutional efforts do not guarantee increased Hispanic educational achievement, milestones and metrics of efforts—such as improvement in student retention from semester to semester, increased student completion of gatekeeping courses, enhanced Hispanic representation in disciplines of national need, increased representation of Hispanic faculty and administrators, overt tracking of Hispanic student progress among all students, and annual increases in the number of degrees awarded to Hispanics—are useful measures of an institution’s commitment to increasing the educational attainment of its Hispanic students.

SUMMARY

Many HSIs are setting trends in their efforts to serve Hispanic students and the Hispanic community in the United States. Higher education is changing because of increased demand for accountability, demographic shifts, and decreased public funding. College and university systems will be challenged to evolve in their service to the Hispanic populous and to a growing critical mass of nontraditional Hispanic students. HSIs can provide critical leadership to support an increase in degree completion by serving as models of success in Hispanic student outreach, support, retention, and completion. Sharing effective institutional practices developed and implemented at HSIs that are intentionally serving Hispanic students with institutions that are only beginning to experience this growth of Hispanics in their service area can bring to scale these successful programs and practices to enhance both access and success for Hispanic students and to increase the number of well-educated U.S. citizens to take their rightful place in an ever-changing, dynamic world.

This essay highlights questions that must be considered as education policy grapples with appropriate and meaningful measures that impact public funds and educational attainment for HSIs. More research is needed to understand institutional efforts that effectively serve Hispanic students beyond enrollment to degree attainment. This research must revisit the current definition of an HSI in public policy and expand the criteria required to demonstrate institutional intentionality in serving Hispanic students beyond enrollment. Research must also go beyond the focus on traditional measures of institutional effectiveness and incorporate appropriate and useful metrics for a set of institutions with a high concentration of Hispanic students that track the success of these students from enrollment to retention and completion. Ensuring both financial support for institutions enrolling a high concentration of Hispanic students and the accountability of these institutions for increasing Hispanic educational attainment will be vital for effective educational policy that advances national needs and interest.

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