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Answering the Call: Hispanic-Serving Institutions as Leaders in the Quest for Access, Excellence, and Equity in American Higher Education

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Modeling an Effective Program for Latina/o College Student Success

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Abstract

This article presents a case study of the design, implementation, and results of a program developed to increase Latina/o student success at a Hispanic-Serving Institution. A team of university faculty, staff, and administrator researchers drew from four sources of evidence to design and examine the effects of the program, including: (a) longitudinal cohort data, (b) the scholarly literature on Latina/o student success, (c) focus group data with students, and (d) syllabi analysis data. Participants in the program demonstrated increased mid-term grade point average (GPA), end of first-term GPA, and fall-to-fall persistence.

Introduction

We are a nation of several generations: the GI generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and now, Generation Z (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Generations are known for their unique circumstances and attributes, i.e., they can be described and discussed due to what makes them unique (Strauss & Howe, 1991). The GI generation, also called the Greatest Generation, is comprised of individuals born between 1901 and 1926. This generation was marked by the hundreds of thousands of soldiers that fought and died in World War II, the spawning of labor unions, and the golden age of radio (Delcampo, 2011). The Baby Boomer generation, which includes people born between 1946 and 1964, was known for their engagement in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the large influx of women entering the labor force, and the age of television (Cannon Gibney, 2017). Americans born between 1965 and 1980 are known as Generation X. Characteristics of this generation include rising divorce rates, a lack of after-school adult supervision, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Mulrennan, 2015). Millennials include children born between 1981 and 2000 and are known for having omnipresent parents, enormous academic pressure, and computers in schools and homes (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Recently, the Millennials surpassed the Baby Boomers as the largest generation in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2016). The latest generation is referred to as Generation Z and is comprised of children born after 2001. They are the internet generation and have never known a world without computers or cell phones (White, 2017).

Examining these distinct generations through the lens of the Latina/o experience illuminates an sobering reality. It is not the trends that change over time that calls our attention. Rather, it is what persists: the struggle for educational access and achievement in postsecondary education. For those concerned with this struggle, two questions remain: (a) How can more Latinas/os enroll in college, and (b) How can more Latinas/os complete college degrees?

With regard to progress in college enrollment for Latinas/os, in 1992, the federal government took action to recognize colleges and universities as Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI) if they met an enrollment threshold of 25%. Subsequently, federal grants were made available to such institutions with the intention of supporting their efforts to increase college access for Latinas/os. Today, approximately 409 colleges or universities meet this threshold and

are recognized as HSIs (Contreras, Malcom, & Bensimon, 2008; Excelencia in Education, 2015; Nuñez, Hurtado, & Calderon Galdeano, 2015; Vigil-Laden, 2001).

Progress in college completion for Latinas/os is another matter. A college or university earns the designation HSI due to its enrollment of Latinas/os rather than the number of Latinas/os completing a degree. In fact, there is no substantive accountability structure for HSIs that receive funding to increase degree completion for Latina/os but that do not succeed in doing so (Contreras, Malcom, & Bensimon, 2008; Nuñez, Hurtado, & Calderon-Galdeano, 2015; Vigil-Laden, 2001).

Review of college completion rates (College Scorecard, 2016) for two states with large Latina/o populations, California and Texas, reveals several concerning patterns. For example, in California, only six of the state's 32 public, four-year universities have graduation rates higher than 80%. In five out of these six universities, the representation of Latinas/os is small, somewhere between 10 and 13%. Conversely, more than two-thirds of California's public, four-year universities have graduation rates below 60%. Latina/o enrollment for most of these institutions ranges between 25 and 60%. Stated differently, nearly every California HSI has a graduation rate below 60%. Upon closer examination, California's public universities with the highest proportion of Latina/o students (California State University Los Angeles, California State University San Bernardino, California State University Northridge, California State University Bakersfield, and California State University Dominguez Hills) yield some of the lowest graduation rates in the system. California State University Los Angeles, which serves over 20,000 undergraduates, 61% of which are Latina/o, has a graduation rate of only 38%. Similar patterns occur in California's private, non-profit universities. When Latina/o enrollments reach 25% or higher, the graduation rate drops below 60%. In sum, too few Latinas/os *attend* California's four-year universities with high graduation rates and, too few Latinas/os *graduate* from California's four-year universities with large Latina/o enrollments.

Texas shows similar patterns regarding enrollment and graduation rates for Latinas/os (College Scorecard, 2016). Only the two public flagship institutions (The University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University) have graduation rates approaching 80%. The remaining 32 public four-year universities have graduation rates near 60% or below. Latinas/os comprise only 18% of the undergraduate student population at The University of Texas at Austin, despite being more than 50% of the state's K-12 enrollment. At Texas A&M University, the Latina/o

population drops to 14%. Mirroring a pattern in California, Texas' public, four-year universities with the largest enrollments of Latinas/os have some of the lowest graduation rates in the system (University of Texas at Brownsville, University of Texas at San Antonio, Texas A&M Corpus Christi, University of Texas at El Paso, Texas A&M at Kingsville, and the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley). Graduation rates at each of these institutions range between 27 and 40%. Similar patterns occur in Texas' private, non-profit universities. Institutions with the largest percentage of Latina/o undergraduates have the lowest graduation rates in this sector.

Despite decades of research (Baumann, Cabrera, Scott, & Swail, 2007; Crisp, Taggart, & Nora, 2015; Nora & Crisp 2009; Salis & Nora, 2012; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006) and practice pertaining to Latina/o college completion (AAC&U, 2014; Santiago, 2011), it is clear that much more progress needs to be made. Before yet another generation emerges after Generation Z, more effective answers to the question: *How can more Latinas/os complete college degrees?* must be found, followed by successful implementation of solutions. What is intriguing about this special issue of the *Association of Mexican American Educators Journal* is the notion that both answers and solutions may lie within HSIs—institutions that historically have experienced low graduation rates.

Scholars and leaders in the field of higher education agree that significantly increasing the graduation rates of institutions with large enrollments of Latinas/os is an effective strategy to increase the total number of Latinas/os earning a college degree (Contreras, Malcom, & Bensimon, 2008; Nuñez, Hurtado, & Calderon Galdeano, 2015; Vigil-Laden, 2001). *Excelencia in Education*, a not-for-profit organization that promotes policies and practices that support Latina/o college achievement, shares this notion and has consistently recognized a handful of institutions for demonstrating promising practices, or *Examples of Excelencia* (see www.ed.excelencia.org). Gonzalez and Arámbula Ballysingh (2012) appraised the value of such programs in light of their effort to increase Latina/o college completion. They found that for those programs that exhibited effective practices, the following characteristics were present: (a) use of longitudinal, disaggregated, cohort data; (b) use of scholarly literature; (c) collection and application of local data that identified the experiences and challenges of Latina/o students specific to a campus; and (d) use of formative assessment data. The remainder of this article presents a case study (Stake, 1994) of the design, implementation, and results of a program that exemplifies these characteristics at a HSI. Notably, the program increased Latina/o student

success and positioned the university to increase Latina/o college completion rates in a sustained and broad manner.

Designing Latina/o Student Success in Context

The site of this exemplar program was a private, religiously affiliated, HSI in a large, metropolitan city in Texas. The university enrolled approximately 2,000 undergraduate students, 71% of which were Latina/o at the time of the study. Data collection and review of this program occurred between fall 2012 and spring 2014. Prior to the design and implementation of the program, longitudinal cohort data indicated that the fall-to-fall persistence rate remained flat at approximately 55% with no clear pattern of increase or decrease. Graduation rates also held steady at approximately 37% during this time period. It was clear to the university faculty and administration that both persistence and graduation rates for their predominately Latina/o student population were consistently low. To address lagging graduation rates, the institution recognized the first year as pivotal to increasing the retention and graduation rates for Latina/o students. The institution set out to design a program to best meet the needs of their distinct student population.

To begin, a team of faculty, staff, and administrators used the university's longitudinal cohort data as a point of departure and consequently delved into the scholarly literature to better understand the factors that supported or impeded Latina/o student success in college. They noted the following conceptual insights: Latina/o students must achieve a sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), engagement (Kuh, 2001; Nora, 2002), and integration (Nora & Crisp, 2009; Tinto, 1975, 1997) fostered by a campus climate (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) that recognizes and validates (Rendón, 1994) their cultural heritage, family relationships, and academic potential as learners. The team also became cognizant of polices, practices, and interactions that engendered microaggressions (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009) and thereby reduced students' sense of belonging, engagement, integration, and validation.

Prior to applying the scholarly literature to the design of an intervention, the team of faculty, staff, and administrators conducted a series of focus groups with their Latina/o students to acquire a local understanding of the common barriers impeding their success during their first semester. The team argued that coupling the scholarly literature with local focus group data would produce a deeper understanding to inform the design of an effective program. The

team conducted five focus groups with first-term Latina/o students at the university. First-term Latina/o students were selected due to the fact that only 55% of this population returned for their second year in college. The team found five common barriers that were consistently noted by the students as the following: (a) difficulty managing time; (b) failure to submit assignments; (c) discomfort asking questions in class; (d) failure to complete online class assignments; and (e) difficulty managing the academic workload of multiple courses. The team noted that four of the five common barriers were interconnected and related to managing their collegiate academic workload (i.e., the assignments, tests, quizzes, and readings associated with being a full-time student). The interconnectedness of these barriers prompted a deeper question posed by the team: How heavy is the students' academic workload?

Academic Workload Analysis

To answer the question regarding academic workload, the team conducted an analysis of course syllabi for four different groups of full-time students: humanities majors (first-term and third-year status students) and biology majors (first-term and third-year status students). Latina/o students were well represented in both majors, 68 and 57% respectively. The goal of the syllabi content analysis was to quantify the number of assignments, tests, quizzes, and readings required of first-term students and contrast it with students in their third year. The findings were striking and produced a breakthrough insight that drove the design of the subsequent program intervention.

With regard to students majoring in humanities, first-term students bore nearly three times the workload of third-year students in the same major. During the fall 2013 semester, first-term students carrying a 13-unit load were given 88 assignments, quizzes, exams, and readings to complete in the month of September; 70 in the month of October; 62 in the month of November; and 48 in the month of December. In contrast, third-year students in the same major with a 13-unit load were required to complete 26 assignments, quizzes, exams, and readings in the month of September; 19 in the month of October; 14 in November; and 12 in December. The same pattern was present for biology majors. First-term students carrying 13 units were expected to complete 90 assignments, quizzes, exams, and readings to complete in the month of September; 74 in the month of October; 69 in the month of November; and 43 in the month of December. In contrast, third-year students in the same major with a 13-unit load

were given 26 assignments, quizzes, exams, and readings in the month of September; 20 in the month of October; 16 in November; and 12 in December. Although no two assignments can be weighed equally, the sheer number of assignments and the contrast between first-year and third-year was a compelling discovery. Tables 1 and 2 describe the number and types of assignments given during the month of September that first-term and third-year biology majors were required to complete with a 13-unit academic load.

Table 1

Academic Workload for a First-Term Biology Major

Biology Major: First-Term Assignment Workload (Aug-Sept)

Course Name	Week 1 (Aug)	Week 2 (Sept)	Week 3 (Sept)	Week 4 (Sept)	Week 5 (Sept)
First-Year English	Chapter 4: pgs. 62-83 Lynda Barry's "The Sanctuary of School" pgs. 84-89 Questions on pg. 88-89 Check for Online assignments	Three Essays on Ch.4 "An American Childhood" pgs. 90-94 Discussion Questions Online assignments Quiz readings last week	"Render unto Larry's" pgs. 95-98 "Longing to Belong" pgs. 99-103 Questions on pg. 97-98 Peer Review Drafts of paper #1 Questions on pg. 102-103 Quiz on readings 95-98 Short Quiz 99-103	The Way We Lie Quiz on The Way We Lie Assignment on Essay 2 Questions on pgs. 343 Start Essay 2	"Mother Tongue" pgs. 345-351 "People like Us" pgs 357-358 Questions on 345-351 Questions on reading 357-358 Draft of Essays 1-2 Quiz on 345-351 Quiz on 357-358
Student Success Course	Signature Assignments	Chapter 3	Reading Demonstration/ Review CSFI Results	Chapter 4	Chapter 5

First-Year Math Course	HW 1.1 HW 1.2 My MathLabHW My MathLab HW My MathLab HW Quiz 1 over Syllabus	HW 1.5 HW 1.6 HW 1.7 My MathLab HW My MathLab HW Quiz 2 over 1.1-1.4	Review Test 1 Ch. 1 Ch.2.1 My MathLab HW	HW 2.2 HW 2.3 HW 2.4 HW 2.5 My MathLab HW My MathLab HW My MathLab HW Quiz 3 over HW 2.1-2.2	HW 3.1 HW 3.2 HW 3.3 HW 3.4 HW 3.5 My MathLab HW My MathLab HW My MathLab HW Quiz 4 over 2.3-2.5
Sociology Course	Intro Disc due	Ch. 1 Ch. 2 HW #1 due DISC #1 due	Ch. 5 HW #2 due DISC #2 due	Ch. 8 HW #3 due DISC #3 due	Ch. 9 HW #4 due DISC #4 due
Spanish Course	Leccion 1: Hola, Que tal?	Leccion 1 WebSAM for Ch.1	Examen Leccion 1 Leccion 2	Leccion 2 WebSAM for Chap. 2	Examen Leccion 2 Leccion 3
Total # in a week	Readings: 5 Assignments: 7 Quizzes: 1 Exams: 0 Projects: 0	Readings: 9 Assignments: 7 Quizzes: 2 Exams: 0 Projects: 0	Readings: 6 Assignments: 8 Quizzes: 2 Exams: 1 Projects: 0	Readings: 8 Assignments: 9 Quizzes: 2 Exams: 0 Projects: 0	Readings: 10 Assignments: 8 Quizzes: 3 Exams: 1 Projects: 0
Total # in a Month	**Readings: 38** **Assignments: 40** **Quizzes: 10** **Exams: 2** **Projects: 0**				

Table 2

Academic Workload for a Junior Status Biology Major

Biology Major: Junior Status Assignment Workload (Aug-Sept)

Course Name	Week 1 (Aug)	Week 2 (Sept)	Week 3 (Sept)	Week 4 (Sept)	Week 5 (Sept)
Biology Course	Chapters 2-3	Chapters 4-5	Exam 1	Chapter 7	Exam 2
Physics Course	Chapters 1 & 3	Lab Summary	Exam 1	Chapters 4 & 7	Lab Summary
Gen Ed Philosophy Course	Chapters 1 & 4	Dialogue Assignment 1	Chapters 5 & 7	Dialogue Assignment 2	Chapter 9
Gen Ed Arts Course	Chapters 1 & 2	Studio Project One Draft	Chapter 4	Chapters 5 & 6	Studio Project One
Total # in a Week	Readings: 8 Assignments: 0 Quizzes: 0 Exams: 0 Projects: 0	Readings: 2 Assignments: 2 Quizzes: 0 Exams: 0 Projects: 1	Readings: 3 Assignments: 0 Quizzes: 0 Exams: 2 Projects: 0	Readings: 5 Assignments: 1 Quizzes: 0 Exams: 0 Projects: 0	Readings: 1 Assignments: 1 Quizzes: 0 Exams: 1 Projects: 1
Total # in a Month	**Readings: 19 Assignments: 4 Quizzes: 0 Exams: 3 Projects: 0**				

The team was astounded by the stark contrast between the total number of assignments between first-term students and third-year students. They concluded that the students least prepared to manage the rigors of full-time university study–first-term students–were being required to complete the heaviest workload. The team shared their results with faculty

members in the humanities and biology departments who taught first-year courses and documented their reactions. Although surprised by the total number of assignments required of first-term students, a common response from faculty was that these students would not be successful if their grades were based on fewer but more heavily weighted assignments. Instead, they intentionally designed their courses with a higher volume of smaller assignments as a means of scaffolding the learning process. As a result, the notable increase in the total number of assignments resulted in impeding first-term students to effectively manage their academic workload. During this time period, 37% of new students ended their first term with a GPA below 2.0 and were placed on academic probation. Only 16% achieved a GPA of 3.0 or higher. Many of the students placed on academic probation after their first term remained on academic probation after their second term and never returned for their second year in college.

The team discussed two options to address the unintended consequences of this approach: (a) educate faculty regarding the total number of assignments and spark a conversation about what a reasonable workload should be for first-term students; or (b) redesign the university's student success course in a way that focuses heavily on time management and assignment completion. The team decided to address both options, recognizing that they had little control over the outcome of option A. However, option B, was initially where the team exerted their efforts. They used insights from the scholarly literature, focus group findings, and syllabi content analysis to redesign the university's student success course.

From Textbook-Driven to Data-Driven Student Success Course

Before this effort, the university's student success course–a one-unit course required of all first-year students–was designed in a conventional manner, driven primarily by the chapters of a textbook. The chapters covered common topics such as the benefits of college, time management, emotional and physical wellness, personality and learning preferences, critical thinking skills, reading strategies, note-taking and study skills, test-taking skills, campus resources, career development, financial literacy, and diversity. The course was redesigned to better align with the insights they gained from the scholarly literature regarding Latinas/os in college, the results from their focus group data, and the syllabi content analysis. The university team decided to eliminate the textbook and redesign the course to: (a) equip students with the

tools, skills, and dispositions to complete all assignments associated with a heavy workload; (b) facilitate a strong sense of belonging, engagement, integration; and (c) validate their cultural heritage, family relationships, and identities as powerful learners. Refer to Table 3 for the alignment between the scholarly literature, focus group findings, syllabi content analysis, and the redesigned components of the university's student success course.

Table 3

Alignment between Data Findings and Components of Redesigned Student Success Course

Findings from Scholarly Literature, Focus Groups, and Syllabi Analysis	Components of Redesigned Student Success Course
Difficulty with Time Management and Assignment Completion	1) Academic Assignment Calendar 2) Semester Master Calendar 3) Grade Tracker
Developing Sense of Belonging, Engagement, and Integration	1) Student Success Course Integration with New Student Orientation 2) Professor Communication and Meeting Assignment 3) Staff Communication and Meeting Assignment
Validation of Cultural Heritage, Family Relationships, and Identity as a Powerful Learner	1) Family Participation in New Student Orientation. 2) Course sessions on (a) Cultural Ways of Being and Individual Calling, (b) Power of Execution, (c) Foundational Values.

To address the findings related to "difficulty with time management and assignment completion," the team designed the following three tools for the student success course: 1) *The Academic Assignment Calendar*– a weekly, monthly, semester-long calendar built by students that included all assignments for each course taken. The assignments included readings, exams, quizzes, and out-of-class assignments; 2) *The Semester Master Calendar*– a comprehensive semester calendar that detailed social, family, self, work, and academic responsibilities using an online tool located on the university's portal; and 3) *The Grade Tracker*– an electronic grade monitoring tool that tracked the point and percentage value of assignments, quizzes, exams, or

projects for each course. Students updated the *Grade Tracker* tool weekly based upon feedback and assignment of grades from their professors.

The team also designed and added three new components to the student success course to reduce the likelihood students would experience microaggressions (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009) and to enhance students' sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), engagement (Kuh, 2001; Nora, 2002), and integration (Nora & Crisp, 2009; Tinto, 1975, 1997. The new student orientation program included a segment where students were grouped together by the instructor of their student success course. This was designed as the first class session for the student success course and enabled the students to quickly build a sense of belonging and community. During the program, the students engaged in discussion and reflection regarding what qualifies as a microaggression and discussed different intervention approaches. The second component required students to draft and send an email to each of their professors to introduce themselves. Students were asked to share a few details about their background and what brought them to the university and to request a one-on-one meeting with their faculty. Students were also asked to send a similar email to a student support staff member or advisor and request a one-on-one meeting.

Finally, to address the importance of validation (Rendón, 1994), the team added two components. First, students' families were invited to participate in the new student orientation program. Parents met with bilingual faculty, staff, and administrators while younger siblings were invited to meet with current students and discussed navigating the pathway to college. Second, course sessions were designed to focus on cultural ways of being (Córdova, 2008), individual calling (Palmer, 1999), and the power of execution (McChesney, Covey, & Huling, 2012).

To acquire feedback on the redesign of the university's student success course, the following formative assessment data were collected and analyzed: (a) Mid-term grades for first-term students; (b) End of first-term GPA; and (c) Fall-to-fall persistence rates. Three years of trend data for each of the data elements above were identified. For mid-term grades, 35% of first-term students had a GPA below 2.0. During the term of the redesigned student success course, this percentage dropped to 19%. For end of term GPA, 37% of new students ended their first term with a GPA below 2.0 and were placed on academic probation. Only 17% had a GPA of 3.0 or above. At the end of the redesigned student success course, 18% of new students ended their first term with a GPA below 2.0, and 36% had a GPA of 3.0 or above.

Finally, with regard to persistence, three years of trend data spanning the 2009-10 and 2011-12 academic years indicated that the fall-to-fall persistence rate was steady at 55%. After the redesign of the student success course, the students who entered in the fall of 2013 had a fall-to-fall persistence rate of 64%.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine that a redesigned program was the primary factor in increasing student success in the case study offered here. However, the team was emboldened by witnessing the percentage of students with end-of-first-term GPAs of 3.0 or higher increase by 19 percentage points. The notable reduction of students with GPAs below 2.0 also was a significant morale booster. Finally, the team felt that the increase in fall-to-fall persistence rates would translate into increases in degree completion rates. When they looked back at their process, they recognized the importance of using multiple sources of data and asking deeper questions. They acknowledged that much more work needs to be done, especially to address the potential of microaggressions emerging through polices, practices, and interactions. They set an internal goal that their work would not be complete until they matched the success rates of the best universities in the nation. That is a goal worthy of the students that they serve.

Discussion

Generations come and go, marked by unique events and changes in societal life (Strauss & Howe, 1991. The millennial generation, now the largest (Pew Research Center, 2016), should be known not only as one characterized by omnipresent parents, enormous academic pressure, and computers in homes and schools (Howe & Strauss, 2000), but also the generation that witnessed the rise of Hispanic-Serving Institutions and their role in increasing access to higher education for Latinas/os. The case study presented here demonstrates that HSIs can be more than places of large Latina/o college enrollment; they can be institutions that facilitate and support high levels of success. Perhaps, in the future, individuals will look back and characterize this generation as the one that produced the largest increase in Latina/o college graduates.

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