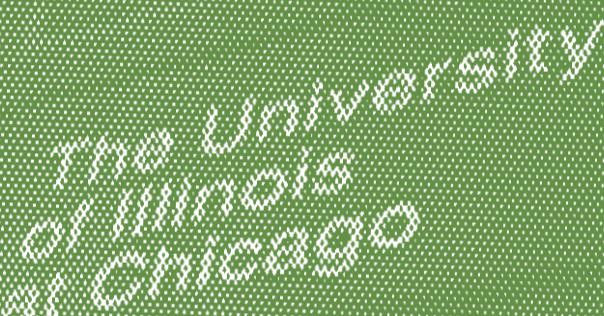


Illinois Latinos in Higher Education



The University
of Illinois
at Chicago

Latinos in Higher Education: Illinois Latino Council Higher Education (ILACHE)

Introduction

Research has shown the importance of Latino faculty in higher education and is considered the single most important key to any hope for increasing Latino access. However Latino faculty are increasing very slowly in colleges and universities throughout the nation and state.

Lack of Latino faculty and staff in higher education is reflected in the numbers and under-representation of Latinos and people of color in faculty positions. In 1995–1996, the Higher Education Research Institute reported that faculty of color account for 10 percent of the professor rate, up 1 percent from the 9 percent of 1989. Minorities are also placed in non-tenure track positions. Latinos represent less than 3 percent of all full time faculty and it appears as though tenure rate among Latino faculty is on the decline, with HACU (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities) reporting a 4 percent decline in Latino faculty tenure from 1983 to 1993.

Statewide the figures are comparable to nationwide statistics. The following table illustrates this point and the under representation of Latino faculty and staff in Illinois Colleges and Universities. These leaks and cracks in the pipeline have a cumulative effect and must be viewed from the very beginning of the process of formal education. Latino and minority students are already being marginalized in the public school systems. With over 50% of Latinos dropping out of High School, 10% never enrolling in High School, and only 4% receiving bachelors' degrees, one can assume that the pipeline is in serious need of repair. The pool that successfully makes it to college and through graduate school is slim and minimal. This trend has serious implications for the hiring of Latino and minority faculty, as pools become smaller and competition for qualified minority faculty becomes greater.

“With over 50% of Latinos dropping out of High School, 10% never enrolling in High School, and only 4% receiving bachelors’ degrees”



Search Procedures

Increasing Latino faculty representation in higher education begins with the recruitment and hiring of Latino faculty. Recruitment in higher education is done the way it has historically been done with procedures and bias that perpetuates the status quo. “Hiring strategies may contribute more to the under representation of faculty of color than the leaving of faculty of color”. Search committees do not go beyond traditional avenues of recruitment. Consistent use of the same methods and the same advertisement mechanisms may lead to a pattern of discrimination in faculty hiring. The excuse that there are “no qualified Latino faculty”, is not a justification for not doing an extensive search. Advertising in venues that attract mainly white audiences, and networking with peers of the same makeup and background will not lead to a diverse search.

Hiring strategies may mirror the same type of behavior. Judgment by search committee members have a potential to be culturally biased and in many cases Latinos and people of color are not evaluated fairly or by the same standards as their white counterparts.

Also, every attempt should be made to diversify search committees. People are more prone to favor someone who looks and sounds like themselves. However university policies reinforces this very practice by their university governance and laws. Search committees are required to include faculty members from the academic department that is conducting the search. Lack of minority faculty in these departments almost insures that diverse search committees become an impossibility and this will continue as long as there is under representation and exclusion of minorities in higher education. Hence, during the search process there is no alternative view, diverse perspective, and evaluation at the important time of the interview process. In many cases the applicant might even be discouraged or turned away during the interview, being subtly given the message that they do not fit in or meet the expectations of the position.

Retention of Latino Faculty

Turnover of Latino and minority faculty continue to be a challenge for many universities. The “revolving door syndrome” is common and retention of Latino and minority faculty is of great concern. Many factors can contribute to this. The environment also plays a role and can be unwelcoming, creating a chilly climate for Latino and minority faculty. Latino faculty may move on because they do not make tenure or are passed over for promotion and become dissatisfied. It is possible that they never quite really fit in and eventually move on looking for a better fit and where they feel their scholarship and work is of value. And lastly, the market drives the turnover. Qualified Latino faculty are in such demand that they can move on to better higher paying jobs in higher education or in the private sector.

Cultural Bias

The curriculum within higher education is based on the Eurocentric view. Latino history, voice and heroes are absent in the curriculum. This negating of the culture continues on to Latino faculty scholarship within academe. In 1993 a survey was conducted of 238 Latino faculty, 40 percent of Latino faculty felt that their peers devalued their research, 44 percent felt that research by Latinos was seen as inferior. These same respondents cited denial of tenure for Latino faculty were departmental politics, racism and insensitivity to their research interests.

Cultural stereotyping is manifested in the academy by having Latino and minority faculty serve and work on committees and projects that have a minority focus. This “organizational logic channels Latino faculty into limited roles and results in limited opportunities for networking and possible advancement. “The institutional relationship between Chicano faculty and administrators in academia places them in a situation of relative isolation referred to as “barrioization”. Chicano faculty feel constrained by institutional demands that prevent them from participating in institutional sectors that are closer to mainstream decision making. As peripheral participants in academia, Chicano faculty are unable to develop networks that could alter the perceptions whites hold of them.

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ILACHE History

On October 30 1986, a meeting was held at Roberto Clemente Community Academy by University of Illinois administrators to explain and justify the new admission requirements for undergraduate admissions. Over 1000 concerned parents, students and community members confronted University of Illinois officials chanting “Open the Doors of U of I”. The community was trying to drive home the message that their communities were systematically being denied access to higher education. Resultant of this meeting was a series of meetings held by UIC officials, parents and community members on the issues of Hispanic student access and retention at the university of Illinois at Chicago. This activity led to the creation of the report “Declining Minority Access to Higher Education”.

Spurred on by the recent community outcry and the findings of the report, on June 30, 1987 the Senate Joint Resolution 72 created a Joint Committee on Minority Access to Higher Education, Co-Chaired by Senator Miguel del Valle. One of the committee's main functions was to analyze the Chicago public schools' college preparation programs and course offerings and their relationship to the proposed undergraduate admissions changes that the IBHE sought to implement by 1993. A series of public hearings were held throughout Illinois beginning in November of 1987 through December 1988. A final report was generated and a series of recommendations were made.

A direct result of this activity was the creation of CACHE (Community Advisory Committee on Higher Education) which was the forerunner of what would become the groundwork for ILACHE. CACHE members were appointed by Senator Miguel del Valle and included concerned Latino Educators in Higher Education. CACHE held its first conference on April 30, 1988 and the theme was “Developing a Legislative Agenda for the 1990's”. In 1993 the organization changed its name to ILACHE (Illinois Latino Council on Higher Education) to more closely reflect the collective concerns of Latinos in higher Education in the state of Illinois.



Recommendations

Detailed in the next section are strategies and recommendations to address the issue of Latino Faculty under-representation.

Strengthening the Pipeline

- Increase cohort masters, doctoral programs to Latino community through programs such as El Valor educational Cohorts.
- Work with universities, Chicago Public Schools and educators to provide teacher licensure and certification.
- Strengthen the pipeline and encourage Latino students to pursue education as a viable career. Work with programs such as IMGIP/ICEOP to attract more Latino graduate students to complete terminal degrees and to go on as faculty in the academy.
- Work collaboratively with Latinos and people of color throughout the institution and other recognized formal organizations to give voice, provide credibility, and to demonstrate true commitment to this issue.

There is ample evidence of substantial underrepresentation of blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians along virtually every part of the pipeline toward faculty positions: underrepresentation among college graduates in science and engineering fields and in nonprofessional fields; under representation in graduate school enrollment; and underrepresentation in Ph. D.'s received. There is no doubt that increasing supply of minority faculty will require increasing stocks and flows along the pipeline.

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Conclusion

The increase of Latino Faculty who are culturally and linguistically sensitive to Latino students should be a priority for Illinois institutions of higher education. In creating access and opportunity Latino faculty are key in helping Latino students transition into higher education. The barriers of access however extend outside the classroom and into higher education's workforce, recruitment and hiring strategies, and the retention of Latino faculty. Corrective steps must be taken to resolve this under representation of Latino teachers and faculty in the state of Illinois.

Today ILACHE continues this important work of addressing the needs of the Latino community and serves as an action oriented, independent advocacy group for Latinos in higher education in the areas of access and equity as it relates to employment, admissions, and legislation in the state of Illinois. Through their annual conference they provide public forums to provide networking opportunities to Latino higher education professionals, and to create advocacy agendas, share best practices, and to explore new ways of affecting legislative and university policies. Striving for inclusion and voice ILACHE continues to advocate for the needs of the Latino community and provides a statewide forum for dialogue on issues in higher education.

"You don't have other people that listen to your music and eat your food."

A special consideration for Latino faculty is language and cultural isolation Latino faculty are given the subtle message that they are inferior, that their ideas are not valid, and their scholarship is confined to the "barrio". Feelings of isolation and being different, alone, and isolated are common for Latino faculty. Being in a new environment without a sense of community and the comfort of familiar cultural references and images, can be a very intimidating experience "One situation that is a challenge for me is the language. You are hesitant to participate. Some colleagues become impatient with you. Sometimes I just keep quiet. Lack of a perfect command of English can be seen as if you were not good enough for your field. They don't have any Latinos here. You feel isolated in terms of your culture. You don't have other people that listen to your music and eat your food." Female untenured instructor

ILACHE Mission Statement

To promote understanding and to advocate on behalf of the needs of the Illinois Latino population as they pertain to higher education. To provide a statewide forum for Latino and non-Latino educators and community persons with a professional and personal commitment to Latino issues in higher education.



Latinos in Higher Education: Today & Tomorrow

Latino Hispanic?

The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably in this article and refer to a group of Americans who share a language and common cultural origins but who come from diverse nations and backgrounds with distinctive histories and socio-economic and political experiences. The three largest Hispanic sub-groups in the United States are Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Cuban-Americans, but the number of immigrants from Central and South America has been growing very quickly Over the last 15 Years.

These sub-groups are concentrated in different parts of the United States, their economic circumstances vary, and the timing and causes of their immigration differ. As diverse as this population is, so are the many strengths and needs of the Latino student population.

"The three largest Hispanic sub-groups in the United States are Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Cuban-Americans"

Sarita E. Brown is the president and CEO of the Hispanic Scholarship Fund Institute. She was previously executive director of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans. Deborah Santiago is the vice president for data and policy analysis for the Los Angeles Alliance for Student Achievement. Formerly she was deputy director of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans and worked in the US. Department of Education in higher education policy. Estela Lopez is currently vice chancellor for academic affairs at the Connecticut State University System. Prior to this position, she was provost and vice president for academic affairs at Northeastern Illinois University.



Why Focus on Higher Education?

Over the past several years, research reports from notable organizations, such as the RAND Corporation and the Pew Hispanic Center, have focused on Latinos in higher education. This is a big change from even a few years ago, when little literature on the topic existed. Historically, there's been a greater emphasis on research regarding Latino students in elementary and secondary education, especially focusing on bilingual education, immigration, and dropouts.

In 2000, the high school dropout rate for Latinos was almost 30 percent, more than double the rate for African Americans and more than three times the rate for white students. Some policy makers argue that cutting the dropout rate of Latino youth is the top priority for improving Latino advanced educational attainment. Without plugging this hole in the educational pipeline for Hispanic students, they argue, we will never substantially increase Latino enrollment in higher education. Any action strategy to increase the college going rate for Latino students must include efforts to increase the numbers who graduate from high school ready to pursue bachelor's degrees.

However, the emphasis on the high school dropout rate masks the fact that the Latino community is also making progress in higher education. More disturbingly, media focus on high school dropouts and the limited public attention given to Latino higher education achievement reinforces two bad habits the reliance on the deficit model when talking about Latinos and the invisibility of Latino high achievers. To rely exclusively on the deficit model diverts attention from the real accomplishments that can be the foundation for national strategies to ensure Hispanic intellectual achievement at the highest levels.

Latinos in Higher Education Today

What are some of the characteristics of Latinos in higher education today? Many are first generation college students, are low-income, have a less academic high school education than their peers, and enroll in community colleges. They are concentrated geographically in a small number of states and institutions of higher education. Just over 50 percent of all Hispanics enrolled in higher education are in two states: California and Texas.

Further, over 40 percent of Latino students are enrolled in the approximately 220 institutions identified as Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI). A large number of Latinos in higher education are also non-traditional students. They are older, work, attend college part-time, and often are also caring for a family with all characteristics that influence the decisions Latino students make in participating in and completing higher education. If we want large numbers of Latino students to thrive in higher education, the question is, what kinds of advocacy and institutional leadership will help ensure their success?

Advocacy

Advocating for Latino educational achievement in higher education is critical. This work includes enhancing public understanding of the challenges Latinos face in accessing higher education and then addressing those challenges through supporting public policies that help Latino educational achievement and targeting resources toward the effort.

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“They are older, work, attend college part-time, and often are also caring for a family.”

Enhancing Public Understanding

Parents want what is best for their children, and Latino parents are no exception. In fact, the reason many Hispanic immigrants come to this country is for the opportunity to create a better life for themselves and their families. However, a myth exists, expressed in the media and by some educators and public leaders, that Hispanic parents do not value higher education. Why is this? The family is highly valued by Hispanics and remains a key influence even when making decisions about education. While some portion of the Hispanic population has been here since before the creation of the United States, there is today a significant number of immigrant and first-generation students who are unfamiliar with our education system and how to traverse it, and they look to their families for guidance.

But unlike other immigrant groups, many Hispanics come from their home countries with little formal education. Add their low literacy levels in both English and Spanish to their unfamiliarity with the U.S. education system, and many Latino parents are limited in their ability to guide their children to high school completion and to help them with higher education decisions. Students navigating the system alone while also tending to their current education keenly feel the absence of family and community members who have already mastered the process. As first-generation college-goers, many Latino youth must rely on formal sources of information to tell them how to prepare for and participate in higher education. Information available through the high school counselor's office or through occasional college fairs typically does not target parents. It is the young people who must inform their parents about, and then ask for their assistance in, the new enterprise.

The Educational Leadership effort ties in with El Centro's goal as described by its new motto: "Educando anuestra comunidad para el nuevo milenio" educating our community for the new millennium. Evidently, much remains to be done to enhance the processes of recruitment, selection, admission, registration, course offerings, and scheduling at El Centro. As our experience with the program grows, so do our ambitions and goals for it. The need, which has been identified in the Chicago Public Schools for more Latino educators and administrators, has not diminished.



Latinos Seeking College Degree, but Path is Often Fraught

Miguel Casimiro, a student at Northeastern Illinois University, looked at his biology grade and knew the time had come: He had to drop out. The "F" he got came after several years filled with frustrations. There was his commute, a 40-minute bus ride to classes from his job at his parent's corner store. He worked two other jobs, too, one sitting at a desk and greeting students at the school and another at a video game store. And the relationship he was in wasn't going well, and he was trying to figure out how to salvage it.

Urged by his parents and teachers, he'd worked hard to get into college, applying to 10 schools. Enrolling at Northeastern, he took part in a university support program, Proyecto Pa'Lante, geared toward Latino students who needed help getting a handle on the basics of academic life, like which classes count toward degrees. But the program was only for the first two years of school. After that, Casimiro was on his own. A few days after grades were posted in 2014, Casimiro and his mother sat with an administrator at Northeastern Illinois. They agreed: He'd drop out rather than pay for another semester he could barely afford. "I felt the help I was being offered wasn't the help I wanted," he says.

Pushed by parents and educators, more Hispanics than ever are attending college in the hopes of securing their place in the U.S. middle class. As they navigate the bureaucracy of higher education and grapple with paying tuition in an environment where, in many cases, they find few students, teachers and administrators look like them, some Latino students say higher education institutions happily take their money without working to ensure their needs are met.

The number of Hispanic students enrolled in college rose from 3.17 million in 2016 to 3.27 million in 2017, making them only one of two demographic groups that saw an increase in college attendance, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. That's nearly double the 1.4 million Latino students who attended college in 2000.

College enrollment overall has been on the decline for years. According to the National Student Clearinghouse, there were 19.2 million students enrolled on campuses for the fall 2015 semester. By 2019, enrollment had dropped to 17.5 million.

It used to be that colleges had a large pool of students to draw from. But retention rates among Hispanic students were "less than optimal," says Deborah Santiago, one of the co-founders of Excelencia in Education, a Washington-based advocacy group focused on Latino students. But neglecting Hispanic students is bad business, Santiago says. "You can't just enroll them if you're not going to help them graduate," she says. "The only growth population is Hispanics. So we're saying: You have got to focus on what it means to serve."

"Latino students say higher education institutions happily take their money without working to ensure their needs are met."



Paying for and surviving college

About 70% of Latino undergraduates are from families in the bottom half of wage-earners, according to federal data analyzed by the college lobbying group the American Council on Education. That's comparable to the nation's African American population, where nearly 75% of students come from the bottom half of earners. About two of every three white students come from the top half of earners.

Nearly half of Latino students are the first in their family to go to college, according to data analyzed by Excelencia. Just under half were eligible for federal Pell Grants, given to those in great financial need. By comparison, one in five white students was first-generation, and about one in three qualified for Pell Grants. About 22% of Hispanics over 25 have an associate degree or higher, compared to 40% of the general population. These financial strains can make surviving college especially difficult for Latino students.

Several times a week, Leslie Hurtado, 23, rushes to Northeastern Illinois' computer lab to snag one of the few Apple computers. If she doesn't get there first thing in the morning, she has to wait until after her classes have finished, and others have left the campus, when the computer lab isn't as busy. Hurtado, a Chicago native, says she wants to be a broadcast journalist and needs the video-editing software on these computers to do her homework because she can't afford to buy it for her personal computer. One night, long after classes, Hurtado sat in the computer lab, eyes half-closed from lack of sleep, stitching together footage of herself covering news on campus, including student protests of a talk by Sean Spicer, the former Trump White House spokesman. Her footage is usually shot on her iPhone because she says she can't borrow a professional camera from the college. She does her homework when she's not working as a teaching assistant.

It was an exhausting day. Hurtado had spent the early part of it at a government office trying to help her husband secure his legalization paperwork. He was one of the beneficiaries of the Obama-era Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program that offered immunity for two-year periods to immigrant children brought to this country without documentation.

Northeastern Illinois is the third college Hurtado has attended in five years. In 2014, she enrolled at Columbia College Chicago, attracted by promises of a diverse student body. But she says she often was the only Latino person in her class, and other students had parents who worked in the media industry, so they were more familiar with the field and, she felt, got more of the attention of the professors, many of them white. At colleges across the United States, about 73% of full-time professors are white; under 5% are Hispanic, while a little more than half of undergraduates nationally are white and just under 20% Hispanic.

Hurtado says she felt excluded. But even more troubling was the cost. Her father had urged her to go to college and offered to pay. But they didn't realize what the cost would be. When her first \$5,000 a semester tuition bill came, he couldn't pay. She dropped out midway through the semester. "I came in there with no knowledge of what I was going to get into," she says. Hurtado says she wishes she had known to save money while in high school to help pay for school. Now, she feels behind since she is still a few semesters from graduation. After dropping out of Columbia, Hurtado went to a community college briefly before transferring to Northeastern in the fall of 2018. She says she feels more at home there, where plenty of students look like her, and she reports for her classes on issues affecting Latinos.

"I came in there with no knowledge of what I was going to get into"

The tuition is also more palatable. The average tuition at Northeastern for an in-state student is roughly \$4,849. With her aid package, Hurtado's bill is closer to \$2,000. But Hurtado questions what Northeastern does with the money she and other students pay. Like why did the school invest in a dorm when most of the students are commuters? And she can't understand why money was spent to bring in Spicer, who drew protests. The Trump administration has taken a hard stance against immigration, a topic of great interest to many Northeastern students who are immigrants or have family members who are. She'd rather see money directed toward lowering her tuition or providing more resources to students.

She's not alone in asking such questions. In one of the spacious hallways where students pass, Miriam Garcia, 23, was selling stickers on a recent day for a fundraiser for Alpha Psi Lambda, her coed Greek life group. She started her studies in criminal justice in 2014 and hopes to finish next fall. Garcia says she knows people from her neighborhood who ended up in jail or faced other difficulties. She hopes a college degree will help secure her place in the world. But navigating financial aid each semester often leaves her flustered. Even small costs, like a mandatory bus fee, are galling when money is tight. She spends three days a week working at a dog daycare and says more help from the school would go a long way. "I don't even have a weekend," she says.

**"Nearly half of Latino students
are the first in their family to go to college"**

Universities are Increasing Hispanic

Most of Northeastern roughly 8,100 students commute to get to the North Side campus by bus or L via the Brown Line. The student population has fallen in recent years, but the percentage of Hispanic students has risen from 31% in 2010 to about 37% in 2018, the most recent year for which federal data is available. The university started as a teaching college in 1867 and in 1961 was relocated to its current location at 5500 N. St. Louis Ave., near Bryn Mawr and Kimball avenues.

In the 1960s, it largely served middle-class white families in the area, but that changed as more Hispanic students sought the same higher education opportunities. At one point in the early 1970s, Puerto Rican students pushed the school to better serve Hispanic students, which resulted in the creation of the academic support program Proyecto Pa'Lante. At first, that was an effort to expand Hispanic recruitment, according to a history of the program written by Maximino Torres, a counselor and coordinator with the program during its founding.

"The percentage of Hispanic students has risen from 31% in 2010 to about 37% in 2018"

Decades later, dozens of new students continued to enroll in the program. Many of them gathered on a recent Thursday in a lecture hall to discuss how to succeed at higher education. "When you go on a road trip, do you plan it out?" the instructor, Elizabeth Villarreal, asked. Making it to graduation is similar, she said. Students need a plan. They can take summer classes, for example, to speed the process.

Jorrin Andre, 18, was there. Later, he says he isn't sure how long he will stay at Northeastern. Andre, a first-generation college student, says he finds the academic pace at Northeastern a little slow. And living in the dorm feels like living in an empty building, he says, not exactly the vibrant student life his family wanted for him when he enrolled.

Pa'lante is one of the services directed at Hispanic students at Northeastern. The university also has El Centro, a satellite campus that offers programs for Latinos, including a "Festivals de FAFSA" workshop geared toward helping Spanish-speaking students and their families fill out federal forms for financial aid. There also are classes during nontraditional hours, evenings and weekends, for students whose jobs might keep them from attending daytime classes.

"In the 1960s, it largely served middle-class white families in the area, but that changed as more Hispanic students sought the same higher education opportunities."

Northeastern Illinois also has an administrator dedicated to helping undocumented students and a study space on the main campus, the Pedroso Center, aimed at helping students feel comfortable culturally and physically. There are plenty of couches to lounge on and also talks about Native American tribes and immigration issues. Despite these programs, only about one in five students who start at the university will graduate in six years. And the low tuition means the school can't offer the flashiest student services, like high-tech gyms, multiple computer labs or student cafeterias equipped with sushi chefs. But the school is doing what it can with limited resources, says Francisco X. Gaytan, an administrator. "We meet them where they are," Gaytan says. "If you truly believe that the United States is a place where you could get a leg up, then this is the prototypical American university. But you got to invest in it."





Cost of College for Latinos

The success rates look more encouraging at North Park University, a private college less than a 10-minute walk from Northeastern. Visitors to North Park see an ornate, black metallic gate, trees and rolling lawns. The brick buildings with Greek-style columns will be familiar to anyone who has seen a college on a TV show. It's also what some consider a traditional university in that a handful of North Park teams compete in the NCAA's Division 3 sports, including soccer, football, cross-country and women's rowing.

In the mid-1890s, the school was founded by the Evangelical Covenant Church, a Christian denomination for Swedish immigrants. Depending on the course material, classes were \$4 to \$7 a month, about \$120 to \$200 in today's money. It graduated its first four-year class in 1960.

Today, most North Park first- or second-year students live on campus, which is associated with increasing the percentage of students who return for sophomore year. It also reduces the time they have to spend off-campus and tends to mean they have more time to study. As at many colleges, the Hispanic student population at North Park is growing. In 2010, about 12% of the students were Hispanic. By 2018, that percentage more than doubled, to 30%.

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Nearly 60% of students who started at the university in 2010 graduated in six years. Nearly three in four freshmen return for sophomore year. Roughly two in five students come from nonwhite families. North Park costs about \$40,000 a year, including room and board, though many students qualify for grants, scholarships and other aid.

Pedro Garcia, who attended high school a few miles from North Park, applied because some of his friends had spoken highly of the university. At first, the cost stunned him. He had to scramble to scrounge money from friends and family to cover it. Garcia is a DACA recipient, meaning he can't access federal aid available to other students such as federal student loans or Pell Grants. He says she ended paying about \$10,000 a year his freshman year because of financial aid from the university and private scholarships. His second year cost about half as much because he was a resident adviser, which offset his housing costs.

Garcia says he wishes tuition was lower so he wouldn't have to work so hard to go there. The campus sometimes feels empty, he says, because so many students need a job to cover the cost. Garcia went from a high school where Hispanic students were the majority and he had one white friend to a campus where there are "a bunch of white people," he says, and relatively few non-white professors. "I have gotten used to being in situations where I am the only Hispanic," he says.

"Many students need a job to cover the cost."

Seek Federal Money for Latino Students

In the early 1990s, activists recognized similarities among schools serving Hispanic students and pushed for the designation, meant to help these schools get federal money. Many of these institutions have long been underfunded compared to others, in part because they charge low tuition, rely heavily on public funding and don't have large endowments. And with more institutions, including some that are large and well-funded, becoming Hispanic-serving institutions, more colleges and universities will be requesting help from that pool of federal money, meaning there will be less of it to go around. That competition will extend to recruiting students as well. Which means more schools are going to have to step up to attract the best students.

But many aren't prepared to do just that, experts say. These institutions aren't monolithic, and that's partially because many Hispanic serving institutions didn't start out intentionally to serve Latino students. They become Hispanic-serving often when the Latino population grows, says Vanessa Sansone, a professor at the University of Texas at San Antonio who studies these colleges.

The ones that do the best job of helping these students are mindful of the experiences Latino students bring with them, according to Sansone, and try to meet students in their communities and offer orientation materials in Spanish and English. Santiago, one of the co-founders of Excelencia, says more colleges need to make sure students have access to financial aid and to hire more diverse faculty because students are pushing for these changes. The organization rates universities for tracking students, helping ensure they graduate and creating a welcoming culture for Latino students.

Help Other Latinos Going Back to School

For Casimiro, now 26, giving up on his education was never an option. After he dropped out of Northeastern in 2014, he enrolled in a community college for a semester to pull up his grades.

He knew that wouldn't be enough to ensure his success. So when he enrolled at Northeastern again in 2015, he started a student group focused on the needs of Latino students. It had nine members initially and has grown to include 30 students. They'd discuss politics, watch movies and raise money for scholarships.

Casimiro loved his experience so much that he decided to continue at Northeastern after he graduated with a bachelor's degree in communications. He is now taking classes for his master's degree in the same subject.

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