

How To Better Serve Latino Students

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Deborah Santiago's parents always made clear she and her three siblings would go to college. But when she was a high school junior, her father, who served in the U.S. military, relocated to Spain along with the rest of the family — and suddenly, she had to navigate the college journey alone.

“I lived with a third cousin, and I stayed in the States while my parents went to Spain for three years,” Santiago recalled. “I had to figure it out: How do I apply? Where do I choose? How do I pay for it?”

Today she is chief executive officer of Excelencia in Education — an organization she co-founded in 2004 with Sarita Brown, now Excelencia's president. Santiago draws on her experience in self-sufficiency as she helps higher education institutions learn to better serve Latino students.

“The narrative in public policy was Latinos were high school dropouts, English language learners, and immigrants,” Santiago said as a guest on Strada's “Lessons Earned” podcast. “While we are more likely to be that than some other populations, the data were clear that the majority of Latino students are U.S.-born, the majority speak English, and the majority are graduating from high school.”

So Excelencia began looking at Hispanic-Serving Institutions, a federal designation that means institutions enroll a student body that is at least 25 percent Hispanic or Latino. These institutions are eligible to receive certain federal funding streams while others are not.

In 1995, there were 189 HSIs. By 2020, that number had grown to 569 — and it continues to rise.

“Some institutions became HSIs because of demography and geography and not intentionality and impact,” Santiago said. Excelencia wanted to recognize those schools that are truly serving Hispanic students and investing in their success, not just enrolling a high number of them.

Helping students easily identify which schools are committed to Latino student support and success is a key to the Seal of Excelencia, a national certification for higher education institutions Excelencia began in 2019.

Since then, 67 institutions have gone through the rigorous application process required to achieve the seal; 14 have received it. (More institutions will be awarded the seal next week as Excelencia names this year's recipients.)

Even the application process itself is a valuable exercise, Brown and Santiago said, as institutions must take a look at themselves and evaluate how well they know their student population and gather data on whether they are effectively investing in and supporting their success.

Some institutions that accepted the challenge of applying for the Seal of Excelencia discovered that they were doing many positive things on their campuses that they weren't aware of, while others found holes they wanted to fill going forward, Santiago explained.

One school told Excelencia during the application process that its honors college was representative of its student enrollment, but when leaders took a deeper look, they learned it was not and decided they needed to do better. Even institutions that earn the designation must periodically recertify, which encourages them to continually assess their progress and make additional improvements.

"This is about the long term, and this is about institutional transformation," Santiago said. "We think it'll be sustaining if it's done this way."

Here are five things Excelencia recommends institutions consider as they try to improve Hispanic students' success:

Understand your specific student population.

Hispanic students are not monolithic. The majority of Latino college students today are U.S.-born, native English speakers, Santiago said. They may not need English language learner services, but may need culturally relevant coaching and guidance, especially if they are the first in their families to go to college. Other students attending U.S. colleges and universities are coming from all over Latin America and Europe and have distinct needs on campus depending on the experience they've had before their arrival. Knowing who you're serving is the first step in building programs to support them.

Improve diversity and equity among your faculty.

Instructor representation on many campuses does not match or reflect the race, ethnicity, gender, or experience of students, making it difficult for students to connect to faculty and find mentors with whom they can identify. Santiago said many students she has talked to say they have never had a Hispanic faculty member outside of language instruction.

Listen to your students.

If invited to offer feedback, many students are eager to share what is working for them and what improvements could be made on campus.

Focus on wraparound services.

Some Latino students are parents, or have parents and siblings at home who are dependent on their success. In addition to academic support, they — like all students — may need medical and mental health services, childcare, or transportation support, as well as basic services like nutrition and shelter. Addressing their personal as well as academic needs is critical to keeping students in school and on track toward earning their degrees.

Look beyond college completion.

Students often need guidance to find internships and jobs in their chosen field, as they study and once they graduate, Santiago said. “It’s been fascinating to hear students talk about what a college education means for them because rarely is it just about getting that degree or that certificate,” she said. “They talk about what it means to give back to their parents and to their community, and that the education is the intermediary element they need — the stepping stone to the kind of civic leadership and the kind of jobs and careers and life they want.”