Reflections on the Declining Involvement of Hispanic Students in Higher Education: Evaluating the College Entrance/Graduation Rates Among Latinos at CSU Stanislaus

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Introduction: The option to attend college is a choice many high schools students look forward to making after high school graduation. Indeed, the idea of attending college is implanted long before students reach their senior year in high school. Attending college is an opportunity that is important to many different cultures, and especially to the Hispanic culture (though not necessarily within the Hispanic culture). In recent years there have been many legal and policy-making advances for equal opportunity education for all races, starting with the famous case of Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. Additionally, policies have been implemented on a national scale, most notably affirmative action, in order to ensure equal opportunity in the work place and access to higher education. The question is: are the nationwide Hispanic enrollment, retention, and graduation rates concurrent with CSU Stanislaus retention, enrollment, and graduation rates? And despite advances in Hispanic student enrollment at colleges and universities, could it still be the case that Hispanic graduation, college entrance and completion rates are actually dropping? I will focus my research on (1) showing what the problem may be; (2) some reasons for the problem; (3) what is being done to address the problem; and 4) what can be done to improve the situation for Hispanic students.

If there is a hidden issue regarding lower success rates among (a larger population of) Hispanic students, it needs be addressed in an aggressive manner. As teachers, future teachers, parents, neighbors, and citizens, we should be concerned to know why so many students in this group are not succeeding. Through research on the CSU Stanislaus Hispanic retention rate, I hope to answer the question of whether Hispanic college entrance, retention, and graduation rates are indeed declining. If this is shown to be the case, my focus will then shift to what can be done to improve the situation. If I do not find a problem reflected in declining success rates among Hispanic students, perhaps I will be able to demonstrate how CSU Stanislaus is succeeding in its efforts to create an environment in which the involvement of Hispanic students is maintained or perhaps even increased.

Rational: Despite recent advances in the higher education support system, Hispanic students are often derailed as they travel along the path of higher education. Many Hispanics are facing low expectations from teachers, poor understanding of how the college system works, and little or no adult support. The sample group I plan to focus on is the Hispanic student population of California State University Stanislaus. Stanislaus, Merced and San Joaquin counties are major sources of university students and are home to many Hispanic residents. CSU Stanislaus is proud of its designation as an Hispanic serving institution. The campus provides many opportunities to aid students, and appears to have higher than average retention and graduation rates amongst the Hispanic student population. I want to investigate whether these rates can be tied to special, successful support programs, and if so, how these programs might be modeled or enhanced for replication elsewhere.

Purpose Statement: My purpose in researching this topic is that I am a Hispanic student who is concerned about other students of my own ethnicity. I am striving to be a future teacher and I believe that I need to know what is affecting some of my possible future students who may be of Hispanic descent. This issue is important because despite past legal and legislative action taken to aid Hispanic students in going to college their involvement in higher education may be declining. Therefore, it is crucial to understand why Hispanic students may not be taking advantage of these resources to benefit themselves not only as individuals, but also as members of an ethnicity group. It is important that I examine the issue now before I begin to teach, so that I may prepare responsive measures in order to help my students succeed.
Methods: In my research I plan to research the enrollment, retention, and graduation rates of CSU Stanislaus students, and the services CSU Stanislaus is providing in support of Hispanic students. CSU Stanislaus already provides many opportunities to assist students. Two programs in particular will be a major focus of my research. Student retention is handled through Students Support Services (SSS). SSS has the purpose of catering to low-income families, first generation students, and disabled students. SSS is connected to a program called TRIO, which is a federally funded program authorized under the Higher Education Act of 1965, Title IV, Part A, Subpart II and administered by the U.S. Department of Education. There are over 1,200 colleges, universities, and community colleges participating in this program. The TRIO program is something many low-income families depend on. TRIO is also available to students from middle school through college. The Student Support Services Office at CSU Stanislaus provides students with academic advising, peer advising, and free workshops and tutorial assistance.

Another opportunity for CSU Stanislaus students is found in the Faculty Mentor Program. Through this program, faculty mentors are provided to students, along with educational and recreational programs. The target groups are first generation college students and disadvantaged students, which together encompass economically, educationally, or environmentally disadvantaged students. The Faculty Mentor Program information packet claims that this service increases the retention, academic success, and graduation rate of “underrepresented minority students” (Faculty). The Faculty Mentor Program also claims to increase faculty awareness about minority students and their needs.

Another program I plan to research is the Puente program. This important program is available at community colleges. The significance of this program for my research traces to the fact that it is available at Merced College, which is a community college from which many Hispanic students transfer to Stanislaus. The Puente project is an academic program that prepares students to gain an education by helping them to enroll in four-year colleges and universities, gain a college degree, and then give back to their community by returning as mentors or teachers.

There are three areas of service that the program provides to students. These are: teaching, counseling, and mentoring. Puente also provides training to staff and faculty of high schools and colleges on how to provide this program to their students. The Puente program is currently functioning in 56 community colleges and 36 high schools in California. One interesting feature of the Puente program is that it is open to all students. Still, the Puente program offers an inside look into what community colleges are doing to involve Hispanic students in the college systems. This may be a program four-year universities should look into, in particular to see if community colleges are doing a better job with Hispanic engagement in higher education. If so, how are they able to accomplish this? However, this focus may also raise a question about the relative treatment of community colleges and state colleges in the context of state funding. These are just some of the avenues that need to be explored, in trying to implement or maintain programs designed to address Hispanic student attrition.

It is also important that the programs at CSU Stanislaus be analyzed in order to show what limitations they have or are facing. One of the recent limitations CSU Stanislaus faces is a decline in funding of student-based programs. There are budget cuts to services that many Hispanic students would rely on. For example, the SSS program is limited and due to federal funding it is only available to fewer than 5 percent of eligible youth and adults (Students).

Not only do support programs have to deal with a lack of funding, but many of the qualifications they insist on leave out students who might eventually need some services to succeed in school. This can be an issue for middle class Hispanic students at CSU Stanislaus. The SSS program has certain qualifications that an applicant must meet in order to receive assistance. For example, they must fit in the low income category, have a financial aid application filed with the financial aid office, be eligible for Pell grants, have unmet financial need, and be a first-generation college student or have a disability. This is where the difficulty for middle class Hispanics arises. A middle class Hispanic may have an unmet financial need but still not qualified to receive these services.
(or they might only receive them if they can pay for them). There are Hispanic students who are not first generation and may have to work or have some assistance from their parents to attend college. Therefore, they may enter college only to eventually discover they need tutoring assistance they do not qualify for. Some of these Hispanic students may eventually become discouraged or unable to continue their education.

If there does seem to be a decrease in the retention rates of Hispanics, then recommendations should be made to address the situation. One recommendation has been made by Raymond Padilla. I am currently researching a study of his entitled Chicana/o College students: Focus on success. Padilla conducted this study with an emphasis on trying to increase Chicana/o success in college. He decided to focus on students who succeed in college by completing their degrees. He describes the college experience as a Black Box where the inputs and outputs are clear, but where the “in between” process of college is not sufficiently clear. He calls the college experience a black box because certain inputs go in and certain outputs come out (Padilla 3). The black box is something that students enter “with varying characteristics and experiences leaving the black box, either with a degree or as dropouts” (Padilla 1). He studied the expertise of students who have completed their degrees and were able to overcome the barriers that prevent many students from succeeding. The most significant expertise factors he emphasizes are theoretical and heuristic knowledge relevant to negotiating barriers (Padilla 1).

It is not only important to see if Hispanic students are dropping out, but also to discern how the term “drop out” is defined. This is a difficult term to define because there are numerous explanations for why a Hispanic student might leave college, whether it be for financial, personal, or academic reasons. Some students may not even fall into this category because they may enter college with the intention of never completing and for them “dropping out” is part of their original plan (Noel, 2). Drop out rates might also be skewed because some students may take a leave of absence and then continue their education later on, perhaps even at another school; it is not uncommon (though surely inappropriate) for these students to be classed as dropouts. A source I found helpful in defining the term ‘dropout’ -- and which also offers new perspective on how to reduce the drop out rate -- is Lee Noel’s book Reducing the Dropout Rate.

If there is a drop in the college participation rates of Hispanics, it is important not only to develop step by step plans or programs that will help students, but also to find a new way of thinking about the phenomenon of student dropout that can be implemented in a variety of settings (Tinto, 4). It is important for educators to acknowledge the potential for student dropout and to reflect on why it might occur; it should not just be a problem for students to deal with on their own.

Moreover, I will argue that retention should not be the ultimate goal of institutional action, though it may be a desirable outcome of institutional efforts. Instead, institutions and students would be better served if a concern for the education of students, their social and intellectual growth, in particular, were the guiding principle of institutional action. When that goal is achieved, enhanced student retention will naturally follow (Tinto, 4).

Once we establish whether or not Hispanic student involvement is dropping, the issue of how students are recruited and retained must be examined. Two studies conducted by New Directions for Institutional Research focus on these issues. The first is “Evaluating Student Recruitment and Retention Programs,” edited by Don Hossler. This study offers an evaluation of retention programs and suggestions for “establishing an evaluation oriented student information system” (Hossler, 1-3). Hossler’s study goes into detail in its analysis of how financial aid affects recruitment and retention, which is a major issue facing economically disadvantaged Hispanic students. Not only does Hossler evaluate these programs, but he also gives advice on how to track the academic progress of students. He also provides information on students who could not be retained and discusses why they ended up leaving college.

The second study is “Understanding the College Choice of Disadvantaged Students”, edited by Alberto F. Cabrera & Steven M. La Nasa. This study analyzes how disadvantaged students and families choose a college. Not only does it deal with students and how their disadvantages may hinder them from
attending college, but it also discusses how their parents’ education level can affect them while in college or while making the decision to go to college. It also describes programs a college can provide that tend to encourage a continuing engagement of the college experience by this group of students. The focus of this study is addressed primarily to college administrators and enrollment management professionals (Cabrera & Steven, 1-3).

In conclusion, I find the issue of Hispanic involvement in higher education very important to the study of ethnic diversity at CSU Stanislaus, given its designation as an Hispanic-serving institution. This issue is also be important to other state universities and colleges in California, since California has a very large Hispanic population. It is vitally important that we find ways to engage this increasing population of students into the higher education system. Their involvement is not only beneficial to their own ethnicity group, but it helps them develop their ability to give back to their community and country. In the end, we must see that every child from every race is important and should be encouraged to receive a higher education.