

Texas board seeks to close gap in Latinos attending college

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State higher education officials are developing a plan to address the lagging college attendance of Latinos and to close the gap within that group – where men are behind.

"Latino males are vanishing from our higher education ranks," said Victor Saenz, an assistant professor of education administration at the [University of Texas](#). "Our culture has a certain motivation to work right away to contribute to the family."

According to the [Texas](#) Higher Education Coordinating Board's most recent "Closing the Gaps by 2015" report, Hispanics are the least likely group to attend college and are "well below" meeting improvement goals.

Four percent of the state's Hispanic population participates in higher education, compared with 5.6 percent of blacks and 5.5 percent of whites. Improving that figure is vital to the state's economic health, state officials say, because Latinos are rapidly becoming the majority in Texas public schools.

State figures point to a second gap: In 2008, about 39 percent of Latino graduates earning bachelor's or associate's degrees were men: 15,879, compared with 24,757 women. Across all races, male graduates have been lagging behind women for years.

Later this month, the higher education board will consider approving the plan to improve Latino performance. Board members are considering ideas like starting a pilot program to increase the number of counselors at certain high schools, reaching out to more Spanish-speaking parents and expanding "bridge programs" to prepare students the summer before they begin college.

Personal sacrifice

According to a report by Saenz, "sacrificing the individual over the needs of the family is commonplace" among Hispanic males. Other challenges, he notes, are a greater likelihood of being labeled at-risk or placed in special education and higher high school dropout rates.

Hispanic children in Texas public schools have higher poverty rates than white or black students. That adds pressure to work to support family at home or even children of their own.

"When you're in a low-income situation, there's a real trade-off if they can make money right away," said Deborah Santiago, vice president for policy at Excelencia in Education, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization focused on improving college attendance.

In addition, many Hispanics are leery of taking out loans, she said.

While traditional stereotypes hold that a culture of "machismo" would favor men going to college, it is women who are advancing more. However, that doesn't mean they don't face challenges of their own.

The National Women's Law Center and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund recently released a report noting that Hispanic women are held back by many factors, including the pressure to become caretakers for younger siblings and elderly family members and having the highest teen pregnancy rates of any group. They also face double discrimination based on ethnicity and gender.

Staying near home

And Santiago points out that heavy emphasis on family means students will often opt to live at home and attend community college rather than attend a university that is farther away.

Latinos are more likely to begin at community college, but those who do have a much lower chance of finishing their degrees than students who begin in universities. Experts say that's often because they don't feel as connected to college life.

According to a recent Pew Hispanic Center survey, 88 percent of Hispanics believe a college education is important. But a separate Pew study shows about 40 percent of Latinos who graduate from high school enroll in college, which doesn't mean they graduate.

Alberto Lara, who graduated from Townview Magnet last year, is taking four courses at El Centro College while working more than 40 hours a week as an assistant manager at [Burger King](#). He helps support his father, who is on disability, and his younger sister.

He would like to transfer to a university and become a bank examiner, but his workload is a burden.

"It has affected my grades. I'm usually too tired, and I'm always taking naps in classes," Lara said. "I think I do need to cut my hours. But right now this is what I have to do."

Ernesto Cardoso, 20, is taking courses at Mountain View College and is trying to get out of his remedial math course to move into college-level math. He took a year off after high school and works at Walgreens.

"I don't think I'll drop out unless there's like a death in the family or I have to be the remaining caregiver," said Cardoso, whose parents are immigrants from Mexico who never finished middle school. "Or just if I don't want to go anymore."