

## Emerging Hispanic-Serving Institutions Must Adapt to Serve Latino Students, Report Says

by Arelis Hernandez, February 5, 2010

Dozens of schools will qualify for “Hispanic-serving institution” (HSI) status in the coming years, but those colleges and universities must adapt their practices and policies to better serve Latino students, according to a report to be released Monday by the educational nonprofit organization Excelencia in Education.

In the report, “Emerging HSIs: Serving Latino Students,” Excelencia highlighted 176 “emerging” HSIs in 20 states that had Hispanic undergraduate full-time enrollment between 12 and 24 percent in the 2006-07 school year. The report, which includes survey responses and contributions from many institutions, demonstrates that, for states and academic entities, enrolling and graduating Hispanic students is a priority.

“I truly believe that HSIs have an extraordinary opportunity to lead,” said Dr. Margarita Benitez, director of higher education at the Washington-based think tank Education Trust during a briefing on Capitol Hill. “You don’t have to wait to reach 25 percent to ask yourself what you can do for Hispanic students.”

HSIs, which are eligible to compete for Title V federal funds, are defined as academic institutions that have 25 percent or more Hispanic enrollment. The Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) lists 225 institutions as HSIs.

Deborah Santiago, vice president of policy and research at Excelencia and co-author of the report, said the HSI designation is growing. The highest concentration of emerging schools were located in densely-populated states like California and Texas, but an unanticipated number of them appeared in Kansas, Indiana, Arkansas, Oregon and Utah.

Nearly 44 percent of emerging HSIs are community colleges, and private colleges occupied a significant share at 36 percent. Public four-year institutions lagged behind, representing just a fifth of all emerging HSIs.

But the HSI label has its critics. Government criteria do not hold schools accountable on Hispanic retention or graduation completion, and, as a result, the critical mass theory that contends that institutions change to accommodate the emerging quarter of their population doesn’t seem to hold true, Hispanic education advocates argue.

Some institutions, however, shy away from the HSI status for fear of developing a stigma that may send an exclusionary message to non-Hispanic students.

“It is not a given, you can’t assume that just because there are lots of Hispanic students that they are also graduating them,” Santiago said, who also blogs for Diverse. “It’s got to be more than access. It’s about retaining and completing their degrees. There is a difference between enrolling and serving.”

Of these emerging Hispanic-serving institutions, 50 percent said they targeted recruitment toward the demographic to increase enrollment. However, only 30 percent said they provided support services to those same students. About 17 percent of surveyed schools said Latino students do not graduate at the same rate as other students, while 40 percent either didn’t know or did not report those numbers.

“It’s not about the numbers; it’s the mindset,” said Juan Sepúlveda, director of the White House Initiative on Education Excellence for Hispanic Americans, which is housed in the U.S. Department of Education.

Sepúlveda said that, without prioritizing Latino student interests in higher education, the U.S. cannot reasonably expect to reach President Barack Obama’s goal of producing the greatest number of college graduates in the world by 2020.

Santiago highlighted four institutions, two private and two public, that went beyond just recruiting and enrolling Latinos to making investments in retaining and graduating them.

“None of these institutions felt serving Latino students was a detriment to them,” Santiago said. “Being targeted and intentional in your outreach doesn’t mean you are being exclusionary.”

The successes of Loyola Marymount University (LMU), Texas State University at San Marcos, Palm Beach State College in Florida, and Metropolitan State College in Colorado, Santiago said, are drawn from the visionary leadership at each school that made intentional efforts to change the mindset of the college or university.

Luis Torres, of Metropolitan State College in Colorado, said President Stephen Jordan established an HSI task force to offer recommendations for reaching their goals.

Texas State University in San Marcos, which is not a heavily Latino community, recruited students from South Texas but coupled that effort with hiring culturally-competent faculty to facilitate substantive growth. LMU, according to the report, embraces Latino students because they are the population surrounding the Los Angeles institution.

“They are content at 20 percent; it’s not just about bumping up numbers to get more money,” Santiago explained. “It’s also [a chance] to show they are responsible members of the community.”

Santiago said the report is part of Excelencia’s campaign to include degree completion to higher education’s conversation about access through examples of proven success.

“This is a campaign to look at Latino students from an asset model instead of a deficit model,” she said. “We are highlighting what is working and what can be replicated.”