

# Inside Higher Ed

## The Emerging Hispanic-Serving Institution February 5, 2010

WASHINGTON – The number of institutions officially recognized by the federal government as “Hispanic serving” is set to rise dramatically in the coming years, according to a comprehensive study of Latino enrollment in higher education.

In the 1980s, the designation Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) was created by the federal government to direct funding to nonprofit colleges where at least 25 percent of the full-time-equivalent students are Latino. On Thursday, Excelencia in Education, an advocacy group for Latino students, released a report identifying the growing number of institutions that do not meet the HSI enrollment threshold of 25 percent but that fit its definition of “emerging HSIs” – meaning that they “are within the critical mass range of 15-24 percent and have the potential to become HSIs in the next few years.”

Using data federal data from 2006-7, the report states that there were, at that point, 265 HSIs; another 176 institutions were on the brink of becoming HSIs and met its definition of “emerging.”

“Emerging” HSIs were located in 20 states. The highest concentration of these institutions was in California, which had 52, followed by Texas, which had 42. Still, Deborah Santiago, the report's author and vice president for policy and research at Excelencia, said at a discussion accompanying the report's release on Capitol Hill that these institutions are “not just in those places where we expect to see Latinos.” For instance, Arkansas, Indiana, Kansas, Oregon and Utah are among the states that had one such institution.

The largest share -- 44 percent -- of the “emerging” HSIs were public community colleges. Private colleges and universities represented the second largest sector, with 31 percent. Public four-year institutions represented 20 percent, and private two-year institutions represented 5 percent.

“Call me parochial here, but I found it surprising that so many private colleges are emerging HSIs,” said Luis Torres, deputy provost for academic affairs at Metropolitan State College of Denver, an emerging HSI featured in the report. “When one thinks of a rather stereotypical view of Hispanics, it's that we are in the public colleges. I found it very surprising and telling and interesting. That gives us a lot of opportunities.”

Among the prominent private institutions on the list are Loyola Marymount University, in Los Angeles, with 19.7 percent Latino enrollment, and the University of Miami with 22.1 percent. A significant number of the privates are religiously affiliated institutions, primarily (but not entirely) Roman Catholic.

In the public sector, a number of flagship institutions are also nearing HSI status. The University of California at Los Angeles, for example, has 15 percent Latino enrollment, and the University of Texas at Austin has 17.2 percent.

Some of the “emerging” HSIs identified in the report may already have reached the 25 percent threshold, due to the significant numbers of students who choose not to self-identify as Latino. At Palm Beach Community College's Lake Worth campus, for instance, the report notes that administrators were certain that the college was well beyond the 25 percent threshold, even though it had an official Latino enrollment of 16.5 percent.

“A high percentage of students chose not to provide information about their ethnicity, and as administrators reviewed student rosters, it was clear that many of these students were potentially Latino (inferred from their last names),” the report reads. “In the college's internal analysis, staff attributed this phenomenon to a potential stigma of identifying as Hispanic, being undocumented, and/or the institutional requirement that a student whose first language was not English must be tested for language fluency.”

Santiago estimated that at least 15 of the 67 institutions that had Latino enrollments between 20 and 24 percent “could be an HSI today” if their students properly self-identified without fear.

Still, Santiago and others at the discussion argued that institutions should not wait until they reach the 25 percent threshold to start serving the needs of Hispanic students. Torres, for example, noted that Metro State has publicly stated its ambition of becoming an HSI by 2015. It created a task force in 2007, when its percentage of Latino students was 13 percent, to recommend how the college could reach out and appeal to Hispanics in the area.

Torres said he would like to see Congress pass legislation that would give “emerging” HSIs planning grants so that they could intentionally grow into HSIs with ease.

Juan Sepulveda, director of the White House Initiative for Excellence in Hispanic Education, said the Department of Education is “open to the idea” but that it would need some time to consider the merits of awarding such grants. Still, he acknowledged the importance of supporting HSIs, especially if there is hope of reaching President Obama’s goal of the United States having the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020.

“The president is a very smart person,” Sepulveda said. “Secretary Arne Duncan is a really smart person. Undersecretary Martha Kanter.... They can all count. They know it’s impossible for us to reach this goal without the Hispanic community really bumping up attainment-wise.”

— David Moltz