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Success of Hispanic College Students Is Key for Florida

MIAMI – The level of Florida’s economic competitiveness over the long term will depend on the degree of preparation of Hispanic university students, according to a report released Tuesday at Miami Dade College.

The state’s economic health, in the near term, and the strengthening of human capital will, in large measure, rest on the academic success of Latino college students, MDC president Eduardo Padron said.

Padron, along with several experts, presented at a press conference the report entitled “Florida Policy Options to Accelerate Latino Student Success in Higher Education.”

This third report prepared by the Washington-based organization Excelencia in Education! emphasizes that Florida needs a more educated active population to consolidate itself as an economically competitive state.

Therefore, the low academic achievement of Hispanics in Florida is of concern, with just 23 percent of Latinos over age 25 having a bachelor’s degree or higher in 2008.

“Without concerted statewide efforts it will continue to be difficult to substantially expand opportunities to accelerate higher education attainment and workforce preparation,” the report says.

In addition, the experts emphasized the importance of students and their parents understanding the benefits that accrue over the long term from higher education and the preparation to get access to it.

Among the recommendations made to stimulate and promote greater activity and academic presence of Florida Hispanics in higher education are meetings with lawmakers and public officials, as well as with university leaders.

Hispanics in 2007 represented 23 percent of Florida’s school-age population and 22 percent of high school graduates, according to figures from the Pew Hispanic Center.

Only 78 percent of Florida Hispanics have a high school diploma or its equivalent, compared with 84 percent of blacks and 90 percent of non-Hispanic whites.

The report predicts that, in 2018, whites will account for 40 percent of the students in Florida's K-12 schools, down from 56 percent now, while the proportion of Hispanic students will grow from 21 percent to 36 percent.

With regard to financial assistance, higher education is currently less affordable all over the country, and Florida is no exception, although in this state there is generally scanty awareness among most Latinos of the various options for securing financial aid.

At the press conference, the participants emphasized the fact that Latinos are the fastest-growing ethnic group in Florida, although the level of academic achievement of this group in the state is relatively low.

Despite that, the academic results in Florida have improved with regard to the number of students who graduate and receive diplomas.

In 2008, 53 percent of university students completed their studies and obtained their diplomas within six years. Broken down by group: 57 percent of non-Hispanic whites completed their studies, 44 percent of blacks and 49 percent of Hispanics.

The manner in which Florida's demographic environment is changing confirms that the impact of the Latino population on the state's labor force and on its economic prosperity will continue growing in importance, and thus it is essential to offer clear access and effective educational programs to Hispanics and other communities that are less well represented at higher educational institutions. EFE