

Workforce

Latinos are one of the youngest and fastest-growing populations in the United States and will play a critical role in the nation's workforce, economic competitiveness, and civic future. Institutions serving Latino students, particularly Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs)¹, are essential to preparing students for careers in an evolving economy increasingly shaped by technology, artificial intelligence (AI), and growing workforce demands. To support Latino, and all, students' educational pursuits and maximize their contributions to the workforce and economy, higher education has a responsibility to connect students with career-aligned learning opportunities and meet the needs of the competitive workforce. We prioritize:

- **Expanding Work-Based Learning:** *Strengthening partnerships between colleges and employers to align learning with workforce needs through hands-on experiences, internships, apprenticeships, and career-ready credentials that lead to high-quality jobs with economic mobility.*
- **Creating Clear Pathways to Workforce Success:** *Ensuring connectivity between educational programs and careers so students leave higher education with credentials that translate to job opportunities and economic advancement.*
- **Advancing Workforce Readiness Through AI and Digital Innovation:** *Supporting institutions in responsibly integrating AI literacy and emerging technologies into teaching, learning, advising, and workforce preparation to ensure Latino, and all, students are prepared for an evolving economy.*

How can federal and state policy ensure access to excellence by aligning higher education and economic opportunity?

1. **Support work-based learning opportunities for students by leveraging existing federal programs, such as Federal Work-Study.**

Work-based learning opportunities such as internships, apprenticeships, undergraduate research, and other forms of experiential learning support student success during and after postsecondary education, but are often unpaid opportunities. Federal programs such as Federal Work-Study can be leveraged to expand access to paid experiential learning opportunities and support institutions as they integrate career-connected learning into academic programs and student support services. Increasing investments in existing federal programs can help Latino, and all, students participate in applied learning opportunities that strengthen post-completion success.

Increasing funding to already existing federal programs can help Latino students gain these experiences outside the classroom. Latino students are already active participants in the workforce. Of Latino students who work, 56 percent of those students work more than 30 hours, and in some cases, overtime.² However, internships are often unpaid, and Latinos are both underrepresented in internships overall and overrepresented in unpaid internships. While Latinos made up seven percent of recent graduates in a 2023 survey, they made up eight percent of students who did not have an internship and seven percent of those in an unpaid internship.³ By leveraging existing funding, Latinos won't have to choose between earning a paycheck and getting an applied learning experience.

Work-based learning is important for competitive entry into the workforce and can help Latino students prepare for the workforce while in college. Almost half of Latino students are first-generation students and might be the first in their families to enter their profession. They may not have built-in social networks, but internships and on-the-job learning can help them build those networks and navigate new workplaces. Even with a degree, Latinos are still less likely to be employed in the highest-paying occupations. In 2023, only 26% of Latinos were in management and professional jobs, compared to 59% of Asians, 44% of Whites, and 36% of African Americans.⁴ Work-based learning opportunities can ensure students enter prepared for the competitive workforce.

¹ HSIs are defined in federal legislation as accredited, degree-granting public or private nonprofit institutions of higher education with 25% or more total undergraduate Hispanic full-time equivalent (FTE) student enrollment.

² Excelencia in Education analysis of U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019-20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study

³ National Association of Colleges and Employees. (August 2022). *The Class Of 2023: Inequity Continues to Underpin Internship Participation and Pay Status*. Bethlehem, PA: National Association of Colleges and Employees.

⁴ Excelencia in Education analysis of Labor force characteristics by race and ethnicity, 2023. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

2. *Make workforce development an allowable activity for federal Title V grants to support institutions in creating workforce programs.*

The Title V program, the Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) program, can target resources to institutions enrolling large numbers of Latino students and can be updated to include workforce preparation. There are 16 allowable activities in Title V to improve institutional capacity, but none explicitly focus on workforce development. As workforce readiness and economic mobility become increasingly central to higher education, Title V should reflect the critical role HSIs play in preparing Latino, and all, students for workforce success.

HSIs enroll the overwhelming majority of Latinos in higher education. [Excelencia's research](#) highlights that while HSIs are essential to advancing Latino, and all, students' economic mobility, many institutions lack the resources to fully integrate workforce preparation into the student experience.⁵ Expanding Title V allowable activities to include workforce readiness and career-connected learning would help HSIs strengthen employer partnerships, expand paid experiential learning opportunities, enhance career services, and prepare students for evolving workforce needs.

3. *Incentivize engagement between employers and the institutions serving Latino, and, all students.*

To best prepare Latino, and all, students for the workforce, institutions need to know their community and national workforce demands. At the same time, employers are looking to diversify so their employees better reflect the national population. The pipeline between these two needs can be improved. One way is through coordination between HSIs, which graduate two-thirds of Latino graduates, and employers committed to diversifying their employee base. The 631 HSIs represent 21% of all colleges and universities but enroll 65% of Latino, and 32% of all undergraduates, and graduate 67% of Latino, and 32% of all undergraduates earning a degree in the U.S.⁶ Employers can inform HSIs' workforce preparation, and institutions can cultivate a prepared group of graduates from all backgrounds.

Just as Latino students attend school close to home, Latino graduates stay close to their institution after graduating. Among Latino graduates, 70 percent were employed in the same state as their bachelor's degree institution, the highest of all racial/ethnic groups (overall, 62% of students stay in-state).⁷ As states and regions face evolving workforce demands, institutions of higher education play a critical role in developing local talent and connecting graduates to in-demand careers.

States and the federal government have workforce preparation programs in place that provide grants or funding to institutions. By providing priority or additional funding for those employers partnering with HSIs, employers can be incentivized to partner with new institutions and reach a larger number of Latino students.

4. *Create targeted funding to prepare students and graduates in using AI and workforce readiness.*

As artificial intelligence (AI) and emerging technologies continue to transform the workforce, institutions must be equipped to prepare Latino, and all, students for an evolving economy. Latinos are central to the future of the nation's AI-enabled workforce as a young and rapidly growing population whose participation in the education-to-workforce pipeline will increasingly shape the country's economic competitiveness and innovation capacity. Federal and state policymakers should support institutions with financial incentives in integrating AI literacy and emerging technologies into workforce preparation, student support, and career-connected learning. Investments in institutional capacity, faculty development, technology infrastructure, and career-connected learning can help ensure students are prepared to navigate a rapidly changing labor market.

[Excelencia's research](#) highlights that institutions serving Latino students are already contributing significantly to the nation's workforce pipeline, particularly in high-demand STEAM fields. Institutions play a

⁵ Carrillo Villalobos, A., Labandera, E., & Santiago, D. (January 2026). Post-Completion Success: How Leading HSIs Are Transforming Career Readiness. Washington, D.C.: Excelencia in Education.

⁶Excelencia in Education analysis of U.S. Department of Education, NCES, IPEDS, 1994-2024 Fall Enrollment, Institutional Characteristics, and Completions Surveys.

⁷ Excelencia in Education analysis of U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016/20 Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B:16/20).

key role in preparing talent needed for the future economy. For example, **Arizona State University** expanded student engagement with career readiness resources through digital career tools that increased job applications, career services participation, and usage of AI-assisted résumé and interview platforms. Similarly, **Miami Dade College's** AI Clinics provide Latino-serving communities with hands-on AI training and industry-recognized credentials through partnerships designed to expand access to emerging technologies.⁸ At the same time, institutions must approach AI intentionally to strengthen student success rather than widen existing disparities. [Excelencia's research](#) also highlights the need for stronger institutional leadership, coordinated policies, and faculty support to effectively prepare students to use AI in the workforce.⁹

Institutions serving Latino, and, all students are not only preparing graduates for the workforce; they are helping to sustain local communities and regional economies. Supporting institutions in building AI and digital readiness capacity can strengthen workforce competitiveness, economic mobility, and opportunity for Latino, and all, students while helping meet national and regional workforce needs.

⁸ Yan, R., Cuellarsola, L., & Santiago, D. (2026). *Finding Your Workforce: Linking College Completion with U.S. Workforce Needs in Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM)*. Washington, D.C.: Excelencia in Education.

⁹ Excelencia in Education. (2026). *How Institutions Can Use AI to Intentionally Serve Latino, and All, Students*. Washington, D.C.: Excelencia in Education.