

Now is a pivotal moment for our country, our students, and our institutions of higher education. Higher education remains a key driver of economic growth, civic engagement, and social mobility. For Latino students—and all students—to achieve economic prosperity, federal, state, and institutional policies must center on their realities: their needs, educational pathways, and contributions to the country's workforce and economy.

Higher education must be a vehicle for economic mobility, not a hurdle. *Excelencia* in Education remains committed to advancing policy solutions that align institutional practices, public investments, and student realities to ensure Latino, and all, students can succeed.

Excelencia in Education leads a national network of results-oriented educators and policymakers to tap the talents of the Latino community and address the U.S. economy's needs for a highly educated workforce and engaged civic leaders. Our policy priorities are grounded in the strengths and opportunities of our network, the Latino community, and evidence-based practices accelerating Latino student success while increasing all student success.

Our priority is access to excellence for Latino, and all, students.

Who is *Excelencia* in Education?

Excelencia in Education's mission is to accelerate Latino student success, while increasing all student success, in higher education by:

- **Leadership:** Organizing a network of institutions and leaders with the common cause of Latino student success to inform and compel action;
 - *Excelencia*'s leadership efforts include a [network](#) of over 141 postsecondary leaders, committed to Ensuring America's Future by making our country stronger with the talents, skills, and contributions of Latino, and all, college graduates. In this network, 45 institutions are Seal-certified, going beyond enrollment to intentionally SERVE Latino students. *Excelencia*'s policy agenda focuses on scaling the work of these institutions in four priority areas.
- **Data:** Providing credible data-driven analysis on issues in higher education with a Latino lens; and
- **Practice:** Promoting higher education policies and institutional practices that increase Latino college readiness and completion, which are more inclusive of a post-traditional population.

***Excelencia* in Education's Policy Priorities: 2026**

Excelencia's policy agenda advocates for accelerating Latino student success, while increasing all student success, to close gaps in degree attainment based on the current profile of Latinos in higher education. Four policy issues were continually raised among leading institutions committed to supporting Latino student success: 1) **workforce**, 2) **institutional capacity**, 3) **college affordability**, and 4) **retention and transfer**.

Guiding Principles

The following frame is *Excelencia*'s approach to reassessing current federal policies using a Latino lens.

- Efficiency in serving traditional students today can limit effectiveness in serving a majority of students tomorrow (post-traditional students), and those students are increasingly Latino.
- Prioritizing access and success for first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students—especially Latinos—is important while we increase educational opportunities for all students.
- Institutions that have a concentration of Latinos must transform to intentionally serve the needs of the students they enroll.

Policy Pillars: To accelerate Latino student success, policymakers should address workforce preparation, institutional capacity, college affordability, and retention and transfer strategies and practices.

Workforce: Ensuring access to excellence by aligning higher education and economic opportunity.

Latinos are one of the youngest and fastest-growing populations in the U.S. To support their 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 coursework with employment, provide hands-on experiences, internships, apprenticeships, and career-ready credentials that lead to high-quality jobs with livable wages.
- **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.

Institutional Capacity: Improving access to excellence by investing in institutions intentionally serving.

Latino, and all, students. *Institutions serving a growing share of Latino students also serve students from many backgrounds and situations, and supporting the institution will increase the educational and economic success for all learners and their communities. To deliver excellent education, institutions must invest in programs and policies that enhance student access, completion, and workforce readiness. We prioritize:*

- **Sustaining and Scaling Key Investments:** Continued and impactful investment in competitive federal funding programs for institutional capacity to retain critical progress in Latino student success at institutions that have historically been underfunded, and ensure long-term dedication and improvement in academic quality for all of their students.
- **Investing in Quality Higher Education:** Fair and representative investment by states and the federal government in institutions that educate a significant and growing share of Latino students and take responsibility for expanding their impact and building sustainable support systems for student success.

College Affordability: Expanding access to excellence without unmanageable debt. *Latino students leverage cost-saving measures to make college more affordable (e.g., working while enrolled, enrolling part-time, mixing their enrollment, etc.), and they balance many financial decisions when pursuing a college education—supporting their families, covering transportation costs, and weighing the opportunity cost of lost wages. Policy solutions and institutional practices must reduce prices and other financial barriers to ensure students can earn a degree without incurring unmanageable debt. We prioritize:*

- **Increasing Transparent Financial Literacy:** Expanding efforts by states, institutions, and other key actors to provide resources and tools so that students and families fully understand the real costs of college and the financial resources available to them.
- **Fostering Low-Debt Education:** Advocating for policies that prioritize need-based grants over loans and include basic needs—such as childcare, food, transportation and housing—within the true cost of attendance.
- **Lowering the Price of Education:** Supporting and incentivizing institutions to lower prices and contain costs to students while investing in academic excellence.

Retention and Transfer: Facilitating access to excellence through a variety of educational pathways.

Latino students fit a post-traditional learner profile and are more likely to take multiple paths through higher education, often balancing work, family, and financial responsibilities. Students' decisions to pause or change institutions are typically driven by life circumstances, not academic ability. Policy must support seamless transitions and degree completion. We prioritize:

- **Strengthening Transfer Pathways:** Expanding credit transfer agreements and articulation policies that ensure students don't lose time or credits when transitioning between institutions.
- **Supporting Proactive Student Support Systems:** Encouraging institutions to adopt advising, coaching, and financial aid structures that recognize the realities of Latino students and provide tailored support.

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.

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).

[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 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.

Institutional Capacity

Institutions serving a growing share of Latino students also serve students from many backgrounds and situations, and supporting the institution will increase the educational and economic success for all learners and their communities. To deliver excellent education, institutions must invest in programs and policies that enhance student access, completion, and workforce readiness. We prioritize:

- **Sustaining and Scaling Key Investments:** *Continued and impactful investment in competitive federal funding programs for institutional capacity to retain critical progress in Latino student success at institutions that have historically been underfunded, and ensure long-term dedication and improvement in academic quality for all of their students.*
- **Investing in Quality Higher Education:** *Fair and representative investment by states and the federal government in institutions that educate a significant and growing share of Latino students and take responsibility for expanding their impact and building sustainable support systems for student success.*

How can policy help improve access to excellence by investing in institutions intentionally serving Latino, and all, students?

1. **Ensure federal institutional capacity funding approved by Congress continues to serve institutions with low educational and general expenditures, high concentrations of students with financial need, and a demonstrated commitment to serving Latino, and all, students.**

The purpose of the Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions program legislated in 1992 of the Higher Education Act is to meet a clear national need—ensuring that institutions with low educational and general expenditures, a high enrollment of needy students, and disproportionately enrolling Latinos students (a young, fast-growing, significantly underrepresented population) can fairly compete for limited federal funds to strengthen their institutional capacity to offer access to a quality education.

Targeted investments in this group of institutions, including HSIs, are critical to expanding pathways into high-demand, high-wage fields because of the institutions' low educational and general expenditures, combined with their disproportionate enrollment of low-income, first-generation and Hispanic students. *Excelencia's* research on HSI grant participation underscores that federal HSI grant programs have functioned as a "significant mechanism" for institutions to increase capacity to serve Latino, and all, students, even as competition has increased.

In FY26, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) consolidated funding competitions for eligible HSIs and other Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) with the Strengthening Institutions Program (SIP). As a result, institutions that were previously eligible to compete within programs must now compete for the same limited pool of institutional capacity-building funds. In FY25, over 500 HSIs were eligible to apply for Title V funds.¹⁰ In FY26, over 1,400 institutions, including HSIs and other MSIs, were eligible to apply for Title III, Part A funding.¹¹ With limited access to information, networks, and career-aligned experiences, Latino, and all, post-traditional students benefit from institutional efforts to modernize technology, strengthen teaching and support systems, and link education to workforce opportunities.

Federal higher education policy has, over time, financially invested in institutions that expand opportunity—especially those with limited resources serving high-need students. Funding must continue to directly serve this key group of institutions to ensure Latino, and all, students have access to high-quality education and pathways to economic mobility, thus meeting the country's future workforce demands.

2. **Count every student instead of using full-time equivalent (FTE) to determine eligibility for funding, and significantly increase financial support to institutions serving high numbers of students with financial need.**

The Title III and V programs of the Higher Education Act, the Strengthening Institutions and Developing HSIs programs, were created with the intent to support institutions with a high enrollment of needy students and low-core expenses to build their institutional capacity to better serve their students. However, as more

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Education. "Eligibility Designations for Higher Education Programs for FY2025." U.S. Department of Education.

¹¹ U.S. Department of Education. "Eligibility Designations for Higher Education Programs for FY2026." U.S. Department of Education.

low-income students enter higher education, we must equitably invest in the institutions that are enrolling them. Funding for Title III and V programs must strengthen institutional capacity to serve students in a rapidly changing postsecondary landscape.

A. Count every student instead of using FTE to determine eligibility for funding.

Institutions that serve a large number of Latino, first-generation, and low-income students are often disproportionately underfunded to the needs of their students. How students are counted is a critical component of ensuring federal funding meets these needs. For example, *Excelencia*'s analysis found that using full-time equivalent (FTE) as the primary measure for federal funding related to the COVID-19 pandemic (CARES Act) only captured 66 percent of students enrolled at HSIs, compared to 78 percent of students at non-HSIs.¹² In FTE calculations, approximately three part-time students equal one full-time student, therefore, students' financial need was undercounted and inadequately funded.¹³ If we are to meet the needs of Latino students and the institutions that enroll them, measures for enrollment that consider every student are key.

Under current measures, part-time students receive less basic needs funding than full-time students. However, students' needs are not proportional to their enrollment intensity. Outside of tuition and fees, their financial need does not vary depending on the number of credit hours they are taking; whether a student enrolls part-time or full-time, they still have to purchase food, pay rent, and fund their transportation. This is crucial to consider for ensuring funding is equitable for institutions to more intentionally serve their students. For example, Latino students are more likely to enroll part-time or to mix their enrollment between full and part-time than to be enrolled full-time.¹⁴ Among all students, 50 percent of all students and 54 percent of Latino students are enrolled exclusively part-time or mix their enrollment.¹⁵ Using headcount as a method for federal funding is less dependent on enrollment intensity and more focused on need.

B. Significantly increase financial support to institutions serving high numbers of students with financial need.

Many HSIs serve low-income learners. However, funding for these institutions that serve high numbers of students with financial need has not kept up with their growth. In the last decade (2015 to 2025), the number of HSIs has increased by 45% (from 435 to 631 institutions) while funding to the Title V program has increased by 129%, from \$100 million to \$229 million.^{16,17} In FY24, 84 percent of the funding was awarded to continuing grants, limiting funding opportunities for the new institutions that become HSIs every year.¹⁸ In Fall 2025, the U.S. Department of Education redistributed Title V funds from HSIs to other programs, leaving institutions without expected federal support despite Congressional intent. Congress must ensure that funding for Title III and V is protected and keeps up with the growth of eligible institutions.

Despite the limited financial investment, our country benefits from the impact of HSIs on students and higher education. For example, the price-to-earnings premium (PEP) metric shows that some institutions serving low-income learners offer an exceptionally high return on investment, enrolling and serving large numbers of low-income students and providing them with high economic mobility—it takes students graduating from these institutions less time to recoup the net cost of attending them.¹⁹ The Economic Mobility Index (EMI), places federally funded institutions into tiers based on their PEP. About 22 percent of institutions in the highest tier of the EMI are in the *Excelencia* in Action ([E-Action](#)) network, and over

¹² Martinez, J. and Santiago, D. (2020). *Hispanic-Serving Institutions and the CARES Act: Preliminary Analysis of Funding*. Washington, DC: *Excelencia* in Education.

¹³ *Excelencia* in Education (2023). *Essay: Creating a List of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs)*. Washington, D.C.: *Excelencia* in Education.

¹⁴ *Excelencia* in Education. (April 2024). [Latinos in Higher Education: 2024 Compilation of Fast Facts](#). Washington, D.C.: *Excelencia* in Education.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Excelencia* in Education. (2026). *Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs): 2026 Factbook*. Washington, D.C.: *Excelencia* in Education.

¹⁷ *Excelencia* in Education analysis of U.S. Department of Education, NCES, IPEDS, 1994-2024 Fall Enrollment and Institutional Characteristics Surveys; and, U.S. Department of Education, Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions Program - Title V Funding Status <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/dueshsi/funding.html> and Office of Management and Budget, Technical Supplement to the 2026 Budget, U.S. Government Publishing Office, Washington, D.C. https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/appendix_fy2026.pdf

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Third Way. (2024). *2024 Economic Mobility Index*. Washington, D.C.: Third Way.

one-third of institutions in the top 20 percent of schools on the EMI are HSIs.^{20,21} Increasing financial support for institutions that have demonstrated high returns on investment can provide long-term positive impacts.

3. Add criteria to the Title III and V programs of the Higher Education Act to detail institutional momentum measures of progress in key areas of the educational pathway.

An institution meeting the legislative definition of being an HSI is predicated on enrolling Latino students, and Title V grants are not required to be targeted to directly support students. Policymakers should align federal investment with evidence of institutional progress in expanding opportunity and improving outcomes for Latino, and all, students.

Momentum measures of progress are key for institutions of higher education to assess their impact, inform continuous improvement, and demonstrate value to students, their families, and the community. Examples of these measures include transfer, persistence, retention, financial support, post-completion success, and degree completion. Traditionally, accountability has focused on compliance-based reporting and standard outcome metrics such as enrollment, retention, and graduation rates. These measures provide important insights, but they often miss other critical dimensions of performance that capture momentum along a student's entire educational pathway, such as transfer, financial support, and degree completion. Capturing the entirety of a student's journey is essential to intentionally serving Latino, and all, students.

Trendsetting institutions are already going beyond enrollment and supporting Latino, and all, students on their path to graduation. The Seal of *Excelencia* demonstrates that institutions can successfully move beyond enrollment and track progress across the student experience through a framework that aligns data, practice, and leadership. Among [Seal-certified institutions](#), undergraduates have higher retention rates, are more likely to receive Pell Grants and less likely to borrow federal student loans, and Latinos' degree outcomes are better than at all institutions.²²

Institutions seeking to compete for Title III and Title V funding should demonstrate progress through longitudinal data, such as five-year trends in student success outcomes, to assess/track institutional momentum, support continuous improvement, and align federal investments with measurable progress for Latino, and all, students.

4. Refocus and limit the allowable activities for Title III and V grants to better align with Latino student success.

The Title V: Developing HSIs program is intended to expand and enhance capacity, quality, and student achievement and has 16 allowable activities for grant support. Given this diversity of allowable activities, it is not easy to summarize the impact of the federal investment at scale or answer questions about the actual investments by grantees and the link of these funds to meeting the purpose of the grant program. *Excelencia's* analysis of Title V grants showed that most institutions that receive support for capacity building choose to invest in the activities that support student success, including support services and faculty/curriculum development.²³ However, there are ten allowable activities that improve educational opportunities but are not aligned to student success, including that of current students. By better aligning institutional capacity building to directly tie to student success, we can and should expect more from those institutions enrolling high numbers of Latino students.

²⁰ *Excelencia in Education* analysis of Third Way, 2024 *Economic Mobility Index*.

²¹ *Excelencia in Education*. (2026). *Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs): 2026 Factbook*. Washington, D.C.: *Excelencia in Education*.

²² *Excelencia in Education*. (Spring 2026). *Excelencia in Action and Seal-Certified 2026 Profile*. Washington, DC.

²³ *Ibid*.

College Affordability

Latino students leverage cost-saving measures to make college more affordable (e.g., working while enrolled, enrolling part-time, mixing their enrollment, etc.), and they balance many financial decisions when pursuing a college education—supporting their families, covering transportation costs, and weighing the opportunity cost of lost wages. Policy solutions and institutional practices must reduce prices and other financial barriers to ensure students can earn a degree without incurring unmanageable debt. We prioritize:

- **Increasing Transparent Financial Literacy:** *Expanding efforts by states, institutions, and other key actors to provide resources and tools so that students and families fully understand the real costs of college and the financial resources available to them.*
- **Fostering Low-Debt Education:** *Advocating for policies that prioritize need-based grants over loans and include basic needs—such as childcare, food, transportation and housing—within the true cost of attendance.*
- **Lowering the Price of Education:** *Supporting and incentivizing institutions to lower prices and contain costs to students while investing in academic excellence.*

How can policy help Latino, and all, students afford a degree?

1. Incentivize FAFSA completion to increase access to financial aid.

Policies like mandatory FAFSA completion have demonstrated positive impacts for Latino students. In Texas, early evidence indicated that the mandatory policy led to increases (62% to 73%) in FAFSA applications during the 2021-22 school year across the board, with students living in poverty and Latino students seeing the largest increases.²⁴ This is particularly impactful for the Latino community since they make up 40 percent of the Texas population.²⁵ With the same statewide percentage of Latinos (40%), California, which implemented mandatory FAFSA completion in 2021, ranks among the highest in FAFSA completion (67%). Louisiana, where six percent of the population is Latino, was the first state to implement such a requirement. The state effectively closed the gap in FAFSA completion between "low-income" and "high-income" school districts—with disparate districts now having nearly equal completion rates.^{26,27}

In recent years, there has been a push by states to increase FAFSA completion so more students receive financial aid. A notable policy to address this is "Mandatory FAFSA" which looks different in various states. For example, Texas passed a new performance-based funding policy that offers a financial incentive to schools to maximize FAFSA completion. California mandates that school districts, charter schools, and county offices of education require high school seniors to complete the FAFSA, or parents and students over age 18 can complete an opt-out form.²⁸ Lastly, until recently, Louisiana required high school seniors either complete the FAFSA in order to graduate or submit an opt-out waiver.²⁹

The rising cost of college has become a significant concern for many students to access higher education. For many Latino students, the cost of attending college poses a major barrier to continuing their education. Financial aid is crucial as Latinos' average family income is significantly lower than most racial/ethnic groups. Latino students' average family income (\$65,221) is lower than Whites' (\$129,431), all students' (\$104,479), and Asians' (\$104,184).³⁰

In addition, many first-generation and low-income students are impacted by limited access to information about funding. Latinos are more likely to be first-generation college students (51%) than other racial/ethnic groups.³¹ This presents a challenge to navigating the financial aid process. In fact, 15 percent of students who did not complete the FAFSA reported that it was because they did not have enough information from parents and trusted advisors about how to apply for financial aid. These students were more likely to be Latino, first-generation, and/or low-income.³² FAFSA is an important step to receive financial assistance.

²⁴ Kim Won, Sie. (April 2023). *How a Mandatory FAFSA Completion Policy in Texas Could Improve College Access*. Urban Institute.

²⁵ U.S. Census Bureau. "Hispanic or Latino, and not Hispanic or Latino by Race." Decennial Census, DEC 118th Congressional District Summary File, Table P9.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ National College Attainment Network. (2025). NCAN's FAFSA Tracker - 2025-26 FAFSA Cycle. Washington, D.C.: National College Attainment Network.

²⁸ Legislative Counsel Bureau. [AB 469 Pupil instruction: financial aid applications](#). (2021-2022).

²⁹ DeBaun, Bill. (March 2025). *Louisiana Board Rescinds State's Universal FAFSA Policy*. Washington, D.C.: National College Attainment Network.

³⁰ Excelencia in Education. (April 2024). [Latinos in Higher Education: 2024 Compilation of Fast Facts](#). Washington, D.C.: Excelencia in Education.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Barone, S, Knaff, C., & Fletcher, C. (2023). *Financial Experiences of Students Who Don't Complete the FAFSA*. Round Rock, TX: Trellis Strategies.

However, each year, many students who are eligible for aid do not complete the FAFSA. In award year 2024-25, an estimated \$4.4 billion in Pell grants alone was left on the table for the class of 2024, a missed opportunity for over 830,000 students nationally.³³ Incentivizing states to mandate FAFSA completion and provide resources to their students and their families during the application process could increase federal aid for Latino, and all, students.

2. Reduce unmet financial need to pay for college by including basic needs in financial aid calculations.

The cost of attending an institution of higher education includes more than just the price of tuition and fees, especially for post-traditional students (who are low-income, often attending part-time, caring for dependents while enrolled, and/or transferring institutions).³⁴ For example, over half of Latina students are also caring for dependent children, and a majority of Latino adults work more than 30 hours per week and are more likely to enroll part-time to make college more affordable.³⁵

Data show that Latino students have unmet basic needs that are not covered through current financial aid, creating a barrier to college access, retention, and completion. For example, 85 percent of Latino students report inconsistent access to affordable and healthy food, and approximately 21 percent report experiencing homelessness.^{36, 37} Additionally, Latino students list “transportation issues” as a reason for leaving their college program at a rate that is 19 percent higher than non-Latinos.³⁸ Providing basic needs and security to Latino, and all, students is crucial to their learning and success.

Latino students face a large gap in unmet need (Unmet Need = Cost of Attendance (COA) - Student Aid Index (SAI) - Grants and Scholarships). On average, after grants and scholarships, Latino students still have \$6,352 in unmet need, compared to their White peers, whose full cost of attendance is covered.³⁹ These are high out-of-pocket expenses, particularly for Latino students whose average family income is significantly lower (\$65,221) than White students (\$129,431).⁴⁰ Additionally, these financial barriers are most evident for low-income students, as they would need to contribute nearly 150 percent of their household income to cover the cost of attending college full-time, even after grants and scholarships.⁴¹ Even further, Latino students are less likely to accept federal loans than other racial groups (except Asians) to pay for college. Thus, federal grants and scholarships should cover this unmet need so that college is affordable for Latino students.

America’s economy depends on an educated workforce, and Latinos’ labor force participation over the next decade is expected to increase. Thus, the education of Latinos is critical for the U.S. to meet its workforce demands. However, if college continues to be unaffordable, students will not attend. To ensure a skilled workforce, we must make college affordable for Latino, and all, students.

3. Strengthen the Pell Grant and make it a fully mandatory program.

Latinos are already active participants in the Pell Grant program, and strengthening the amount can make postsecondary education more affordable for them. *Excelencia*’s research using federal data has found that Latinos are more likely to receive a Pell Grant (49%) compared to state aid (30%), federal loans (29%), or institutional aid (23%).⁴² Latinos receive a larger average Pell Grant than their peers (\$4,246 vs. \$4,120 for

³³ Woodhouse, L., DeBaun, Bill. (2025). *New Report Highlights Benefit of Pell Grant for Students and States*. Washington, D.C.: National College Attainment Network.

³⁴ Cuellarola, L., Lucas, M., & Santiago, D. (June 2025). *College Affordability: Insights and Solutions from Texas Students and Postsecondary Leaders*. Washington, D.C.: *Excelencia* in Education.

³⁵ *Excelencia* in Education. (April 2024). [Latinos in Higher Education: 2024 Compilation of Fast Facts](#). Washington, D.C.: *Excelencia* in Education.

³⁶ UnidosUS. (October 2024). *Latinos and Higher Education Survey*. Washington, D.C. UnidosUS.

³⁷ SchoolHouse Connection and Trellis Strategies. (February 2026). *Removing Barriers, Building Futures: Data-Informed Policies to Support College Students Experiencing Homelessness*. Washington, D.C.: SchoolHouse Connection and Round Rock, TX: Trellis Strategies.

³⁸ Sablosky, K., Dorrance, J., Agans, R. (September 2020). *Debt, Doubt, and Dreams: Understanding the Latino College Completion Gap*. Washington, D.C.: UnidosUS.

³⁹ Institute for Higher Education Policy (August 2023). *IHEP Analysis of the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 2019-2020*. Washington, D.C.: IHEP.

⁴⁰ *Excelencia* in Education. (April 2024). [Latinos in Higher Education: 2024 Compilation of Fast Facts](#). Washington, D.C.: *Excelencia* in Education. <https://www.edexcelencia.org/research/publications/latinos-higher-education-2024-compilation-fast-facts>

⁴¹ Institute for Higher Education Policy (August 2023). *IHEP Analysis of the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 2019-2020*. Washington, D.C.: IHEP.

⁴² *Excelencia* in Education. (April 2024). [Latinos in Higher Education: 2024 Compilation of Fast Facts](#). Washington, D.C.: *Excelencia* in Education.

all).⁴³ At institutions in *Excelencia* in Action ([E-Action](#)) network and [Seal of Excelencia](#) certified institutions, students are more likely to receive Pell Grants (40% and 44%, respectively) compared to 35 percent nationally.⁴⁴

The current maximum Pell Grant award is far from enough to cover the full cost of college. When the Pell Grant was first established, the maximum amount covered the majority of a student's cost of attendance.^{45,46} Today, the maximum (\$7,395) only covers about a quarter of college costs; Latinos receive, on average, 69 percent of the maximum amount, leaving them with steep costs to cover.^{47,48} Additionally, Pell Grants are currently subject to annual renewals of funding from Congress (discretionary) instead of guaranteed annual funding, like Social Security (mandatory). Making the Pell Grant a fully mandatory program guarantees students receive their funds.

4. *Revise the Federal Work-Study distribution formula to more strategically support students with high financial need, reduce administrative burdens to program participation, and increase funding for the program.*

As students prepare for a continually changing workforce, the Federal Work-Study (FWS) program can help Latino students access experiential learning opportunities, like internships. It also supports students' ability to access on-campus resources, which can increase retention and completion. However, Latinos' access to the program is limited because of its setup, but addressing the formula, administrative burdens, and increasing funding can improve access.

First, Federal Work-Study is allocated based on a formula that prioritizes an institution's previous participation in the program, a disadvantage for institutions where Latinos enroll. The formula's Base Guarantee ensures institutions in the program in 1999 receive the same amount each year. Over half (51%) of FWS recipients are at private four-year institutions.⁴⁹ Fewer funds are distributed to institutions that have a higher concentration of low-income and Latino students, such as community colleges. Currently, only four percent of Latinos receive Federal Work-Study aid.⁵⁰

Second, administrative hurdles to FWS participation can make it difficult for the institutions where Latinos enroll to participate. Colleges must match the amount they receive—or apply for a waiver—and cover the administrative costs of the program.⁵¹

Third, funding levels for FWS have remained stagnant over the last decade, despite increased student enrollment, particularly among Latino students. In 2020, Latinos received \$2,446 in federal work-study on average, which is similar to Asian (\$2,616), African American (\$2,461), and White (\$2,382) students. In 2016, about \$2,340 was allocated per FWS participant. Currently, about \$2,340 is allocated per FWS participant.⁵² Without additional funding, the institutions where Latinos enroll are unable to access FWS, limiting Latinos' participation.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ *Excelencia* in Education analysis of U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2024 Fall Enrollment, Retention, Student Financial Aid and Net Price, Graduation Rates, Completions, Fall Staff and Institutional Characteristics Surveys.

⁴⁵ *Excelencia* in Education analysis of Congressional Research Service, *Federal Pell Grant Program of the Higher Education Act: Primer*.

⁴⁶ *Excelencia* in Education analysis of U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 1976–1977, *Institutional Characteristics of Colleges and Universities*.

⁴⁷ *Excelencia* in Education analysis of U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study and Federal Student Aid.

⁴⁸ *Excelencia* in Education analysis of U.S. Department of Education, 2026–2027 Federal Pell Grant Payment and Disbursement Schedules

⁴⁹ National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators. (September 2023). *National Student Aid Profile: Overview of 2023 Federal Programs*. Washington, DC: National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Federal Student Aid. (March 31, 2026). Apply by April 23, 2026, for Designation as a Title III Institution and Waiver of the Non-Federal Share Requirement for FWS and FSEOG, Electronic Announcement. Washington, D.C.: Office of Postsecondary Education, U.S. Department of Education.

⁵² Scott-Clayton, Judith. (July 2021). Participation in Federal Work-Study. Community College Research Center: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Retention and Transfer

Latino students fit a post-traditional learner profile and are more likely to take multiple paths through higher education, often balancing work, family, and financial responsibilities. Students' decisions to pause their education or change institutions are typically driven by life circumstances, not academic ability. Policy must support seamless transitions and degree completion. We prioritize:

- **Strengthening Transfer Pathways:** *Expanding credit transfer agreements and articulation policies that ensure students don't lose time or credits when transitioning between institutions.*
- **Supporting Proactive Student Support Systems:** *Encouraging institutions to adopt advising, coaching, and financial aid structures that recognize the realities of Latino students and provide tailored support.*

How can policymakers support access to excellence through a variety of educational pathways?

1. **Include transfer pathway development and transfer student success initiatives as allowable activities under Higher Education Act Title V, Part A grants.**

Currently, the only explicit transfer-related activity allowed under Title V is the creation of articulation agreements to facilitate the transfer from two-year to four-year institutions. Articulation agreements, while important, are on their own not enough to improve transfer. Institutional capacity can be improved to strengthen transfer by investing in more robust efforts, such as student data sharing between institutions and creating clearer pathway programs.

Including transfer support into Title V is strategic as these grants go to Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). HSIs enroll two-thirds of Latino students, and many (36%) are public two-year institutions.⁵³ Latino students are more likely to transfer than their peers. Almost half (49%) of Latino students attempt to transfer their credits, the highest of all racial/ethnic groups, on par with Black students (49%).⁵⁴ Among those students, less than half (48%) of their credits successfully transferred.⁵⁵

Institutions need funding to build successful transfer infrastructure, and allowing HSIs to use funding that's already available to them for this purpose can facilitate Latino student success. For example, better data sharing could be used to identify potential Latino transfer students. Institutions are not obligated to share data with other institutions, leaving them and their students in the dark about transfer opportunities. To strengthen transfer, increased collaboration between two- and four-year institutions will be critical. Institutions could share data about students, set up articulation agreements to ensure credits transfer, or incentivize associate degree completion before transfer. By funding this through existing programs or creating new funding programs at the state level, institutions can better do the work that we know helps Latinos to the benefit of all.

2. **Update federal data to more transparently report transfer student outcomes, including credit accumulation, credit loss, bachelor's completion, and workforce outcomes, disaggregated by race/ethnicity and income.**

Federal data does not capture Latino students' postsecondary experiences because they are not likely to follow what a "traditional" pathway looks like. The "traditional" pathway is one where a student enters postsecondary education right after high school and graduates in four years with a bachelor's degree from the institution where they first enrolled. When federal graduation rates are reported, they reflect "traditional" students who began and graduated from the same institution within three or six years (for two- and four-year institutions, respectively).

Latino students follow a post-traditional pathway and are often not included in federal graduation rates, which are often used as a measure of success. Latino baccalaureate degree holders are more likely than all other racial/ethnic groups to begin at a two-year institution (33% vs. 28% for all). In fact, about half of

⁵³ Excelencia in Education. (2026). Hispanic-Serving Institutions: 2026 Factbook. Washington, D.C.: Excelencia in Education.

⁵⁴ National Center for Education Statistics. (2020). *One Year After Bachelor's Degree: A Profile of 2015-16 Graduates*. Washington, DC.: US Department of Education.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Latino students transfer to a two-year institution at some point in their enrollment, regardless of their starting institution.⁵⁶ Consider the following key points on Latino students:

- **Upward Transfer:** Latino transfer students are most likely to transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution (also known as Upward Transfer).⁵⁷
- **Stop-out:** Latino students are overrepresented in the undergraduate population that “stops out” (withdrawing from enrollment at a college or university for a period of time). While Latino students only make up 21 percent of the overall undergraduate population, 24 percent of all undergraduate students who stop out are Latinos.⁵⁸
- **Still enrolled:** Latinos are most likely to remain enrolled beyond the traditional time period for a degree. At two-year institutions, 12 percent of Latino students are still enrolled three years after beginning their degree compared to eight percent of their White peers, while at four-year institutions, four percent of Latino students are still enrolled six years after beginning their degree compared to two percent of their White peers.⁵⁹

Current data systems count those transfers or remaining enrolled as a dropout, which can reflect negatively on the institution (and the student). Additionally, the data don’t show important points along the path to graduation, including retention and persistence disaggregated by race/ethnicity. With better data, there are opportunities to incentivize retaining students, improving transfer, and ultimately, increasing degree completion.

3. *Strengthen partnerships between higher education institutions and high school districts for high-quality dual enrollment programs.*

Earning college credit in high school can be an influential tool for exposing students to colleges and universities as well as earning a postsecondary degree. Dual enrollment (DE) is a partnership between school districts and institutions of higher education that allows high school students to enroll in college courses and earn transferable college credit.⁶⁰

One of the key benefits of DE is reducing college costs. Participating students under this program get early access to college-level learning and potentially reduce some of the financial burden of college costs.⁶¹ DE increases the chances of students enrolling and persisting through college. Research shows that dual enrollment participation increases college enrollment and completion, with notable benefits for historically underrepresented groups, including Latino and low-income students.⁶² For example, at the Dual Enrollment Academy, high school juniors earn an associate degree from South Texas College tuition-free while completing their high school graduation requirements. From 2005 to 2023, over 1,500 students graduated from high school with an associate’s degree through the program.⁶³ Overall, the benefits can provide a long-term impact to accelerate Latino student success.

Dual enrollment has expanded significantly across the country. Nationally, nearly 2.5 million high school students (about one-third of all high schoolers) are taking dual enrollment courses. However, participation gaps remain. Latino students are underrepresented in dual enrollment, making up 29% of public K–12 enrollment and 22% of undergraduate enrollment, but only 20% of dual enrollment participation.⁶⁴

⁵⁶ *Excelencia in Education* analysis of Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Huie, F., Wakhungu, P.K., Bhimdiwali, A., Nathan, A., & Youngsik, H. (2018, July). *Transfer and Mobility: A National View of Student Movement in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2011 Cohort* (Signature Report No. 15). Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

⁵⁷ *Excelencia in Education* analysis of National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, *Transfer and Enrollment Pathways, Fall 2024 Report*.

⁵⁸ *Excelencia in Education* analysis of Causey, J., Gardner, A., Pevitz, A., Ryu, M., and Shapiro, D. (April 2023), *Some College, No Credential Student Outcomes, Annual Progress Report – Academic Year 2021/22*, Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

⁵⁹ *Excelencia in Education* analysis using U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2023 Fall Enrollment, Graduation Rates Survey, and Institutional Characteristics Survey*.

⁶⁰ *Dual Enrollment*. (2023). The Education Trust.

⁶¹ *Ibid*.

⁶² Velasco, T., Fink, J., Bedoya-Guevara, M., & Jenkins, D. (2024). *The postsecondary outcomes of high school dual enrollment students: A national and state-by-state analysis*. Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University.

⁶³ *Excelencia in Education*. (November 15). *Growing What Works Database*. Washington, D.C.: *Excelencia in Education*.

<https://www.edexcelencia.org/programs-initiatives/growing-what-works-database>

⁶⁴ *Dual enrollment: Participation and characteristics*. (2019). National Center for Education Statistics

One way students are able to pay for DE is through the Pell Grant program. While Latinos are already active participants in the program, using these funds for DE has demonstrated potential long-term barriers. By using Pell, students started their “Pell clocks” and had fewer years of funding available when they eventually enrolled in college as undergraduates.⁶⁵ Moreover, Latino students have to navigate limited access to dual enrollment in high schools. DE is often less accessible at schools that serve larger proportions of lower-income communities and communities of color.⁶⁶ Thus, while Pell is an important resource for students who have enrolled in college post-high school, it is not sufficient to ensure access to DE.

Given the growth of these programs, we need to ensure that Latino students are participating and taking advantage of these opportunities for accessing higher education. This not only benefits their journey in education but also their long-term careers. Many institutions across the country are implementing this program and incentivizing them to scale their efforts can help additional communities access DE. To reduce gaps in participation in DE, the federal government should strengthen partnerships between higher education institutions and high school districts to provide high-quality and affordable access to higher education.

4. Provide financial incentives to institutions to retain Latino students on their path to graduation.

While access to higher education for Latino students has increased steadily, degree attainment has not. Only 3 in 10 Latino adults hold an associate’s degree or higher.⁶⁷ Currently, most funding programs are based on rewarding graduation or degree completion, but do not consider the work done to retain students. Leading indicators to completion, including year-to-year retention, are key to ensuring Latinos are on track.

Notable institutions in the *Excelencia* in Action (E-Action) network have demonstrated successful retention strategies that serve Latino students. At institutions in the [E-Action](#) network and [Seal-certified](#) institutions, students’ full-time and part-time retention rates are higher than at all institutions.⁶⁸ For example, California State University, Los Angeles’ Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) supports first-generation, low-income students, of which 81 percent are Latino, to overcome social and economic barriers to higher education, from middle school through college completion. EOP provides academic support, leadership development, and peer mentorship. In Fall 2021, first-time EOP Latino students were retained at the same rate (74%) as all students. The 6-year EOP Latino graduation rate is 55 percent, compared to 51 percent for all students.⁶⁹ The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) is another Seal-certified institution that has demonstrated successful retention strategies. UTSA prioritizes financial support to ensure Latino student retention. Through coordinated programs, such as Bold Promise, Bold Scholars, and Bold Futures, students receive support to cover tuition and fees, on-campus housing, and/or experiential learning opportunities. This strategy has been successful in retaining Latino students, as the one-year retention rate for Bold Promise Latino students is five percentage points higher than that of other first-time-full-time Latino students with similar family incomes, and the second-to-third year retention rate is 10 percentage points higher.⁷⁰

Institutions in the [E-Action](#) network and [Seal-certified](#) institutions serve as examples of intentionally serving Latino, and all, students by implementing evidence-based strategies to increase retention rates. Providing more financial support to institutions that are retaining students by recognizing their efforts year-to-year can help scale such efforts to ensure more Latino students stay on track to graduate.

⁶⁵ Matheny, K.T., Lu, Amanda., Bettinger, E. P., Kienzl G. S. (July 2022). *Do Pell grants increase dual enrollment for low-income students?*. Brookings.

⁶⁶ Rhine, Luke. (2022). *The Power of Dual Enrollment: The Equitable Expansion of College Access and Success*. U.S Department of Education.

⁶⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, 2023 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

⁶⁸ *Excelencia* in Education. (Spring 2026). *Excelencia* in Action and Seal-Certified 2026 Profile. Washington, DC.

⁶⁹ *Excelencia* in Education. (2023). *Seal of Excelencia Certified Institutions*. Washington, D.C.: *Excelencia* in Education.

<https://www.edexcelencia.org/seal/seal-excelencia-certified-institutions>

⁷⁰ Ibid.