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As Latino Enrollment Grows, So Does the Potential for Partnerships at the Institutions That Serve Them



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With Latinos projected to make up over a quarter of the United States population in coming years, colleges need to figure out how to best meet the needs of adult Latino learners.

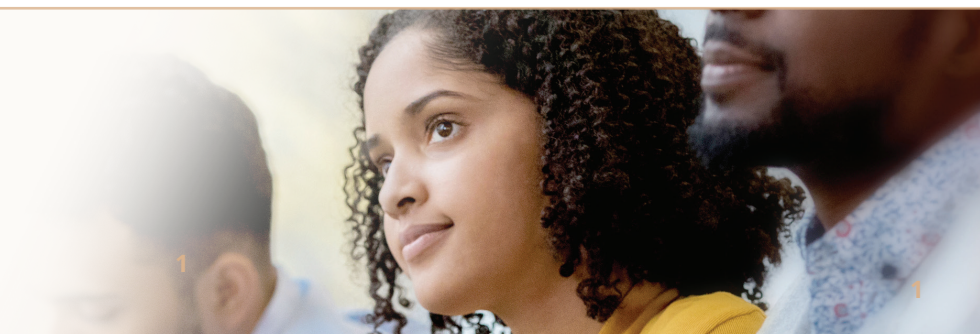
Latinos make up an ever-growing share of the U.S. population — and the workforce. As we look to a future in which jobs will require higher levels of skills and postsecondary learning, it is critical for colleges and universities to step up their efforts to improve Latino educational attainment. The U.S. Census Bureau projected the Latino population will grow from 58.9 million in 2017 to 68.5 million in 2025 to 111.2 million in 2060, when it will comprise 28 percent of the U.S. population. Yet, Latinos lag behind in educational attainment.

In 2018 that discrepancy meant only 26 percent of Latino adults had completed an associate degree or higher — 19 percentage points lower than the 45 percent of all American adults with a degree. And we know that just enrolling in college does not mean a college diploma is guaranteed. In the 2015-16 academic year, the graduation rate was 41 percent for Latino college students, compared to 52 percent for all students.

In real numbers, this means that in 2018 there were almost 5 million Latino adults that had some college but no degree, with an additional 10 million with no more than a high school diploma or equivalent. As Latinos grow to over a quarter of the United States population, the country needs to reduce such educational inequalities.

These demographic realities led to a partnership between the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and *Excelencia* in Education to develop the Latino Adult Student Success Academy to help 15 Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) and emerging HSIs better serve their Latino adult learners. The three-year initiative is made possible through the generous support of The Kresge Foundation, Ascendium Education Group and Greater Texas Foundation.

The Academy offers research-based practices that support persistence and completion, such as CAEL's Adult Learner 360 diagnostic tool. Its parallel student and institutional surveys identify disconnects and highlight opportunities for improving services for adult learners. The program also offers professional



development for staff at the institutions through the Adult Learner 360 Academy.

The Academy launched in September 2018. Although it has just entered its second year, the lessons surfacing from the experiences of participating institutions, like Austin Community College and the Maricopa Community Colleges, are exciting to share.

In particular, as these colleges are beginning their focus on Latino adult learners, they have identified two important needs for this work:

1. Creating space and time for intentional, action-oriented, community conversations about adult Latino learners.
2. Building strategic alliances is critical to further this important work — for both institutions and nonprofits such as CAEL and *Excelencia*.

When CAEL and *Excelencia* selected the 15 HSIs/emerging HSIs to participate in the Academy, each was asked to assemble a team of administrators, faculty and staff. This team would be responsible for determining the institutional challenges to be addressed, developing new responses to these challenges, developing institutional awareness of Latino adult learners, and ensuring that their goals and strategies would be fully aligned with and incorporated into the institution's overarching mission, vision and strategic plan.

Austin Community College and the Maricopa Community Colleges

Austin Community College (ACC) serves Central Texas' higher education and technical training needs, with a mission to

provide open access to an affordable college education for any learner who wishes to earn a degree, learn a marketable skill or advance their careers. In fall 2018, ACC enrolled over 38,000 students, 37.2 percent of whom were Hispanic.

Maricopa Community Colleges consists of 10 institutions in the Phoenix area, two of which are participating in the Academy — Estrella Mountain Community College and Phoenix College. In fall 2018, Estrella Mountain enrolled almost 10,000 students, 55 percent of whom were Hispanic. During the 2017-18 academic year, Phoenix enrolled over 11,400 (unduplicated) students, 54 percent of whom were Hispanic.

Common institutional challenges

The three institutions agree that the biggest challenge they shared was the need to better understand adult Latino learners, including their motivations for attending college and the types of services and resources they need. Even though each institution has strong commitments to better serve adult Latino learners, they struggle to find ways to identify, engage and support these learners despite successful outreach to more traditional-aged Latino students.

Dr. Maria Harper-Marinick, chancellor of Maricopa Community College System, views the Academy as an opportunity to unpack some of the pre-conceptions associated with adult Latino learners and understand the "diversity within diversity" of these learners.

Dr. Richard Rhodes, president of Austin Community College, echoed these sentiments when he reflected on ACC's challenges to engage older potential Latino learners outside of adult basic education and GED course. He noted that Austin Community College has realized the need to invest in



innovative and collaborative efforts to ensure appropriate wraparound support and effective methods of delivery of education to serve all learners, from dual credit/early college high school to older adult populations without a workforce credential — anyone striving for upward social mobility.

Mindful of the need to more fully understand the diverse spectrum of Latino adult learners, both leaders also reflected on the challenges they faced in finding potential students and helping them see themselves in college. The most obvious part of this challenge for all the institutions is simply finding potential learners and determining the best ways to communicate with them. But the schools have learned through participation in the Academy that this is more than just a marketing challenge — this is very much about helping these potential students see themselves in college.

In the case of ACC, this has meant forming committees with the intention of thinking differently about college pathways and examining the ways continuing education can be used to ease some adult Latino learners into ACC. At Estrella Mountain, staff teams have realized that almost all of the marketing and communications they use for Latino students are targeted to the 18-24 year old population and are developing new marketing materials and strategies.

Emerging lessons and early impact

Although all of the colleges were already actively engaged in institution- or system-wide conversations about diversity in general and Latino students in particular, both leaders highlighted the ways participating in the Academy had elevated deliberate, action-oriented conversations about adult Latino learners that cut across internal institutional divisions and silos. One result of creating the space for conversations that put adult Latino learners first is that all of the schools have the time and space to reflect on the needs of adult Latino learners and whether or not current services are aligned with those needs. Instead of trying to shoehorn adult Latino learners into existing services, administrators and leaders are asked to consider how they might need to do things differently in order to best meet the needs of adult Latino learners.

An especially powerful lesson at the Maricopa institutions has been to build in opportunities to listen to the voices of Latino adults already enrolled — after all, who is better situated to explain the needs of adult Latino learners than those learners themselves? Maricopa's Dr. Harper-Marinick credits the Academy for helping elevate conversations as staff look at the

intentional design of services with the needs of students in mind.

Another significant early outcome of the Academy has been the realization on the part of institutions and grant partners alike of the critical role that strategic alliances and outside support can play. For ACC and the Maricopa institutions, the Academy has created the opportunity to learn from other institutions engaged in this vital work of meeting the needs of adult Latino learners. They have also valued the insights from CAEL and *Excelencia* for developing new strategies for effectively engaging Latino adult learners.

Another perspective from these two institutional leaders is a strong commitment to creating innovative new approaches throughout their colleges. Both serve on the board of the League for Innovation in the Community College, an organization that is interested in helping to expand this model to other colleges in its network. The League and CAEL are hoping to amplify the work of the current Academy by partnering with *Excelencia* to create additional Latino Adult Student Success Academies or focusing on special topics such as employer partnerships or working parent learners. Another Academy idea is the development of Academies geared toward other regions or groups, such as historically black colleges and universities or military-friendly institutions.

Dr. Rufus Glasper, League President and CEO, has credited the strategic alliances created by the student success academies at the selected HSIs/emerging HSIs for bringing a plethora of innovative ideas, approaches and resources, including the sharing of successes and failures. He also believes that the Academy model tested in the HSI space will prove to be replicable and scalable beyond HSIs.

When we asked what advice they have for other institutions, Dr. Rhodes and Dr. Harper-Marinick both emphasized the importance of truly understanding the needs of adult Latino learners. Dr. Rhodes stressed understanding the data and listening to and respecting the community and culture of which these students are a part.

Almost as important as understanding is making sure that everyone in the institution has the appropriate professional development. At ACC, all faculty and staff are undergoing cultural competency training as a part of their regular professional development activities. And, as Dr. Harper-Marinick pointed out, institutional leaders also must create

opportunities to break down silos across institutions to ensure that meeting the needs of adult Latino learners is everyone's responsibility. At the end of the day, integrated efforts have the most staying power and the most impact.

CAEL and *Excelencia* are eager to share more findings from the Academy as our work with these institutions continues. We agree with Drs. Harper-Marinick and Rhodes that we all have

an obligation to better serve adult Latino learners. And we are especially excited to engage new partners like the League in the expansion of the Academy model to create greater impact with this critical work. Building strategic alliances is critical to further this important work — for both institutions and non-profits such as CAEL and *Excelencia*.

Note: The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Kresge Foundation, Ascendium Education Group, Greater Texas Foundation, or any director, officer, or employee thereof.



Deborah A. Santiago is the co-founder, Chief Operating Officer and Vice President for Policy at *Excelencia* in Education. For more than 20 years, she has led research and policy efforts from the community to national and federal levels to improve educational opportunities and success for all students. She co-founded Deborah Santiago in Education to inform policy and practice to accelerate Latino student success in higher education. Her current work focuses on federal and state policy, financial aid, Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), and effective institutional practices for student success in higher education.



Marie Cini is currently Chief Strategy Officer of ED2WORK. An accomplished senior executive in higher education, her academic career spans more than 25 years and she has extensive experience as a C-level academic administrator in universities that predominantly serve adults. Most recently, Marie served as president of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), where she transitioned to a streamlined organization able to focus on the evolving needs of adult learners.

Learn more at cael.org



Recognizing that adult learners are the backbone of the U.S. economy, CAEL helps forge a clear, viable connection between education and career success, providing solutions that promote sustainable and equitable economic growth. CAEL opens doors to opportunity in collaboration with workforce and economic developers, postsecondary educators, and employers, industry groups, foundations, and other mission-aligned organizations. By engaging with these stakeholders, we foster a culture of innovative, lifelong learning that helps individuals and their communities thrive. Established in 1974, CAEL, a Strada Education Network affiliate, is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) membership organization.