Latino Student Success Pilot at Rhode Island College

Research Findings and Recommendations

Executive Summary

PROVIDENCE
Children
Youth &
Cabinet

Annenberg
Institute for
School Reform
AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

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About the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR) is a national policy-research and reform-support organization affiliated with Brown University that focuses on improving conditions and outcomes for all students in urban public schools, especially those attended by traditionally underserved children. AISR's vision is the transformation of traditional school systems into "smart education systems" that develop and integrate high-quality learning opportunities in all areas of students' lives – at school, at home, and in the community.

AISR conducts research; works with a variety of partners committed to educational improvement to build capacity in school districts and communities; and shares its work through print and online publications. Rather than providing a specific reform design or model to be implemented, AISR's approach is to offer an array of tools and strategies to help districts and communities strengthen their local capacity to provide and sustain high-quality education for all students aligned with a set of values and design principles that promote equity and excellence.

http://annenberginstitute.org

About the Children and Youth Cabinet

The Children and Youth Cabinet (CYC) is a coalition of more than 150 organizations and community members who work together to ensure all children in Providence, Rhode Island, thrive. CYC members are committed to using their collective resources to improve outcomes for all children and youth in the Providence Public School District.

Formed in 2010, this consortium has grown to include members from education, state and local government, higher education, business, and community-based organizations. Together, these diverse players work across traditional boundaries to create positive change for Providence children from "cradle to career."

Since 2012, AISR has provided planning, research, and communications support to the CYC. The CYC and its director, Rebecca Boxx, are affiliated with and housed at AISR, and students from Brown's Urban Education Policy program have served as research assistants and interns with the CYC.

http://cycprovidence.org/

Introduction

Latinos are a growing population on college campuses across the United States. Historically, Latinos have lower college enrollment, lower accumulated college debt, and lower four-year degree-attainment rates compared with other racial/ethnic groups.[1] The Latino Student Success Pilot (LSSP) is a novel program designed to support first-generation low-income students of Latino origins at Rhode Island College (RIC) – an institution ranked in the top ten in the nation for closing the gap between White and Latino graduation rates. Beginning in the fall of 2014 as a part of Providence's Lumina Community Partnership for Attainment,[2] the LSSP's primary goals were to: (1) increase retention and increase academic success among this cohort of students; (2) understand the barriers and successful supports to assist students in persisting and graduating; and (3) develop recommendations for RIC and other institutions of higher learning desiring to support Latino students effectively.

Methods Used

This report utilizes a mixed-methods approach, including quantitative analyses of data obtained from RIC and qualitative analyses using data obtained through focus group and individual interviews. Ten students were interviewed, nine of whom participated during the program's second year, while the other student only participated in the program during the student's first semester. Two of the students only participated in the program's second year, and two of the students did not enroll in RIC during their third academic year. Faculty and staff members from Rhode Island College, College Visions, and the College Crusade of Rhode Island who are directly involved with the LSSP were also interviewed.

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[1] Jens Manuel Krogstad, "5 Facts about Latinos and Education," Pew Research Center website (July 28, 2016), http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/28/5-facts-about-latinos-and-education/.

[2] For more information, please visit https://www.luminafoundation.org/strategy-2-community-partnerships/.

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Quantitative Findings

A total of thirteen students started participating in the Latino Student Success Pilot in the fall of 2014. The entire cohort returned for their second year and three additional students were added during this year, bringing the total number of students participating in the program to sixteen. The total amount of loans or academic debt for each student ranges from $0 to $13,862, with a mean of $3,751. Six of the students have taken no loans and do not have an outstanding bill with RIC. Table 1 compares the retention percentages of students in the LSSP program with the percentages of students at RIC broken down by White and minority students. Table 2 displays the mean scores of the Latino Student Success Pilot cohort's grade point average (GPA) and their credits earned by semester and cumulatively throughout all four semesters.

Table 1: Student retention percentages

	LSSP students	RIC White students (10 year average)	RIC minority students (10 year average)
Retained to second year	100.0%	77.4%	74.2%
Retained to third year	62.5%	65.8%	61.3%

N=16

Table 2: Mean scores for grade point average (GPA) and credits earned

	Fall 2014	Spring 2015	Fall 2015	Spring 2016*	Cumulative
GPA	2.81	2.89	2.54	3.05	2.75
Credits earned	11.50	12.94	11.00	11.92	45.31

N=16

*4 students did not complete the spring 2016 semester and are not included in the numbers for this semester.

Correlations shown:

- Finances and student workload are most highly correlated with student outcomes as measured by persistence and grade point average.

- A lagged effect for loan debt is present, as loan debt is negatively correlated with third and fourth semester GPA, but not with first or second semester GPA. Loan debt may be an indicator of other financial pressures students are facing that are not measured in the data.

- The amount of financial aid earned in a student's sophomore year is highly correlated with enrollment in the fall of 2016.

- The number of credits earned in the first semester is most highly correlated with fourth semester GPA, compared with GPA in any other semester. This demonstrates the importance of students getting their college career off to a good start.

- Enrollment in fall 2016 is highly correlated with cumulative GPA and credit accumulation.

Qualitative Findings

- The Navigators are a clear strength of the LSSP. Navigators serve as a direct liaison to students, as they help students acclimate to college life by building close one-on-one relationships; advising about academic, social, personal, and financial issues; and regularly checking in with students throughout the semester. A common theme among those who spoke favorably of their Navigator was that they felt their Navigator saw them as individuals and cared for them. Students' relationships with their Navigator appear to have a large impact on how students feel about the LSSP and their attitudes towards involvement. Positive feelings about the program do not necessarily translate into greater program participation. In fact, most students did not participate in non-mandatory events or functions.

- Many students did not interact with other students in the program. Those who did have high levels of interaction with other members of LSSP had established a prior relationship with the students in the program.

- Many students discussed financial stress as an impediment to college completion. Financial stress also manifested in unmeasurable ways as students voiced difficulty in finding an appropriate work/school balance and made course load choices based on the amount of hours needed to work to keep up with expenses. Financial stress derived not only from school factors, but also from financial obligations to family. These issues were compounded for students who were not U.S. citizens, as they were not eligible for federal loans.

- Students expressed difficulty navigating crucial administrative procedures (e.g., financial aid paperwork). Students were unsure whom to approach to address their concerns, making them timid around administrative employees. This led many to seek information from non-university personnel.

- Students were timid around their academic advisors. Several students did not feel comfortable questioning their advisor when the students felt concerned.

- Students recalled performing better in professors' courses where they had a positive relationship with their professor and were able to navigate course requirements more easily in courses where they had a positive relationship with their professor. A positive relationship is identified as a close relationship where students could recall the professor's name and had multiple constructive interactions with the professor outside of the classroom. Generally, students understood the value of having a faculty member on their side with whom they could communicate easily both in and out of the classroom.

- Students noted that time constraints impeded them from attending events, despite having a desire to attend. Alternatively, students discussed regular participation in other extracurricular activities not related to the LSSP. When we probed into their participation in these other activities, two common themes emerged.

  - The first theme that emerged was related to established student social networks. Initial contact with students, which is crucial to fostering strong social bonds, is vital to building organizational commitment.

  - The second theme for why students participated in non-LSSP activities was that they saw a type of altruistic motivation for participating. Students often viewed their participation as contributing to something greater than themselves.

  - We believe that (1) building student social networks and (2) giving students a larger, altruistic purpose for program activities are applicable to increasing participation in the LSSP and would increase retention and academic success.

Recommendations for Success

- Develop consistent data sharing policies that align with recent National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) recommendations[3] for handling the sharing of information with appropriate stakeholders.

- Arrange for Navigators or the staff of partnering organizations to meet with students before the first semester starts to prepare students for transition from high school to college.

- Host a one or two-day pre-college camp for students participating in the LSSP (or a similar program).

- Offer a Proseminar in the first semester of college for students in the program.

- Allow Navigators to attend advising sessions with academic advisors, since Navigators can be strong advocates for students and can help translate institutional language to practical realities.

- Pair students with another student in the program as a peer connection/mentor.

- Frame the LSSP not only as a program that benefits students, but also as a program with a larger purpose and scope. Potential ways to achieve this:
  – Develop a "What I Wish I Would Have Known" project. Results from this project could be used by Navigators when they meet with incoming students and during the pre-college camp.
  – Have first and second year students serve as high school mentors and have third and fourth year students serve as peer mentors to freshmen and sophomore students.
  – Have students serve as counselors during pre-college camps. LSSP can increase the scope of the program by allowing current students to serve as advocates for similar programs at other IHEs in Rhode Island.

- Create a community center, with a place for students to stay between classes in order to foster a greater sense of community.

- Develop a partnership with RIPTA to provide a cost effective and timely mode of transportation to and from campus for students.
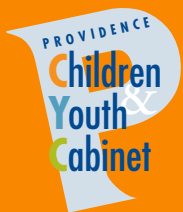
Summary

Rhode Island College serves as a great venue to examine Latino success, since it has achieved national prominence in both increasing Latino graduation rates and decreasing the gap between Whites and Latinos in graduation rates. Considering the increase in Latino students throughout U.S. colleges and universities, other institutions of higher education (IHEs) would do well to consider integration and retention strategies for an increasingly diverse student body.

In this report we examine RIC's pilot program designed to increase Latino student success. As an IHE, RIC should be commended for its dedication of resources and innovative programing to ensure that students receive the best educational experience. During our interviews with stakeholders and students, we noticed bright spots that should be emulated by other IHEs. Other programs wishing to foster Latino success, especially for first generation students, should create Navigator-like positions where paid staff can serve multiple roles toward student advocacy and general guidance.

As with any pilot program, we also noticed areas in need of improvement and re-imagination. In this report, we have outlined recommendations that are pertinent to Rhode Island College, but can easily be adopted to fit institution-specific needs and resources. We understand the complexities of institutions and various administrative roles designed to foster student success and the difficulties in implementing broad scale programming. Yet, given the changing demographics of U.S. universities, we believe it is a worthwhile endeavor for IHEs to be proactive in their efforts in order to ensure long-term student success.

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[3] *Financial Aid Data Sharing,* National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (July 2016), https://www.nasfaa.org/uploads/documents/Financial_Aid_Data_Sharing.pdf.