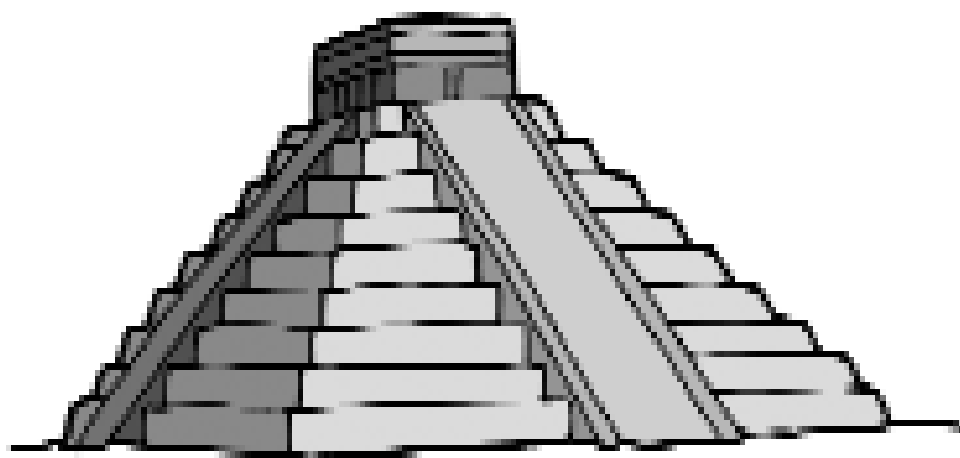


# Focus Group Findings and Recommendations

August, 2006



**PROJECT ÉXITO**

# Acknowledgements

The South Metropolitan Higher Education Consortium (SMHEC) would like to thank the following members of the Consortium's Latino Committee who guided the development of the focus groups and handled the meeting logistics at their individual institutions.

**Calumet College of St. Joseph**

Michael McNicholas

**DeVry University**

Ed Jodelka

**Governors State University**

Jose Reyes  
Maristella Zell

**Illinois Institute of Technology**

Kevin Smith

**Joliet Junior College**

Yolanda Isaacs

**Kankakee Community College**

Jolynne Keiser

**Lewis University**

Roberto Suarez

**Moraine Valley Community College**

Joann Wright

**Northwestern Business College**

Teresa Jimenez

**Prairie State College**

Angela Winters-Harmon

**Robert Morris College**

Lisa Wirth

**South Suburban College**

Songie Millhouse

**Saint Xavier University**

Pamela Lewis Rodriguez

**University of St. Francis**

Ron Clement  
Ingrid Goobar-Szleifer

Special thanks to Raquel Duszynski and Joann Wright of Moraine Valley Community College and Michael McNicholas of Calumet College of St. Joseph for their collaboration in creating this report.

Rachel Unruh of Women Employed provided technical assistance in developing the focus group sessions. The discussion guide SMHEC created for its focus groups sessions was based on the focus group discussion guide found in Women Employed's *Bridges to Careers for Low-Skilled Adults* Program Development Guide.

Focus group sessions were supported by a Higher Education Cooperation Act (HECA) grant from the Illinois Board of Higher Education.

# Introduction

The South Metropolitan Higher Education Consortium's (SMHEC) Project Éxito recently conducted 19 focus groups with students currently attending college and high school juniors and seniors. The purpose of these conversations was to document the real and perceived barriers that Latino students face as they prepare to enroll in, or encounter as they attend college.

SMHEC is a collaboration of 15 public and private, 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities, whose mission is to collaborate to enhance the educational programs and services for their constituents. As such, Project Éxito's focus is to increase the access, retention and graduation rates of Latino students in the Chicago Southland region.

From these sessions the consortium members learned about the challenges Latino students face as they navigate the educational system. Students did not always agree about the difficulties they are confronting - even within single institutions. There is a great deal of consensus however, on some general themes.

Those themes were distilled into 10 major findings grouped into three categories: academic preparation, counseling and financial support. The findings include:

## Academic Preparation

***There is a lack of college preparation among Latino high school students.***

***There is a wide gap between students' college academic preparation and their expectation of attending college.***

***English as a Second Language (ESL) students face additional barriers.***

## Counseling

***Counseling regarding college opportunities is not uniformly available in the high schools.***

***Latino students' motivation for attaining a college education is deeply rooted in their desire to do better than the previous generation.***

***Educational institutions lack role models for Latino students.***

***College support services for Latino students are available but underutilized.***

***There is a significant difference between the barriers experienced by first generation students and second generation students.***

## Financial Support

***Finances are the driving force behind the selection of and attendance at particular colleges.***

***Latino parents strongly support their children's college aspirations but lack the "college knowledge" to guide them.***

These focus groups were a learning experience for the SMHEC institutions that conducted them. Some of the students' comments were consistent with information they already know about first-generation, minority, and economically disadvantaged students trying to make their way through the labyrinth of today's higher education environment. Other observations demonstrated that there is great deal to learn about how to best serve the growing and diverse



populations coming to campus.

The most important lesson learned during the focus groups is the need to coordinate college access, outreach, and support between high schools (and middle schools) and the colleges and universities.

It appears from the discussions and an increasingly visible national "data set" that educational institutions are not providing, at the high school or college level, the preparation, materials, and advice Latino students need to be successful and obtain a degree.

# Methodology

Two different types of focus groups were conducted. Nine colleges and universities held one session with their own students and another session with students from a feeder high school. Six institutions pooled their current students and conducted two focus group sessions. They also conducted three focus groups with high school students from the region. Findings from the regional groups were consistent with findings at individual institutions.

There was a limit of 10 students per session. Session facilitators and recorders were bilingual. Some participants used Spanish to express their opinions. The facilitators in group discussions where Spanish was spoken reported more emotional responses than did the facilitators in the sessions where English only was spoken.

Session facilitators were provided with a discussion outline including a standard set of questions to ensure consistency across the groups. Participants were administered anonymous demographic questionnaires prior to the start of the session. The sessions were audio taped and a recorder took notes. For the most part, the recorders wrote the summaries of the sessions.

The summaries divided participants' responses into three participant perception themes: opportunities to attend college, experiences with personal and institutional barriers to college success and support they have or have not received in continuing their studies. The following report is an amalgamation of those summaries.

## Profile of participants



### Age and Gender

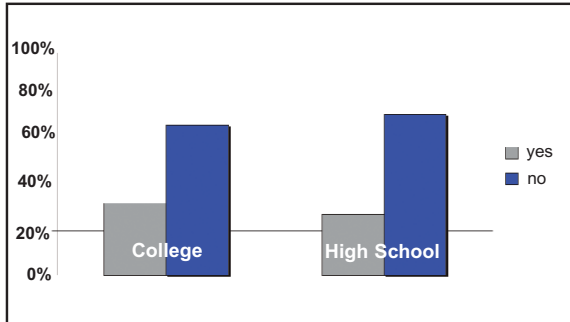
A total of 207 students participated in the focus group discussions. There were 110 currently enrolled college students and 97 high school students. High school students came from schools in the Chicago Southland region and represented private and public schools serving a range of socioeconomic levels.

The breakdown of males to females in both the college and high school groups was almost identical with males representing 36 percent, and females 64 percent. These numbers are similar to the current male-to-female ratio of 40:60 present at most colleges and universities. Slightly over one third (35%) of the college students were 24 years or older, putting them in the non-traditional student category.

Nine out of ten college students were commuters. Two-thirds (66%) of the commuters lived at home, 24 percent lived on their own, and 10 percent had other living arrangements. Fifteen percent of the college students had children, and one percent of the high school students were parents.

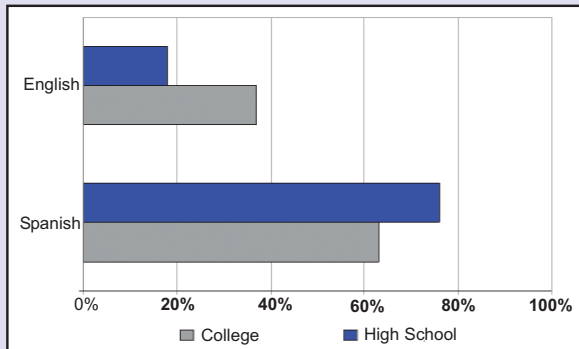
## Profile - continued

*Are you the first generation in your family to attend grade school or high school in the United States?*



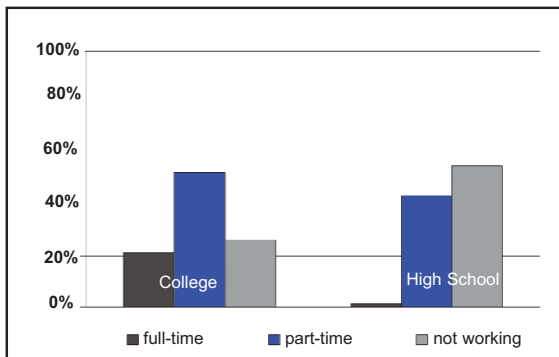
Slightly more college students than high school students were the first generation in their family to attend grade school and high school in the United States.

*What is the primary language spoken in your home?*



A higher percentage of high school students indicated Spanish as the primary language spoken at home. Among college and high school groups over two-thirds of the students spoke Spanish at home.

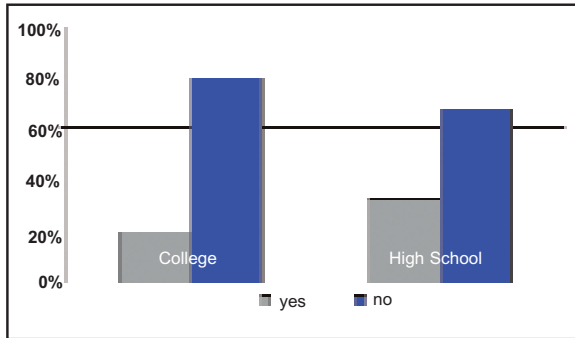
*Are you currently working for pay?*



Sixty-five percent of college students and 45 percent of high school students are employed part or full-time while attending school. Among college students who are employed, 53 percent are working part-time and 21 percent are employed full-time. One percent of high school students are employed full time, 44% have part-time jobs and 55% are not working.

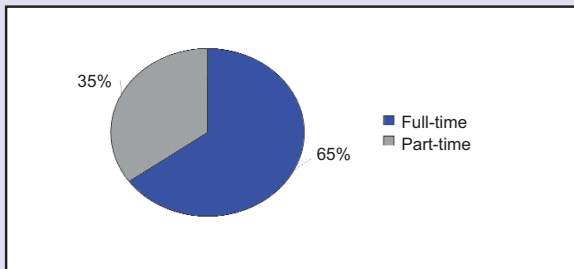
## Profile ~ continued

### Have you taken English as a Second Language (ESL) courses?



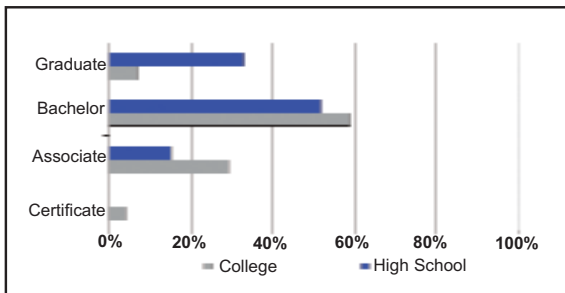
A higher percentage of high school than college students participated in ESL classes.

### Are you enrolled in college full-time or part-time?



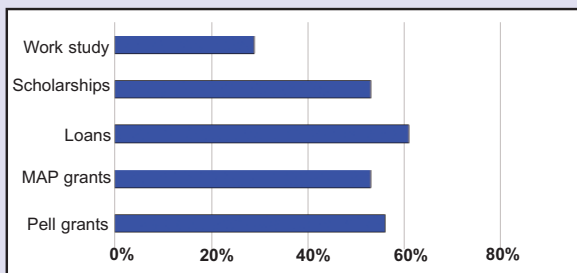
Fourteen percent of the college students earned a GED. More college students were enrolled full time than part time.

### What type of degree or certificate will you receive when you complete your studies?



Only 63 percent of high school students answered this question. This was the lowest response rate to any question on the survey and may reflect their uncertainty about future plans. Of the high school students who answered, fewer projected they would receive an associates degree, and more projected they would receive a graduate degree than college students responding to the same question. Only 2 out of 93 high school students responded that they did not plan to attend college; with most of the students expecting to attain a college degree in 6 years.

### What types of financial aid are you receiving?



Eighty-five percent of the college students currently receive some type of financial aid. In addition to grants, the students receive a combination of loans, scholarship and work study dollars.

# Findings

## Academic Preparation

### **Finding: There is a lack of college preparation among Latino high school students.**

High school students expressed concern about their academic preparation and are apprehensive about stepping into the college classroom. They are excited about gaining a measure of independence and making new friends, but are afraid of not being able to perform academically and failing to live up to parents' expectations. Some students stated their high schools did not prepare them well for college. Several students indicated that their grades were holding them back from entering college immediately after high school. There is some concern with not fulfilling the college course requirements.

*"I felt that I was ready until I actually attended college and saw how rigorous the courses were."*

Many students said they had inadequate preparation in high school. College students indicated that their personal barriers stemmed from poor academic preparation in high school, resulting in low ACT scores and placement in remedial classes. Several students admitted to having poor study habits and/or not taking all the necessary courses while in high school. They were unprepared for the amount of reading and writing required for their college courses.

*"A lot of people don't want to go to college because they are scared of failing."*

One participant noted that she and her fellow students got passing grades in high school just by showing "effort." She was concerned it would take more than effort to be successful in a college class. Common themes in the focus groups were low expectations of teachers and lack of challenge in high school. Students cited these factors as reasons why they did not anticipate and were not prepared for the rigors of college.

One individual stated that she wasn't ready for college because her command of the English language was not up to par. She believed being placed in a classroom with other non-English speaking students didn't help speed the process of learning English.

Across the board, high school students enrolled in honors programs, a college preparatory track, or advanced placement courses believed they were more academically prepared. Their classes were more rigorous, there was a strong concentration in reading and writing, and their teachers had higher expectations.

In some students' opinions, high schools do a better job of preparing them for the workforce than for college. The good news is community college transfer students stated they are well prepared to enter 4-year institutions

### **Finding: There is a wide gap between students' college academic preparation and their expectation of attending college.**

Despite their perception of being academically unprepared, the majority of students plan to attend college. Only two high school participants do not plan to attend college.

This finding corresponds to a recent study by the Illinois Education Research Council, *The Demographics and Academics of College Going in Illinois*. In their quantitative study, 87 percent of the Illinois high school graduating class of 2002 aspired to complete at least a bachelor's degree. In that study, nearly three-quarters of the students who were considered "not, or least-ready to attend college" also expected to earn at least a bachelor's degree. This study found that more than 75 percent of those who did not enroll in college their first year after high school still expected to complete a bachelor's degree at some point.

Based on the participant feedback, there seems to be a startling lack of understanding among high school students of the role academic preparation plays in college access, retention, and completion.

### **Finding: English as a Second Language (ESL) students face additional barriers.**

Among students who took English as a Second Language (ESL) courses in high school, there is a perception of isolation from teachers, counselors and peers. They describe a lack of support from counselors, claiming they are not provided with college information that is available to non-ESL students. They are not notified of information sessions conducted by colleges at the high schools and are unaware of their college options. These students state they were not informed of or guided through the college admission and financial aid application processes.

The level of support and encouragement ESL students receive appears to be institution specific. While ESL students at some institutions felt much support, others reported being told by their counselors that once they complete high school they should "look for jobs in restaurants or on farms." ESL learners (and non-ESL Latino students) receiving this type of advice suggested some teachers need to become more culturally sensitive.

## Findings ~ continued

### Counseling

#### **Finding: Latino students' motivation for attaining a college education is deeply rooted in a desire to do better than the previous generation.**

*"I worked at a factory for a week and it was like hell. I worked very hard for very little money. I would just look around and think, oh my God, people do this for a living. I need to go to school."*

Students reported that the factors determining their decision to attend college were the result of family situations or personal experiences. Participants discussed their friends going to school and dropping out within the first year or never attending college, marrying and having children. They agreed they wanted a better life. Some students said their parents' experiences were influential. They see their parents working hard for the little they have and the students want to do better and have more. In addition, participants noted they want to set an example for their younger siblings and make their parents proud. For most of them, a college degree is the means to higher-paying jobs and better socioeconomic status. This seems especially true for first generation students.

#### **Finding: College counseling is not uniformly available in the high schools.**

There is a big difference between the academic experience of college prep students and those in a general education track at their high schools. Students identified as college bound generally felt they were ready for college and spoke of comprehensive assistance from guidance counselors in selecting appropriate high school curriculum and direction in the college search process.

High school counselors assisted with college application forms, provided recommendation letters and/or supported students in the development of college entry essays. Some participants mentioned their counselors helped them locate and understand federal and state financial aid information.

High school counselors and teachers took a personal interest in particular students; encouraging them to view themselves as college material. Students discussed being pushed by teachers to visit campuses or attend college fairs, but most of them did not take advantage of these types of opportunities.

*"My teacher encouraged me to go to a community college and then to transfer to a 4-year institution."*

Other college hopefuls are pragmatic about their expectations of assistance from their counselors. These students understand that counselors need to attend to the more troubled youth first and that students themselves must be responsible for gathering college information.

However, many students reported they have received neither the encouragement from their teachers nor the assistance from their counselors to pursue a college degree. One student stated that she was unaware that she had taken the ACT. She thought the ACT was just another standardized state exam for her school.

A statement made by another student summarized the experience of many students who are not on the college prep track.

*"I didn't know where to go or who to talk to; I had no sense of direction."*

Some participants told of experiences where counselors would tell students that college was very difficult and the students were doomed to fail. For this group of teenagers there was no attempt by anyone, themselves included, to seek further education.

*"Instead of giving me hope, she (counselor) just put me down."*

At high schools that are not on a college preparatory track, the quality of counseling and advising received by focus group participants seemed dependent on a specific counselor's knowledge and interest rather than on an institution's commitment to Latino student success.

When asked what additional college information students would like to receive, their responses included:

*"I would like to receive information about financial aid, coursework, visit days, social activities, and clubs."*

*"Admissions information is important so that I know if I'm in the right classes."*

*"I have not received anything. My counselor is pushing the community college on me."*

*"Information should be sent earlier so we can get on the right track during high school."*

*"I've received a lot of information from my teachers and online."*

*"I want more specific information such as acceptance rate."*

*"School catalogs would be helpful because they will tell me about my career."*

*"Coursework information."*

*"I would like to receive statistics on graduation rates and how many people found jobs in their major."*

### **Finding: Educational institutions lack role models for Latino students.**

Time and again, participants voiced concern about the lack of Hispanic role models within universities and colleges. A few students mentioned they did not see many Latinos working at their schools other than in maintenance and housekeeping roles. Many students yearned for role models or mentors to guide their progress. With few Latino faculty and staff at the institutions, students felt there was no one who understood or could relate to them culturally.

Every focus group noted the need for more Latino faculty, staff, and students. Students want to look around their classrooms and see other Latino students. Students stated they are more comfortable being advised by Latinos who better understand their culture and challenges. Participants want mentors but do not see enough Latino faculty and staff to provide this guidance.

Students discussed the bias experienced in the classroom. They believe this bias stems from challenges with the English language, accents, Latino surnames, and even appearance. They stated that teachers make assumptions about them without knowing their ability. Students believe faculty expect less from Latino students. They believe that with more Latino faculty, staff, and students, these biases and assumptions would be less prevalent.

### **Finding: College support services for Latino students are available, but are underutilized.**

Although support services are available at all SMHEC colleges and universities, Latino students do not use these services. Even when the services are targeted to Latino students, use appears minimal.

In one focus group, the majority of students stated they do not use the services the college has to offer. None of the participants applied for financial aid. They were unaware of career counseling and don't where it is located. They sought academic advising only for class selection, and were aware of tutoring services and child care services, but did not used them.

At one university, students who participated in Latino clubs and Student Life activities were more aware of available resources and used services such as academic advising and tutoring. Second-year college students are more aware of various services than first-year students. Most participants perceive interaction among students outside the classroom is minimal. They stated most students don't have time to socialize or use support services as they struggle to keep a balance between studies, jobs, and families.

### **Finding: There is significant difference between the barriers experienced by first and second generation students.**

It was noted that first-generation students required far more guidance and information in the college selection process. First-generation students mentioned their parents are unable to help them navigate the path to higher education. ESL students have less exposure to college materials and presentations, and their insecurities with English hold them back even further. In several focus group sessions, students spoke of being unprepared or being perceived as unprepared due to their limited English verbal skills. Second- and third-generation students appear more acculturated and college-savvy than first generation Latino students.

Personal experiences with discrimination varied among students. It was not mentioned in many focus groups. While certain students felt discriminated against, others at the same institution did not. At one institution, students went out of their way to assert they were not discriminated against and their Latino heritage was beneficial in their educational pursuit. Students at another college felt instructors had a bias against all Hispanic students. Feelings of discrimination appear to be teacher-specific, not institution-specific, and more prevalent among first generation students.

Lack of trust stemming from perceived or real discrimination may be the cause of or may contribute to the underutilization of support services at some institutions.

## **Financial Support**

### **Finding: Finances are the driving force behind selection of and attendance at particular colleges.**

Most high school students participating in these focus groups indicated financial considerations determined their college selection and attendance. The lack of financial resources diminishes the pool of schools students select from, and may prevent them from attending college altogether.

Students spoke of their friends' negative experiences in acquiring debt to finance their education. Determined not to accumulate debt, many chose to attend a community college where costs are more affordable. One student did not think it was appropriate to continue school because it would reduce his ability to work. Another student said he waited to pursue a college education because it would be better to work first to help pay for school. Many students and families believe in a "pay as you go" plan which compels students to work full-time while attending college.

## Findings ~ continued

College students want to know more about tuition costs, scholarships, loans, and general financial information. Latino parents know little about costs and fees. Some students were unaware tuition costs may increase throughout their college career. Others were unaware financial aid packages may not increase with tuition increases. They also did not know earning more than \$2,000 per year would decrease their financial aid package.

*"We have part time jobs so we can pay off our loans and contribute to our families. However, the more money we earn the less financial aid we receive."*

Students anticipate working full-time and questioned having the time necessary to dedicate to their studies. One important theme in terms of barriers to college success is that the students find it difficult to work and attend classes full-time. They cited general lack of time for themselves and family and work schedule conflicts as issues.

One student mentioned her school had a student orientation program, but she was unable to attend due to her work schedule. Given the focus on finances, it is not surprising most students expressed a need for assistance gathering information about college costs and potential sources of financial aid.

In addition to cost sensitivity, convenience was highly valued when considering college opportunities. This group primarily investigated campuses close to home when exploring their options. They were interested in opportunities allowing them to advance their careers without traveling to large, distant campuses or disrupting their work schedules. Many valued a sense of comfort, the need to be close to their families, and the desire for personal attention.

### **Finding: Latino parents strongly support their children's college aspirations but lack the "college knowledge" to guide them.**

Students clearly believe their families support their interest in and attendance at college. There are varying degrees of support financially and philosophically, but it is clear parents recognize the importance of attending college and attaining a degree for future success.

However, students state their parents do not understand some aspects of college life and responsibilities. For example, some parents can't understand why students stay up late to do homework or remain on campus after class.



*"My parents don't understand that I can't do things around the house or spend more time with them because I have homework or studying to do."*

Participants frequently mention that their parents did not attend school in the United States and do not understand the American education system. This limits parents' understanding of the importance of a "college prep" curriculum in high school, and the amount of assistance and advice they can offer their children in the college selection process and the transition between high school and college. This parental lack of knowledge strongly impacts student success.

*"My parents are very supportive but they do not have enough information themselves to assist me in the selection process."*

According to the students, additional organizations and individuals support them. Community groups provide financial support and employers encourage schooling, in some cases provide financial incentives (e.g. raises when a degree is attained). A few have been encouraged by neighbors, friends and pastors. A number of students reported they gathered information from college websites and other online resources to aid in their decision making process.

# Recommendations

## **Partner with** *local high schools to provide college counseling opportunities for all students.*

Most high school counselors have many other responsibilities beyond college counseling. Immediate student concerns often take precedence over a student's future plans.

Colleges have a vested interest in partnering with high schools; everyone benefits when students are prepared for the rigors of college.

- *Prepared students are more likely to persist and graduate.*
- *Prepared students have broader college options.*
- *Increased enrollments and higher graduation rates benefit colleges.*
- *Financial aid is used for credit courses, instead of non-credit developmental courses.*

Colleges advisors can partner with high school counselors to present college information, such as the need to take courses beyond those that satisfy high school graduation requirements.

Several Consortium members administer college placement or readiness tests to students at their feeder high schools. These tests provide information on how prepared students are to begin college coursework. This information, when supplied in sophomore and junior year, allows students to register for additional high school classes, increasing their level of college preparation and eliminating the need for later remedial course taking.

## **Provide parents** *with “college knowledge.”*

Parents are a vital part of the student success formula. If they do not understand the educational system or the importance of academic preparation, they are not prepared to support their children's quest for higher education.

The Consortium can assist parents obtain “college knowledge” by providing information on the educational pipeline and discussing how to help students transition smoothly from one level to the next.

As one example, several institutions have conducted financial aid information nights in Spanish to help parents with limited English proficiency understand the application process. These information nights can be replicated across institutions.

## **Create opportunities** *for faculty and staff to enhance their cultural competency.*

Students at several institutions expressed concern about the need for greater cultural sensitivity among faculty and staff. The Consortium should provide opportunities to enhance faculty and staff's understanding of the cultural differences and academic needs of Latino students. SMHEC can present programming on cultural differences within the Latino community and how first generation students differ from second generation students.

## **Improve diversity** *among faculty, staff, and students.*

Participants in all 19 focus groups highlighted the importance of more Latino faculty and staff. Latino faculty bring different points of view to an institution and an awareness of the need for increased cultural sensitivity among faculty, staff, students.

Research abounds on the value of faculty mentors in student success and focus group participants were clear in their belief their mentors should be Latino. To be more effective in serving Latino students, Consortium members need to focus their efforts on minority faculty and staff recruitment.

Additionally, students discussed the need to recruit additional Latino students. Many students commented that the number of Latino students on campus was a significant factor in their school selection. They talked about the impact support groups could have on their success but believed without greater numbers, creation of the support groups, both formal and informal, are unlikely.

It was clear from the focus groups that challenges of first generation students far surpass those of second and third generation Latino students. Focusing on first generation students would optimize limited resources.

## **Implement** *intrusive advising.*

In a 2005 SMHEC study on the educational outcomes of first-time Latino students, one institution graduated Latino students at a higher rate than their white and African American students. That institution attributes its ongoing success to Intrusive Advising, a proactive intervention strategy that requires mandatory advising contacts for students who otherwise might not seek advising. Intrusive advising is especially appropriate for Latino students, many who are disadvantaged and under prepared with limited time for support activities. The Intrusive Advising model could serve as a best practice for other Consortium members to explore.

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