

Project Éxito

Its History, Progress and Future

March 20, 2006

Project Éxito was initiated in 2003 to increase college access, retention and graduation rates for Latino students in the Chicago Southland. In discussions among the Presidents regarding the educational needs of the region, administrators from member institutions noted that Latino students were underrepresented among their student body and were succeeding and graduating at unacceptably low rates. To proactively address this issue, Project Éxito was developed to examine the success of Latino students at each institution and evaluate the policies and practices that affect that success.

A Latino Committee was formed with representation from each of the participating institutions. Early on the committee realized that, for this project to be successful we needed to secure a commitment from senior leadership to support the efforts to *identify gaps in access, retention and success among underserved students* and close those gaps.

Our first effort was to develop a senior leadership conference entitled *Working from Within to Better Serve Latino Students*. [Dr. Juan Andrade](#), the keynote speaker, told his personal story, providing participating administrators with an understanding of the challenges that Latino students face. Sarita Brown and Deborah Santiago, from Excelencia in Education, shared the results of their study, [Latino Student Success at Hispanic Serving Institutions](#).

Our initial efforts attracted the attention of [Dr. Davis Jenkins](#) of UIC. With his assistance we formulated a regional plan, incorporating his 9-step methodology for *Systemic Improvement in the Success of Underserved Students*. Each institution began gathering data on their Latino students' progress and the support network of services and resources available to them.

As a part of the plan we held a year-end workshop with colleagues from Admissions, Advising, Financial Aid, Academic Resources, Student Diversity, faculty and other support areas, during which we shared our work thus far and collected their input on barriers Latino students face in the areas of access, retention and graduation.

With this, we accomplished our primary objectives for the year:

- To secure a consistent commitment from senior leadership to identify and close the gaps in access and attainment among underserved students;
- To develop a plan for identifying gaps in access, retention and success among Latino students; and
- To mobilize our colleagues to participate in self-assessment.

The Latino committee understood that before institutional and regional strategies could be implemented to improve retention and graduation rates we needed accurate and systematic data to track outcomes, to understand the barriers within our own institutions, and to identify the obstacles that keep Latinos from accessing post-secondary education. Although there are nationwide studies about this issue, the institutions wanted to better understand the needs of the Latinos in our area. Hence, we agreed that our first task was a self-assessment. We are still in the process of completing this self-assessment, but this is what we have learned so far.

When examining student records from the fall of 2000, our analyses indicate:

- There are gaps in the attainment of Latino students at the majority of the SMHEC institutions.
- Among students in the 18-23 age groups, Latinos graduated at a higher rate than whites or blacks at only two of the 10 colleges.
- Looking at students in the 24+ age group, Latinos were more likely to graduate at three of the 10 colleges, although the total number of Latino graduates from two of those institutions was very small.
- At only one college, did Latino students graduate at a higher rate than whites in both the 18-23 and 24+ age groups.
- For most of the institutions, the demographics, use of financial aid, course-taking patterns, and outcomes of first time students who were of traditional college age (18-23) differed markedly from those of older first-time students (those who are 24+).
- In most of the colleges that offer developmental education, the rate at which students test into developmental education differs from the rate at which students actually take developmental courses.
- The rate at which students in the 24+ age group took developmental education at the eight colleges that offer such instruction is generally much lower than the rate at which 18-23 year olds took remediation.
- Among the community colleges, very few students completed occupational certificates.

Based on the findings the following recommendations were made:

- The institutions where Latino students complete at a lower rate than whites should diagnose the reasons for the gaps in Latino achievement by drilling down into the data to uncover root causes.
- These institutions should also conduct interviews and focus groups with faculty, student services staff and students themselves to identify the causes of poor achievement by Latino students.
- The institutions with Latino completion gaps should examine what the institutions, where Latinos graduate at a higher rate do to make that happen.
- Colleges should seek to ensure that students have equitable access to aid according to their need.
- Institutions should review their assessment and placement policies to ensure that all students who might need remediation are tested and that students who lack the skills for college-level work receive sufficient support to prepare them to succeed in college.
- Colleges should explore whether fewer older students need remediation or whether older students avoid taking developmental courses.
- The colleges that offer developmental instruction should explore the connection between participation in developmental education and student outcomes, particularly since in most cases such a high proportion of students need remediation.
- The community colleges should explore why so few students earn occupational certificates even though these colleges have substantial certificate offerings.

Data collection also included conducting a survey of the services available to support Latino student success. In sharing this information among institutions we can identify better ways to create partnerships and develop new ideas to better serve Latino students. The results of the survey led to the realization, by our institutions' administration, that the addition or reconfiguration of existing services would be beneficial to Latino students' success.

In a workshop held with faculty, student support, admissions, and financial aid staff from each of the institutions, the Latino committee shared what they had learned thus far from the self-

assessments and listened to attendees share their experiences working with Latino students. We learned that faculty and staffs, which have first hand contact with Latino students, have considerable knowledge about the students' needs and have useful suggestions. We believe that it takes faculty, student services, and administrators working in concert to improve the retention and graduation rates of Latino students.

Within the realm of Project Éxito we saw a unique opportunity to educate and enlighten content area faculty in our various institutions about the experiences and needs of first generation students. Faculty must recognize the need for more curricular and administrative innovation in order to meet the needs of these first generation and diverse students. Most importantly, to guarantee success and quality improvement, faculty must also be given the tools to deal with the new classroom realities, so they can modify, change and actualize instruction in a more effective and creative fashion that will result in a closing of the gap between minority and other students. In the workshop on Generation 1.5 students, we introduced the faculty and staff to the current body of research surrounding teaching and learning related to Generation 1.5 learners.

As a part of our qualitative self-assessment, we wanted to obtain students self-reports of what they perceived made it possible for them to succeed in school, and continue to be successful in college. Likewise, we wanted to understand which obstacles they faced in the high school-college transition, the obstacles and barriers faced once they were in college, and also the obstacles faced by students in the transition from 2-yr to 4-yr colleges. We wanted to gain a better understanding of what types of support the students felt helped them succeed, and what was missing or lacking in order to help them complete their education and graduate.

With technical assistance from [Women Employed](#) we designed focus groups to hear first hand reports from current and potential students of perceived and experienced barrier to access, retention and graduation. Twenty one focus groups were conducted in a two month period.

Preliminary data analysis of the focus groups points to the following:

- The difficulty in transitions from high school to college, ESL courses to college, and transferring from community colleges to 4-year institutions.
- The difficulty and confusion surrounding the financing of college from financial aid, and completing the FAFSA to the high cost of textbooks and unexpected tuition increases.
- The students' sense of being culturally misunderstood by faculty.
- Students' fear of falling behind in their coursework or failing academically.
- Second and third generation students appeared to be savvier and far better informed about the college process overall. First generation students including those in bi-lingual programs appeared less knowledgeable about college.

As we proceed with Project Éxito, our future activities will continue to focus on improving three areas: access, retention and graduation. These future plans include:

Access

- 1) Develop partnership plans
 - a. Review findings with feeder high schools and develop partnership plans.
 - b. Develop relations with guidance counselors from feeder high schools and develop resources to distribute to their students.
 - c. Increase the number of transfer students from 2 year schools to 4 years schools between SMHEC partner institutions.
- 2) Community involvement

- a. Consult with groups that serve the Latino community.
 - b. Determine how well our student bodies reflect the demographics of our service area and offer some indication of the preparedness of prospective students from feeder high schools.
- 3) Pilot strategies
- a. Develop conferences and workshops, bringing together high school and college counselors, high school teachers and college faculty to develop strategies and share expertise.
 - b. Pilot strategies for closing the gap and evaluate their effectiveness.

Retention/Graduation

- 4) Work with faculty
- a. Work with faculty to diagnose the causes of gaps and develop strategies to close the gaps.
 - b. Invite Deans of Colleges to communicate findings to pass on to the faculty of SMHEC partner institutions.
- 5) Continue to analyze data
- a. Continue to analyze data on student performance and outcomes.
 - b. Use collected data to implement enrollment strategies and student services programs that will enhance Latino student success.
- 6) Continue ongoing communication with presidents and institutional leaders.