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SUPPORTING LATINO COLLEGE ACHIEVEMENT

Insights from the LATIDO Roundtable

M *DRC is working with the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office to study the state's efforts to improve college outcomes for Latinos — in particular, the approaches being taken at two-year and four-year colleges that qualify as Hispanic-Serving Institutions. This brief covers the first step in that project: a daylong conversation among researchers, policymakers, and college faculty members and administrators about what needs to be done.*

Latinos are the largest and fastest-growing ethnic group in California, and their college enrollment numbers continue to rise faster than those of other groups in the state. But there are gaps in college outcomes between Latinos and white and Asian students, typically associated with disparities in socioeconomic status, high school preparation, and college guidance.¹ Research indicates that Latinos are less likely than other groups to graduate with an associate's or bachelor's degree within a six-year time frame.² And among students who have completed the requirements for transfer to a four-year university, Latinos are less likely to complete the transfer process.³

In response to the low college success rates of Latinos and other underrepresented groups, California's higher education systems have made large investments in recent years designed to improve student outcomes. In 2017, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) released *Vision for Success*,⁴ a strategic plan that outlines its goals for increasing graduation and transfer rates and closing achievement gaps. A major component of the plan is the state's new Guided Pathways Project, which the CCCCCO considers the organizing framework for community college initiatives to integrate, strengthen, and scale up student support programs that serve specific campus needs or student groups. Meanwhile, in 2016, the Cali-

1 U.S. Department of Education (2016).

2 Valliani (2015).

3 Cooper et al. (2017).

4 Foundation for California Community Colleges (2017).

California State University (CSU) system launched its Graduation Initiative 2025, which aims to significantly increase its six-year graduation rate to 60 percent and reduce the completion gap between underrepresented students and other students by half.⁵ As part of the initiative, each CSU campus is responsible for developing and implementing a student success plan.

Recognizing these system-wide initiatives, MDRC — in collaboration with the CCCCO — launched the Latino Academic Transfer and Institutional Degree Opportunities (LATIDO) project, which aims to examine approaches to increasing the transfer and college completion rates of Latino students attending Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) in California.⁶ Research has demonstrated the value of HSIs as incubators for efforts to promote such achievement,⁷ and many higher education stakeholders have called for continued research and dialogue about what colleges are doing to become truly “Hispanic serving.”⁸ The LATIDO project builds on this research by examining policies and practices in California HSIs that are organized around cultural responsiveness to Latino student populations. The lessons gleaned from the LATIDO project are intended to further inform the larger completion agendas for CCCCO, CSU, and California policymakers, as well as other HSIs and colleges across the country that are making efforts to close achievement gaps.

To help guide the project, MDRC facilitated a one-day roundtable discussion with experts who possess in-depth knowledge of Latino college achievement and HSI policies and practices. On December 4, 2017, more than 20 researchers, faculty members, practitioners, policymakers, and system leaders joined MDRC staff members to discuss key factors related to Latino college success and the role HSIs play in fostering this success, and to recommend ways to further support Latino transfer and completion.⁹ The resulting insights from the roundtable have informed MDRC’s approach to the second part of the LATIDO project during the spring 2018 term, consisting of six case studies of promising approaches implemented at California HSIs.

Several key themes emerged from the roundtable discussion concerning the need to align goals, commit to diversity, adopt holistic approaches, and collect more useful data, as discussed below. These themes are applicable both to the specific HSI landscape in California and to other institutions across the country that seek to improve the postsecondary outcomes of Latino students.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS: A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

California Community Colleges Chancellor Eloy Oakley and Deputy Chancellor Erik Skinner

5 California State University (2018).

6 As defined by the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) are defined as nonprofit colleges, universities, or districts where Latinos make up at least 25 percent of the total enrollment. HSIs are eligible to apply for federal funding under Title V of the Higher Education Act, which was created to assist colleges serving Latino students, and for membership in HACU.

7 Santiago (2008).

8 Malcom-Piqueux and Bensimon (2015).

9 For a complete list of LATIDO roundtable participants, see Appendix.

opened the LATIDO roundtable asserting that the state’s vision for sustaining its civic and economic well-being depends on the overall educational attainment of its Latino population. Fulfilling this vision requires the systems of higher education in California to collectively address the major challenges that Latino students typically face. For instance, Latino students are more likely to enter college underprepared academically and start in developmental education courses (also referred to as remedial or basic skills courses) and to underuse support services that could ease their progress toward successful transfer and degree completion. While there is a statewide urgency to find solutions that can help Latino college students, the chancellor cautioned against repeating approaches that are not grounded in evidence-based reform. He said, “Something very different needs to happen to address these [challenges]. I have been attending meetings like this for years, and it’s clear that we need to change the way we are approaching the problem.” The chancellor stated that a “shared responsibility” must be accepted by the community of educators, researchers, and lawmakers from across the state to decide what must change and how to coordinate efforts to improve Latino students’ college outcomes.

The roundtable experts shared and debated key institutional factors that can promote successful persistence through transfer and graduation for Latino college students. Throughout the day’s discussions, four prominent themes emerged about institutional characteristics and changes that participants consider essential for California HSIs to advance Latino student success:

- Better **alignment of goals** and intended outcomes across different educational departments and institutions

- Commitments to **equity, diversity, and cultural competence** fostered by institutional leadership and widely endorsed by the faculty and staff
- Programs and services with **holistic approaches** that support the educational experiences of Latino students and their communities
- Better **data and metrics**, disaggregated by race and ethnicity, to measure Latino student outcomes

Better Alignment of Goals

Echoing the chancellor’s call for shared responsibility, the roundtable experts agreed there is a clear need to develop stronger **cross-department, cross-institution, and cross-system partnerships** that operate under a set of aligned goals to better prepare Latino students to navigate through the stages of their education. The multiple systems of higher education in California — as well as the different departments within the institutions themselves — often create programs and policies with limited collaboration, leaving many incoming students confused about how to advance from course level to course level or transfer from institution to institution. The roundtable experts suggested that before they even begin their higher education, Latino students — many of whom are the first generation of their families to attend college — do not receive sufficient messages in high school that convey the variation and complexity that await them in college.

The aforementioned California Guided Pathways initiative will be an opportunity for community colleges to bring together resources from current system-wide initiatives that aim to increase student support and guidance, such as the [Basic Skills Initiative](#), the [Student Success and Support Program](#), and

Student Equity programs, so that institutions can cooperate in steering more students through certificate completion, degree completion, or university transfer.¹⁰ The experts anticipated that further integration of these initiatives and their funding streams would maximize institutional capacity so that different programs can operate with interconnected goals and desired outcomes.

Another key topic that was debated during the roundtable concerned the merits of having tiered levels of **developmental education**, in which California's Latino students are overrepresented when they begin college.¹¹ While some experts argued that many students of color — especially those from low-income communities — come in underprepared for college rigor because of the education they receive in high school, others insisted that current placement practices at colleges sometimes unfairly assess Latino students' attainment and skill levels, thereby placing a disproportionate number of Latino students in developmental courses that can take several semesters to complete. There is great variation across the state's community college system in determining developmental education placement. Although the majority of colleges use an assessment test, the type of test differs across colleges and districts, as do the cutoff scores that determine placement levels. Colleges also differ in the extent to which they use measures other than assessment test scores, such as high school performance, to make placement decisions — with some schools using high

school performance measures for all incoming students and others only upon a student's request.¹²

In California, only 41 percent of community college students who start in developmental education go on to complete a degree or certificate or successfully transfer.¹³ Roundtable participants recognize that very few Latino students make it through the multiple stages of developmental math and reading and writing sequences because of the amount of time it takes. Low success rates through the developmental sequences are not exclusive to Latino students, but because Latinos are more likely than other racial/ethnic groups in California to be required to take such courses, they are less likely to begin college-level course work.¹⁴

Roundtable experts expressed hope that California's Assembly Bill (AB) 705 — which is designed to develop a set of standards, including high school grades, for California colleges to use as part of their placement practices — will lead to more consistent use of multiple measures, reducing the number of students required to take developmental education courses, and by extension the number of semesters and financial aid devoted to courses for which students gain no credit.¹⁵ This could, in turn, increase the likelihood that students will complete college-level course requirements in English and math within one year.

With so many Latinos starting higher education in community college, **simplifying the transfer path**

¹⁰ California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (2016).

¹¹ Valliani (2015).

¹² Rodriguez, Cuellar-Mejia, and Johnson (2016).

¹³ California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (2017).

¹⁴ Cuellar-Mejia, Rodriguez, and Johnson (2016).

¹⁵ Preston (2017).

is another institutional and system priority named by roundtable experts. They noted that the Associate Degrees for Transfer (AD-T) program,¹⁶ which was developed in 2010 to simplify the community college-to-CSU transfer process, has helped Latino students take advantage of this transfer path,¹⁷ but better implementation at the colleges and further data analysis once students transfer are needed. Strengthening guidance on transfers from two-year to four-year colleges will require these institutions to work together to find out what happens to Latino students throughout the transfer process, to address common obstacles to persistence — such as long developmental education sequences or difficult math courses — and to create clearer and less complex requirements for students to reach completion.

Commitments to Equity, Diversity, and Cultural Competence

A substantial amount of time was spent at the roundtable discussing the need to increase institutional cultural competence and a **commitment to equity** that starts with institutional leadership and takes root among the faculty and staff. Experts noted the importance of having a college president and other senior administrators set the tone for promoting equity, both through institutional messaging and by making institutional resources available for efforts to reduce the achievement gaps between student groups. Research also confirms the importance of leaders taking specific steps to monitor their institutions' mission-driven goals

and values.¹⁸ But the experts pointed out that many HSI leaders still face challenges in selling the faculty and staff on their equity agendas; identifying more faculty leaders on this issue is necessary to transform an institution's overall culture.

There was a resounding consensus among experts at the roundtable for **hiring more faculty members of color** at HSIs and at other colleges that enroll large numbers of Latinos and other students of color. Roundtable participants observed that the demographic makeup of the faculty at California community colleges and CSU campuses does not match up with the student diversity. The small numbers of faculty members of color — and in particular Latino faculty members — has resulted in Latino undergraduates having a limited number of instructors who look like them. Moreover, there is an often uncompensated “cultural taxation”¹⁹ placed on faculty members from underrepresented communities who are expected to serve as the de facto faculty mentor or student organization sponsor for students who come from the same or a similar cultural background. There is more demographic diversity among adjunct faculty, but participants noted that it takes a long time for part-time instructors to land a full-time position at their institutions. They emphasized the importance of having more faculty members who look like the students and understand the community they come from, and who add different perspectives to the teaching and learning taking place in the classroom as well as to the decisions being made on faculty committees and other institution-wide working groups.

16 The AD-T is a two-year associate's degree that is fully transferrable to CSU and allows students to enter CSU at junior-level status.

17 Cooper et al. (2017).

18 Taylor, Milem, and Coleman (2016).

19 Padilla (1994).

Along with a need to diversify their faculties, the experts felt that California’s HSIs have an opportunity to infuse professional development with training for **culturally responsive pedagogy**, which refers to teaching practices that recognize the cultural values, traditions, and learning styles of students’ communities.²⁰ Institutions typically do not require all faculty members to undergo such training, but roundtable participants agreed that it would give faculty members better awareness about what goes on in Latino students’ lives outside of the classroom. Instructors adopting culturally responsive pedagogical practices could help students balance other life commitments that are priorities among many Latinos, such as family caretaking, work, and community involvement. Roundtable experts said that culturally responsive pedagogy might serve to hinder implicit bias on the part of faculty about the ability of students of color to succeed in college, while also fostering students’ social-emotional learning and identity development in the classroom. Faculty members, they maintained, are typically well positioned to help Latino students stay enrolled in college, given their regular contact with students and their ability to encourage and reinforce a love of learning and a commitment to achieving academic goals.

Holistic Approaches

The roundtable experts would encourage more HSIs to offer **holistic, multiservice programs** that provide support for a larger proportion of Latino students on campus. Such programs exist: State-funded programs such as the [Extended Opportunity Program and Services \(EOPS\)](#), which have been well established in many HSIs for decades, provide enriched academic instruction and college prepa-

ration to help enroll and retain Latino students and students from other groups who lack economic and social resources. Culturally based, student-centered programs — for example, the [Puente Project](#) and the [Umoja Community](#) — provide similar academic, financial, and social-emotional support to help traditionally marginalized students of color feel a stronger sense of belonging at their institutions and to create for them a college experience that matches their backgrounds and family life. The experts said they consider these programs to be models for improving the chances of Latino students to stay on course through successful transfer or degree completion, but they pointed out that such programs typically operate on limited budgets and thus do not have the capacity to serve all students who could benefit from the services they provide.

Roundtable participants also saw **mentoring and cohort programs** for Latino students as essential in helping them navigate unfamiliar academic processes and learn about the campus services and resources at their disposal. College programs that facilitate mentoring relationships between students and faculty members — or between new and seasoned students — can allow Latino and other underserved students to experience quality interactions on campus.²¹ Mentoring and cohort programs offer students a wide network of peers and role models who can provide advice, support, and career exposure; encourage them to stay on track; and hold them accountable for their educational goals. One example of a program touted by experts is the [McNair Scholars Program](#), which provides students of color with an opportunity to conduct research projects within their fields of interest as part of a peer cohort model. Similarly, experts

²⁰ Umbach (2006).

²¹ Taylor, Milem, and Coleman (2016).

pointed to a recent study of federal HSI STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) grants at CSU campuses, which found that mentoring had positive impacts for low-income minority participants on degree completion in STEM fields within five years.²²

Finally, roundtable participants called on HSIs to go beyond their own institutions and develop programs and partnerships with the **surrounding community**. Stronger collaboration among education, business, and government entities could identify key resources to help Latino constituents address challenges and seize opportunities that arise. Connecting HSIs to their surrounding communities can facilitate the dissemination of “college knowledge” and resources to Latino families and other groups who primarily reside in underserved areas, who have a low income, or who are English learners.²³ An example of such a partnership mentioned at the roundtable is the [L.A. Compact initiative](#), which fosters collaborative strategies among different high schools, colleges, community-based organizations, and industries with the common purpose of advancing student outcomes and opportunities throughout the region. Within L.A. Compact, the Institutions of Higher Education Collaborative has brought together regional colleges and universities in the Greater Los Angeles area, along with the Los Angeles Unified School District, under a common goal of helping all students in the district graduate from high school prepared to succeed in college and careers.

Better Data and Metrics

According to the roundtable experts, there remains a need for consistent sources of data that HSIs can use to assess how well policies and practices are working for Latino college students. **Disaggregating program-level data by race and ethnicity**, while also aligning data systems across institutions and systems, is seen as necessary for HSIs to identify particular areas where Latino students need support and guidance.²⁴ For instance, while experts pointed to the AD-T program as making notable progress in expanding transfer options to CSU schools, some suggested that further data analysis is still needed to understand the impact the program has specifically for Latinos who successfully make a transfer and how well they fare after entering four-year destinations. A closer look at Latino student success after transfer to a university could provide further insights on how transitions have gone and what bridge supports were helpful; it could also help HSIs better discern which approaches are effective for Latino students and which are promising for all students.

An important part of becoming more data driven is first to agree on **what defines “success”** at different stages and to put those success measures side by side with data about what typically happens to Latino students before, during, and after college. Although data about longer-term indicators, such as successful transfer and degree completion, can inform HSIs on how to better organize their policies, roundtable participants consider lessons from implementing short-term success indicators equally important. Policies informed by short-term indicators include encouraging full-time

²² Olson, Sayson, Mahoney, and Haviland (2016).

²³ Nichols (2017).

²⁴ Santiago (2008).

enrollment, increasing the amount of financial aid for which students are eligible, and reducing the number of courses or credits needed for degree completion. Participants believe clear and specific indicators of success provide HSIs and other colleges with better benchmarks to strive for and build on when improvements are needed.

Finally, experts underscored the value of better understanding qualitative data that provide access to “**student voice**,” which can be gathered through interviews, survey data, and campus observations. Faculty and staff members can use the data to improve their classroom and program practices and direct struggling Latino students toward the appropriate resources.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

The final session of the LATIDO roundtable provided time for participants to reflect on the themes discussed in earlier sessions and to offer suggestions for further supporting Latino college achievement at the state, local, and institutional levels. The following bullets are key recommendations for HSIs in California seeking to improve institutional policies and practices:

- Develop stronger articulation agreements and align requirements across the state systems and between academic departments. This would simplify transfer requirements and expand options for Latino students to complete the courses they need to move from one institution to the next.
- Continue the process of integrating state investments in California HSIs across programs and funding streams — including federal Title V HSI funding — and make goals and outcomes for these multiple investments more compatible. The state has already taken steps in this direction, with Governor Jerry Brown proposing to create a new formula for community colleges that would consolidate funding for various student support programs into one pot of money, to provide districts with greater flexibility.²⁵
- Have HSI college presidents and senior leaders articulate and communicate the importance of being a Hispanic-Serving Institution, which includes allocating institutional investments into cultural and social-emotional support systems that are accessible to large numbers of Latino students on campus.
- Align learning standards, curricula, and skill development between high schools and colleges to better prepare Latino students to enter into college-level courses in their first college year and reduce their chances of being placed in remedial courses.
- Require that hiring practices include intentional recruitment of qualified faculty and staff of color for full-time positions, and require training and professional development practices to include culturally responsive pedagogy and curricular development.
- Increase institutional capacity to collect data on persistence and completion disaggregated by race and ethnicity, as well as successful transfer and post-transfer data between systems.

²⁵ Brown (2018).

GATHERING MORE EVIDENCE: LATIDO CASE STUDIES

As the CCCCO and CSU work toward their respective statewide initiatives to increase completion rates for all students, the LATIDO project provides an opportunity to examine how HSIs in the state are successfully working to integrate, strengthen, and scale up existing programs and practices, particularly for their growing base of Latino students.

As mentioned in the introduction, the expert insights and recommendations taken from the roundtable and highlighted in this brief inform the approach that MDRC is using to conduct six case studies as part of the LATIDO project. First, the roundtable discussions helped guide the selection of HSI sites with promising institutional strategies that merit deeper investigation. During the spring 2018 semester, MDRC will visit six of these community colleges and CSU campuses. A focal point for the case studies will be to distinguish best practices that are specific to improving outcomes for Latino students and those that can improve outcomes for any student. While the case studies will primarily examine institution-wide policies and practices, some of them will also examine two specific areas: local two-year and four-year partnerships that strengthen the transfer pathways between institutions, and strategies for better serving Latino males. Recent data show that Latino males were the least likely demographic group in California to transfer from community college to a four-year university.²⁶

CONCLUSION

As more Latinos pursue postsecondary education, altering the demographic complexion of the student body at many California colleges, these institutions must develop methods that effectively support Latino students academically and culturally. HSIs are becoming models for maximizing the effect of policies and practices on Latino postsecondary attainment rates, an important factor in California's goals for increasing college transfer and degree completion rates overall.

The LATIDO roundtable provided an opportunity for expert scholars, practitioners, and supporters to discuss promising institutional actions and existing research that California HSIs can draw on. The roundtable and MDRC's subsequent case studies are highlighting new approaches with the potential to help California colleges that are increasingly "Hispanic enrolling" to become truly "Hispanic serving."

²⁶ Cooper et al. (2017).

APPENDIX

LATIDO Roundtable Participants

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