

Transcription for

THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 20: LATINO STUDENT SUCCESS AND HOW TO CLOSE EQUITY GAPS

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PAUL FAIN

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PAUL FAIN: Hello, welcome to another episode of The Key with IHE. I'm Paul Fain, a contributing editor at Inside Higher Ed and the show's host. A growing body of evidence shows that Latinos have particularly hard hit by the pandemic and recession. And last month the group Excelencia in Education released its latest data analysis on Latino representation in higher education, as well as degree attainment and completion rates. The group found progress for Latinos nationwide but they also found equity gaps remain. We spoke with Deborah Santiago, Excelencia's co-founder and CEO, to hear about the report's findings and key indicators for Latino students.

DEBORAH SANTIAGO: We're more likely to still be enrolled six years later, so there's the persistence issue that's rarely talked about, right? Retention is what institutions do, persistence is what students do. And I wish we had those kinds of conversations a little bit more.

PAUL FAIN: Santiago also went beyond the data to talk about what some institutions are doing right and where opportunities exist for colleges to do better.

DEBORAH SANTIAGO: There's some institutions that their data look great, but sometimes, you know, because they've selected out issues of equity.

PAUL FAIN: Let's get to the conversation.

Deborah Santiago, good to see you. Thanks for joining me.

DEBORAH SANTIAGO: Thank you, Paul. Good to be with you.

PAUL FAIN: So not too long ago, Excelencia put out a new report, some data on Latino representation in higher education, completion. Some good news, some not so good news. But I thought maybe we'd start with just the numbers of representation. I mean, this was a big and growing population, correct?

DEBORAH SANTIAGO: Yes it is. We've been running this poll since 2009 when there was conversation back then, President Obama had wanted to be first in the world in degree completion and set a goal. We're a small organization, but we said, you know what? We need to bring a Latino lens to this and pay attention to where Latinos need to be to add value to where a nation needs to be overall.

And in that time, so 11 years we've been tracking this and releasing these data, but their representation has continued to grow, as we knew it would. I think that's part of the story.

I think the other part of the story is what we've done with completion to close gaps, but also the opportunity we have to take action in a proactive way. And really for us, the data are not just for their sake, it really is how it does it inform and compel action in ways that are very asset-based, that are positive, and can make a difference, because I think that's what the opportunity we all have in front of us.

PAUL FAIN: Right now, numbers show one in five students in higher ed is Latino currently...

DEBORAH SANTIAGO: That's right. One in four in K-12, and actually we've done this data, one in three, zero to five, one in four, K-12, one in five in higher ed. So, and then one in five, just under five, if you're looking at one in six of the population. We tend to be young in terms of our average age, and the potential of addressing the educational pipeline now is clear in that data. So when you think about the

numbers, we've tried to do a projection of where we need to be in 2013, assuming the closure of equity gaps in attainment, our calculations, we have got all the methodology if you're interested, but 6.2 million degrees by 2030 are needed to close the equity gap in attainment. And for us, Paul, that means that we want every population to increase in degree attainment, but to close the gaps in attainment, we have to accelerate Latino students success while everybody's increasing if we're going to close the gap. And these data are an attempt to just quantify what does that look like in terms of enrollment, completion, graduation, and how do we need to frame a baseline for action.

Taking a look at the fact that less in one in four adults have an associate degree or higher, compared to white non-Hispanics where that number is 46 percent, so almost one in two. That's a powerful opportunity for us to see what can we do in higher ed now, we can we do in K-12, so that we see more parity in a time-bound way, which means these students are already in our educational system. That's one way to understand these data that can be useful.

Another one is to take a look at the K-12 population and the adults. And when you see nationally, as I said, one in four in K-12 are Hispanic, and then you see that one in four adults that are Latino have an associate degree or higher, what does that mean about the opportunity to make sure we're addressing first-generation college goers, that we're addressing the opportunities to make sure that our policies are addressing the reality of our population overall. I think those are big parts of it.

And then the last of the data that I'll share in the short-run as we give context, Paul, is, you know, we tried to take a look at measures. And for us, traditional conventional measures, like graduation rates, they are very good metrics for traditional conventional pathways to completion for students overall. Traditional students, traditional pathways, and traditional students and pathways.

So when you look at that information, you see that the Latino profile is not all that consistent. We're more likely to swirl, to go part-time, to stop out. You know, all those characteristics that our audience knows, and so we've always tried to figure out what are additional metrics that can tell us more about the story of progress and opportunity for completion for Latino students.

And this year is the first year we've approached it this way, because the data has evolved. And we took a look at degree outcome by two-year, four-year, and we took a look at whether they were, had graduated or had transferred, were still enrolled, or were no longer enrolled. And we tried to compare. We compared Hispanic students--that's how the data are listed by the Department of Ed, so we used that term--compared to the white non-Hispanics, because that's the biggest population where we see

the progress that we want others to make sure that we are continuing to work towards. And we see equity gaps in attainment for the most recent population. So while degree attainment is overall, we still see gaps. They've closed, they've gotten better, but they're still significant. And for us, looking at completion policies, retention policies, transfer policies, and investments, return policies for those who left---those are powerful opportunities for action that we're hoping that gets reinforced with these kinds of data.

PAUL FAIN: I really like the way you cast pipeline, you know, one in three up to age five, 6.2 million degrees needed. You know, the work is there and that makes sense to me. Can you talk a little bit about how big some of the gaps you found in this more holistic completion metric that you used. I mean, how big, how much work do we have there?

DEBORAH SANTIAGO: Paul, we took a look nationally and then we looked by individual state, and we included DC and Puerto Rico, because we this is not just about federal action work. In fact, given the current environment, it not necessarily, or maybe has been quite as compelling as what happens at the institution and the state level. So where we really see these gaps, some at the national level for sure, but I would say there's some states where there's real standouts for opportunity for investment support.

At the national level, when we look at four-year institutions, we see greater gaps in completion than two-year institutions, just to give you a quick snapshot for people to consider. The gap in attainment in a given year, our most recent year of data that we had for the Department of Ed, shows there is gap of completion of 12 percent between Hispanics and white non-Hispanics overall in completion. We're more likely to still be enrolled six years later, so there's the persistence issue that's rarely talked about, right? Retention is what institutions do, persistence is what students do. And I wish we had those kinds of conversations a little bit more, how institutions can transform to better serve students who have different contexts and realities that are unconventional.

And then those that leave. That's really significantly better, I mean, a challenge, because we have a third of Hispanics who start are four-year institutions leave without a degree. That's clear, that I would love to close gaps in completion, but what that's a critical area for focus. It's about 24, 25 percent for white non-Hispanics but it's almost a third for Latinos.

So those are just two examples. We can drill down by state, and we can drill down... We tried also to identify the top institutions enrolling and graduating Latinos, because for community-based organizations and local folks, you know, in institutions, they want to see themselves and where they are,

who's doing a good job in completion, who still has opportunities to grow.

PAUL FAIN: Just briefly, with the opportunities, I like the way you frame that, you know...

DEBORAH SANTIAGO: [LAUGH]

PAUL FAIN: I'm guessing, an obvious conjecture here, but that for Latino students, probably more likely to leave a four-year institution in part because of work and family responsibility... Is that what you think part of the gap?

DEBORAH SANTIAGO: That is, if you put the onus completely on the student. I think the other part is making sure that we pay attention to the responsibility the institution has to the student and that social contract, right?

PAUL FAIN: Let's talk about that. I mean, I think I have some ideas of what some of that might be, but where do institutions fall short in making sure that students are able to continue?

DEBORAH SANTIAGO: We talk a lot about the need to be intentional in serving Latino students. We need to be intentional in serving all of our students in this day and age, but I think one of the biggest challenges we've seen is institutions that want to remain conventional in their strategy and their approaches when you're dealing with a very post-traditional student body. And to us, Latino students are much more representative of that post-traditional student. And, you know, life happens between 18 and 24, when you're 18, and possibilities versus as you get older, and the pulls of the economic environment, family and others, the limited support services on campuses, the feeling of belonging, all of those are, I don't mean to sound, you know, squishy and qualitative, but when we talk to students about their likelihood of persisting and then retaining, and see what institutions are doing, I think an awareness of the reality of our students actually now, you know, not just with the pandemic but with the epidemic of structural inequities and racism that most institutions were built on, having to find ways to confront that from a student perspective and lens, I think institutions have to have more humility about what it takes to serve these students well. And many of them aren't. And the ones we choose to work with and who choose to work with us are willing to be more critical about this growing population and the potential. And you can't do business the way you've done it before and expect to see the same results if the students that come to you have other strengths and needs.

PAUL FAIN: Absolutely. Never more true than it is now.

We're going to take a quick break. Please stick with us.

[MUSIC]

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Could you talk about some of the institutions that you identified that do seem to have a better handle on how to do this well and what it is that they do?

DEBORAH SANTIAGO: Yeah, we are just a facilitator, a listener for what good work is being done out there. And so our way of understanding this is predicated on those of common cause who are trying to do well by students. And I say that as a caveat, because there's some institutions, their data look great, but sometimes, you know, because they've selected out issues of equity. And so we, that's good on them but that's not where we focus our energy. And I say that because we look at a combination of data, practice, and leadership to determine if an institution is being intentional in serving the students they have. And I say it that way because we've been listing institutions for 20 years, [UNCLEAR] data can tell you some, the direction in some ways, but it doesn't give you the context of what it takes to serve students with intentionality. That was sort of a long-winded way, but I had to give context for the institutions that we've seen are doing some important work, not because they've figured it all out, but because their commitment to trying to figure it out is what at Excelencia, we're choosing to focus our energy on.

You look at the top institutions graduating Hispanics overall. We work with all of those institutions and we [UNCLEAR] pretty much. Florida International University, dynamic leadership, you look at their data, it's really year over year, five years running, we take a look at five years of data and see how they are performing. You see momentum growth. We see efforts in institutional practices aligned that explain why they've improved, especially when it comes to the Latino lens to these students. We see the same when we're looking at other institutions, Cal State, California State University, Channel Islands, has been doing some really good work for a long time, small and newer campus. University Texas El Paso, Austin

Community College, Valencia College. I mean, speaking of surprises, they stand out, I think, at the national stage as well overall. But what we've seen in talking to faculty, staff, students, and their leadership is that there's a commitment to cause that compels.

PAUL FAIN: Absolutely. And, you know, the ones that you listed I often think of as being quite good in their relationships across the two-year and four-year divide, you know, Valencia in particular, but, you know, FIU and Miami Dade, I mean, these are, they're institutions that make these transfer pathways as strong as any around the country. That's part of this too, I guessing.

DEBORAH SANTIAGO: Absolutely. So, you know, El Paso Community College is a power partner with University of Texas El Paso, absolutely. You know, for us, Paul, we've taken a look at the Latino pathway and we often tend to enroll close where we live, and the potential to graduate is there. So we often talk about, you know, Hispanic-serving institutions, asking are you an HIS by demography, geography, or intentionality and impact. And our interest is in the latter, not negating the former, but there's an intentionality in their efforts that makes a difference. And every single one of them has some tie-in, tie back to a community college and/or their service area that allows there to be more culturally relevant understanding and perspectives. There's a tie-in so that the social network students have has been valued and leveraged rather than assuming, you know, in loco parentis. You know, you're enrolled now. We are now your family and negating that. Those are the kinds of things we see matter and make a difference.

PAUL FAIN: You know, to take a step back, you mentioned the feeling of belonging, you know, the student supports that--you used the word squishy--I like that. You know, the data backs that up. It's a big driver in people's success in higher ed. And it also these days, anxiety and uncertainty are just amplified to a profound degree. You know, as you look forward in higher ed's big moment here, you know, how concerned are you about traditional institutions being able to help students through their anxiety and uncertainty, when, as we've said, you know, this population of students has been hit the hardest of all.

DEBORAH SANTIAGO: Again, not to be [UNCLEAR], when I see the differences when you see institutions and leadership that can acknowledge who they're serving and see the need that they have as well as the strengths, it does make a difference. I think traditional four-year institutions have a lot of positive things that work in their favor and their ability to serve students, especially Latino students and other post-traditional students. They can create an environment that's supportive, that's engaging. That means that sometimes we have to rethink if they're not living on campus, what does that look like?

And, you know, the people who touch students that most are faculty, right? They're in their classes and others. I think the leverage opportunity if you've got faculty and staff to engage them, they're teaching because they want to contribute, engage with students. So we see institutions that leverage the positive influence and benefit of faculty with students. We see institutions that are sometimes reconsidering their limited resources to put it where the student need is. We work with a lot of institutions that say mental and emotional health of students, as to your point, Paul, escalated as an absolute priority. And the institutions that I see that are grappling with that well have partnered with community-based organizations and service providers outside of the campus lines to create a more holistic support of the students that they have.

And at the end of the day, I think a social contract that an institution has with a student, if the student has chosen to enroll there, help them get to and through, I see that as different. As opposed to some other institutions that, and I think historically, the onus was completely on the student to figure it all out on their own. I just think that, given the demographic changes, meaning less traditional college-age students available overall and the need to get more adults in to address more of our male population that you've got to take ownership and responsibility of our part of institutions in that, rather than just leaving all of the responsibility to students. Students have responsibility, by the way, I don't mean to minimize that. But you know what I mean.

PAUL FAIN: Well, I think particularly now, there's discussion of maybe too much being put on students. And, you know, I'm thinking about the pandemic and what's going on this week. By the way, for folks who are listening, we're talking on August 25th and time moves fast here, so... Well, I think that's a good note to end on, Deborah. I really appreciate you taking time to talk with me on this.

DEBORAH SANTIAGO: Thank you, Paul. I really appreciate it. I feel like we covered a lot in a very short period of time. I hope people will take a look and understand that, you know, bringing a Latino lens to our understanding is a way to look at issues that seem intractable in different ways. It's not intended to just exclude others, but we've got to find ways to rethink what we do. And I think looking at this vast young population is a way for us to do that. It's the bellwether of what's already here and needs to continue. So thanks for taking the time.

PAUL FAIN: Absolutely. Thank you. Bye-bye.

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