

# CULTIVATING CONFIANZA

EXCELENCIA IN EDUCATION'S TRUST-BASED  
APPROACH TO LATINO STUDENT SUCCESS





ACCELERATING LATINO STUDENT  
SUCCESS IS WHAT WE DO.

# CONFIANZA

IS HOW WE DO IT.

For nearly 18 years, *Excelencia* in Education has been charting a course for innovative, collaborative, and actionable efforts to accelerate Latino student success in higher education throughout the United States. Building on our role as a reputable research organization, we have become a recognized change agent in postsecondary education. Invoking a unique *confianza* approach, *Excelencia* today functions as a facilitator, guide, and catalyst for colleges and universities, large and small, to cultivate the conditions necessary for transformative change that helps more Latino students achieve their aspirations.

With our 2020 call to action — 6.2 million more Latino students earning college degrees in the next decade — *Excelencia* launched the next chapter of our mission-driven work.



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**CALL TO  
ACTION**

**6.2 million**

more Latino students earning  
college degrees by 2030

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Serving Latino student success goes beyond enrolling more Latino students, it is about intentionality. It is about identifying, implementing, and scaling the practices, policies, and programs that accelerate success. *Excelencia*-affiliated institutions achieve meaningful results supported by the power of a strong national network of education leaders, a diverse offering of cohort-based technical assistance opportunities, and the organization's unparalleled *confianza* approach.

# Confianza

*Confianza* is more dynamic than a simple term. *Confianza* embodies elements of trust, responsibility, and mutual respect. There is also a sense of interdependence, of *familismo* (a Latino cultural value about the importance of respect, obligation, and responsibility for contributing to the well-being of the nuclear family, extended family, and community). *Familismo* reassures that as we work together, we have a common cause and we can all be open and honest about both strengths and challenges. Our *confianza* approach works because it lays the foundation necessary for true transformation. It is an ongoing process, marked by continual communication, a connected community, common cause, and collaborative change.

“The power of **confianza** is the realness and richness of the conversations we have. We get to know leaders and their institutions, and they get to know us. Our connection to a common cause allows a frankness about what works and what doesn't. This can lead to meaningful transformation that is much more sustainable and intentional for student success.”

– Deborah Santiago, Co-Founder & CEO, *Excelencia* in Education





# AMERICA'S FUTURE DEPENDS ON LATINO STUDENT SUCCESS

Latinos are a large and fast-growing population — both nationally and within postsecondary education. *Excelencia* centers its work on this very simple, yet driving fact: Our country will thrive by implementing a tactical plan that intentionally serves Latino students while serving all.



## 6.2 MILLION MORE BY 2030

In 2020, *Excelencia* issued a clear call to action. While Latino students have been making progress in colleges and communities across the country, the growing Latino population requires us to accelerate, not only increase, Latino college completion.

Recognizing this, *Excelencia* conducted a comprehensive analysis of need and identified a specific goal. For the United States to live up to its aspiration of closing education attainment gaps, 6.2 million more Latino students need to earn college degrees by 2030. To meet this need, *Excelencia* has developed a tactical plan to support institutional transformation.

The plan, based on data, evidence-based practice, and leadership with a Latino lens, calls for implementing and evaluating student-centered programs and initiatives that work for Latinos and other post-traditional students. The guiding beacon for *Excelencia's* next chapter will be ensuring our country reaches this goal. The path to get there will rely on expanding *Excelencia's* network of *confianza* to put our tactical plan into action.

# FROM A REPUTABLE RESEARCH ORGANIZATION TO A NOTED CHANGE AGENT

While equity has increasingly been a topic of conversation in postsecondary practice and policy circles in recent years, *Excelencia* has been laser-focused on accelerating Latino student success from our very beginning. We unapologetically address equity with a Latino lens. The same tactic — lead, inform, accelerate — that has grounded our work since day one continues to guide us today. It is the reason *Excelencia* is now the go-to organization and premier authority on advancing Latino student success in higher education.

## **Accelerating Latino student success requires action.**

*Excelencia's* research began with the intention of providing institutional leaders, student success professionals, and changemakers with key data, actionable insights, and clear recommendations. From our inaugural research report released nearly 18 years ago in partnership with the University of Texas at El Paso to now, we have released over 100 reports, briefs, and other research materials. Our unique approach to relationship building allows us to listen and learn with institutions — prompting action and growth, not just for colleges and universities, but for *Excelencia* as well. At crucial junctures in *Excelencia's* history, we took actions to better serve Latino students at our nation's higher education institutions by launching initiatives to accelerate student success.



“*Excelencia* has had a profound impact by accelerating the success of Hispanic and Latino/Latina students across the mainland United States and Puerto Rico. The secret to their success and the reason their work is so impactful is the commitment to *INTENTIONALITY*.”

– Havidán Rodríguez, President, University at Albany – State University of New York,  
a President for Latino Student Success

# PROVIDING A STRATEGIC LOOK

## AT LATINO STUDENTS IN THE U.S. AND THE INSTITUTIONS THAT SERVE THEM



With almost two decades of experience researching and connecting with education institutions around the country, *Excelsior* is a valued, trusted, and crucial source of information for institutional leaders, changemakers, and advocates as they develop and refine student success efforts. For example, each year our release of data on Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) and Latino college completion provides a shared baseline of understanding for education professionals around the country.

### ANALYSIS TO ACTION AND RESEARCH TO POLICY



“*Excelsior* has experience and a reputation for being the leaders of innovation of what works for Latino student success.”

– Félix Matos Rodríguez, Chancellor, City University of New York

“In many ways, **Excelencia** was ahead of its time. Because most were not ready to believe this influx of Latino students was coming and we needed to pay attention to it. But **Excelencia** was also right on time, and to those presidents and institutions who stand up and are proud to say, ‘we understand and we want to support Latino students coming forward’ do so because we know the impact their success is going to have on this nation.”

– Belle Wheelan, President, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges

## HIGHLIGHTS FROM EXCELENCIA'S HISTORY

From its founding in 2004, *Excelencia* used a strategic approach to research and provided much-needed framing on how Latino students were being served in higher education. *Latino Student Success at HSIs*, our first publication, is a hallmark example of how we inform and compel action with a Latino lens.



In 2005, we initiated **Examples of Excelencia** — the only national effort to recognize and promote evidence-based practices accelerating Latino student success in higher education. In 2006, we started **Excelencia in Action**, a network of higher education programs and community leaders committed to accelerating Latino student success.



To advance our technical assistance, in 2010 we introduced the **Accelerating Latino Student Success (ALASS) Institute**. In 2012, we created the only national database focused on effective programs for Latinos in higher education, **Growing What Works**.



In 2014, the *Excelencia* in Action network expanded with intentionality by the formation of **Presidents for Latino Student Success (P4LSS)** to activate a new level of committed leadership around the country. This network of college and university presidents and chancellors engages with each other and with *Excelencia* to make their institutions learning environments where Latino, and all, students thrive.



By 2018, as the network grew, *Excelencia* introduced our groundbreaking **Seal of Excelencia** framework. It applied our years of listening and learning from institutions and offered them a certification based on demonstrating institutional progress in the three core areas of data, practice, and leadership.



Nine institutions earned the **Seal of Excelencia** for their evidence-based commitment to intentionally SERVE Latino students in 2019. We also ramped up technical assistance with cohort-based learning efforts that leveraged our *confianza* approach to support institutional transformation needed for Latino students.

In 2020, we expanded our technical assistance to meet growing demand and certified another five institutions with the **Seal of Excelencia**. Tapping co-founder Deborah Santiago's expertise on HSIs, *Excelencia* conducted an analysis of federal investment for the project, "**25 Years of Hispanic-Serving Institutions.**"


In 2021, *Excelencia* and our institutional partners hosted virtual state and national briefings on **Latino Student Success and 25 Years of HSIs** with members of Congress, the U.S. Secretary of Education, and leaders of **Seal of Excelencia** certified institutions. Growing numbers of leaders in higher education, business, state and federal policy, grantmakers, and nonprofit organizations are turning to the power of the **Seal of Excelencia** to advance equity with a Latino lens. In the fall, *Excelencia* announced the third cohort of colleges and universities certified with the **Seal of Excelencia**. Together with these institutions, *Excelencia* will lead the transformation of higher education to intentionally serve Latino students.

# TRANSFORMATION

## THAT ISN'T ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL.

“True, lasting change must be rooted in the context and community of each college and university — and is not one-size-fits-all. Leadership takes responsibility for that change, and we support their efforts to ask the critical questions and work for solutions that are student-centered and mission-driven.”

– Sarita Brown, Co-Founder & President, *Excelencia* in Education



*Excelencia* has provided counsel and training to thousands of college and university professionals striving to improve their institutions' abilities to serve Latino students. The average evaluation score these participants rate our technical assistance institutes is

**9.65**  
ON A SCALE OF 10





## THIS IS A MOMENT FOR **ALL** COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

All colleges and universities in the country have the opportunity to serve Latino students. *Excelencia's* approach to transformative change embraces a spectrum of partnerships and collaborative learning opportunities. Working with *Excelencia*, institutions are able to create and refine tailored action plans that focus on their students, their needs, and their communities. For example, *Excelencia* supports:

- Expanding the use of data for program improvement and institution-wide change, from increasing knowledge of existing data sources and approaches to learning new ways to utilize their institutions' existing data to better support student success
- Aligning data, practice, and leadership with an asset-based and Latino lens to bring intentionality to serving their students
- Designing strategies to help recruit and retain Latino faculty and administrators
- Instituting equity-oriented approaches that make program evaluation an intentional tool in the improving student success toolbox
- Developing and maintaining the multi-team, institution-wide buy-in required to foster innovative and accelerated change

### USING **CONFIANZA** FOR COLLABORATIVE CHANGE

Institutions that join us benefit from our *confianza* approach as they tackle the challenge of institutional transformation, essential for change.

*Excelencia's* technical assistance provides dedicated time, with campus teams of professionals who shape the students' experiences. Working with *Excelencia*, institutions are able to create and refine tailored

action plans that focus on their students, their needs, and their communities. Their efforts gain traction within and across their institutions as they work with support from *Excelencia's* expertise and network.

Meet the colleges and universities that are making common cause with *Excelencia* and leading the way with intentionality.

# EXCELENCIA'S NETWORK OF INSTITUTIONAL LEADERS IS MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN

With over 125 institutions currently represented, the Presidents for Latino Student Success (P4LSS) network is a key entry point for institutions that are dedicated to intentionally serving Latino students. Representing a diverse array of colleges and universities, including Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) and Emerging Hispanic-Serving Institutions (eHSIs), the network provides opportunities for collaboration and helps further hone *Excelencia's* flexible, intentional approach to transformative change.

“*Excelencia in Education is transforming higher education by setting the bar for campuses to have a value system deeply rooted in equity and inclusion.*”

– Erika Beck, President, California State University, Northridge, a President for Latino Student Success



## THE IMPACT OF THE NETWORK IS FAR GREATER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS

The number of institutions in the network represent **4%** of all colleges and universities in the U.S.

The institutions in the network enroll **one in four** of all Latino students nationwide.

The institutions in the network account for **over one-third** of all Latino graduates nationwide.





# POSITIVE CHANGE IS POSSIBLE

*Excelencia* knows positive change is possible. We see it every day in our work with leaders and institutions committed to Latino students.

“For decades, UTEP’s faculty and staff have been focused on Hispanic student success and have worked in common cause with **Excelencia** in Education. Through dedication to excellence and student success, UTEP tops all R1 universities in the percentage of Hispanic bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral students we graduate. As one of the first universities to be honored with the Seal of **Excelencia**, UTEP is pleased to work alongside our fellow Hispanic-Serving institutions to open doors to opportunity.”

– Heather Wilson, President, The University of Texas at El Paso, a Seal of *Excelencia*-certified institution

## SEAL OF EXCELENCIA: CERTIFICATION OF INTENTIONALITY AND RESULTS

*Excelencia* believes institutions must transform to address structural inequities and more intentionally serve Latino, and other post-traditional, students. To respond to this opportunity and challenge, we established the Seal of *Excelencia*, a national certification for colleges and universities that go beyond enrollment and demonstrate how they more intentionally SERVE Latino students. These institutions have tangible outcomes and real results that show up through alignment in data, practice, and leadership.

Participating in the technical assistance and Seal certification process helps institutions further refine their approach to serving their students and advancing equity with a Latino lens. In this moment of calls for

systemic change, the certification process allows for institutions to look internally at what they are doing and align their efforts with data, practice, and leadership with an articulated methodology. Institutions tell us the process has led to insights of who they have served, where they might invest more effort, and opportunities to continue their institutional transformation.

In 2020, there were 14 institutions from the network that had earned the Seal of *Excelencia*. We will announce the next cohort of institutions in October 2021. These

Seal-certified colleges and universities are trendsetters. They demonstrate what is possible when serving Latino students, and are vital to the momentum to transform higher education.



**Excelencia's commitment is to support and facilitate student-centered institutional efforts to advance transformation to intentionally serve Latino, and all, students.**

# EXCELENCIA'S TACTICAL PLAN FOR LATINO STUDENT SUCCESS



**Design** a national acceleration plan for Latino students in higher education



**Build** a community of common cause [[Excelencia's network](#)]



**Advocate** publicly societal benefits for raising Latinos' degree completion [[Policy Agenda](#)]



**Align** and deliver educational support efforts to institutions [[TA Institutes](#)]



**Track** degree completion goals and measures of progress [[Latino College Completion: U.S.](#)]



**Increase** support and accountability for institutions intentionally serving Latino students [[Seal of Excelencia](#)]



**Replicate** and expand institutional practices that are working for Latino students [[Examples of Excelencia](#)]



**Evolve** efforts to support institutional transformation as a trusted intermediary

“**The Seal of Excelencia** ... has brought a certain clarity to academic leaders on how to be responsive to the new realities and expectations of higher education and it has left an indelible impact on the schools that have reimagined how they support Latinx students.

In higher education, we know that change is really hard. **Excelencia** is providing leadership that is paving the way forward for Latinx student success, so the rest of us can follow the path.”

– Peter Taylor, President of the ECMC Foundation

# EXCELENCIA'S PEOPLE

## EXCELENCIA IN EDUCATION FUNDADORAS

*Excelencia* grew from the seed of an idea planted by its founders to the transformative organization it is today through tenacity, hard work, support, and collaboration. Launched in 2004, our Latina-led organization has steadily grown to become an authority in higher education. *Excelencia's* reputation as a national transformative leader and innovator is a result of our consistent work to accelerate Latino student success.



**Sarita Brown**

Sarita E. Brown is Co-Founder and President of *Excelencia* in Education. A recognized leader and advocate for equity in higher education, she began her career at the University of Texas at Austin, where she built a national model for increasing the

number of students of color in graduate education and in the academy. Once in Washington, DC, Sarita served in leadership roles in higher education associations, at American University and the Hispanic Scholarship Fund Institute. She was appointed as the Executive Director of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans during the Clinton Administration.

As President, Sarita is responsible for the vision and governance of the organization, working with the Board of Directors to communicate with stakeholders and identify forward-thinking partners, funders, and investors to support *Excelencia's* mission. With over 30 years of experience catalyzing and supporting higher educational institutions and leaders to address equity, she applies her skills and energies to expanding Presidents for Latino Student Success, *Excelencia's* national network of college and university leaders who have committed to making their institutions learning environments where Latino students thrive.



**Deborah Santiago**

Deborah A. Santiago is Co-Founder and Chief Executive Officer of *Excelencia* in Education. Known nationally as an innovator, thought leader, and educational visionary, she has researched and identified evidence-based practices and

strategies to intentionally serve Latino students for more than 20 years. She has held leadership positions with education organizations around the country, including the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans and the Los Angeles Alliance for Student Achievement.

As CEO, Deborah is responsible for operations and resources for the organization and leads *Excelencia's* efforts to expand and leverage community-informed research in improving educational opportunities for students, working directly with education leaders, and informing campus practices as well as state and federal policies. Driven by a deep desire to advance asset-based, student-centered understanding of the needs and opportunities for the Latino community, Deborah is a sought-after speaker about equity in higher education and her work has been cited in numerous publications, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Economist*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

**CALL TO ACTION:** Will you join us as we support Latino talent for American civic leadership, workforce, and our society? The *Excelencia* story is one of dedication, heart, *confianza*, and most of all, action for positive results — all on behalf of Latino students. It is a story being written. You have read what *Excelencia* is going to do. What will you do?

The work of *Excelencia* is one of intentionality for Latino student success in higher education. The trust — and yes, the *confianza* — we have with so many programs, colleges, universities, and education leaders around the country is possible because of our people. From our staff, to our board, to our funders, *Excelencia's* power for positive change flows from the energies of people who believe in what's possible.



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Good ideas need solid support, and we thank the following leaders for their support that enables us to do this work. They provide vital funding and advance Latino students and the institutions that serve them well by helping *Excelencia* spread the stories of success and transformation in higher education. We are grateful to those who have so generously supported our mission.

ACT Center for Equity in Learning

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## Ready to accelerate Latino student success?

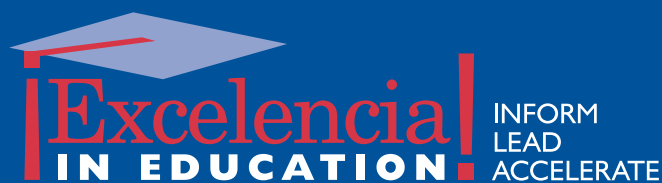
Learn more and join our  
community of common cause.

Visit: [www.EdExcelencia.org](http://www.EdExcelencia.org)

“ The *Excelencia* framework will enable us to further advance our understanding of how best to support Latinx excellence through data, practices, strategy, and leadership. I look forward to our ongoing partnership with *Excelencia* in Education as we work together to transform the narrative around Latinx college students. ”

– Robert S. Nelsen, President of  
Sacramento State University, California,  
a Seal of *Excelencia*-certified institution

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