

Retention and Transfer

Latino students represent a post-traditional profile. *Excelencia* in Education's research has found that many Latinos often transfer institutions, attend part-time, and remain enrolled well after beginning their postsecondary education. Many higher education policies prioritize a traditional college pathway — entering postsecondary education college-ready right after high school and graduating in four years from the institution where they first enrolled. However, that does not represent the majority of college students today.

While recent economic challenges upended higher education and enrollments decreased for almost every group, Latinos' enrollment is increasing again, showing a continued commitment to postsecondary education.¹ Policymakers should strengthen policies that retain Latino students and support them on their post-traditional path to a degree. Doing so would help more Latino students complete a degree in a timely fashion, providing economic benefits to students and policymakers.

How can policymakers support Latinos' retention & transfer on their path to a degree?

1. *Make transfer efforts an allowable activity for Higher Education Act Title V, Part A, (Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions Program) grants.*

Currently, the only explicit transfer-related activity allowed under Title V is the creation of articulation agreements to facilitate the transfer from two-year to four-year institutions. Articulation agreements, while important, are on their own not enough to improve transfer. Institutional capacity can be improved to strengthen transfer by investing in more robust transfer efforts, such as student data sharing between institutions and creating clearer pathway programs.

Title V is a good place to target transfer support because these grants go to Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). HSIs enroll two-thirds of Latino students, and many (43%) are public two-year institutions.² Latino students are more likely to transfer than their peers. Almost half (49%) of Latino students attempt to transfer their credits, the highest of all racial/ethnic groups, on par with Black students (49%).³ Among those students, less than half (48%) of their credits successfully transferred.⁴

Institutions need funding to build successful transfer infrastructure, and allowing HSIs to use funding that's already available to them for this purpose can facilitate Latino student success. For example, better data sharing could be used to identify potential Latino transfer students. Institutions are not obligated to share data with other institutions, leaving them and their students in the dark about transfer opportunities. To strengthen transfer, increased collaboration between two- and four-year institutions will be critical. Institutions could share data about students, set up articulation agreements to ensure credits transfer or incentivize associate degree completion before transfer. By funding this through existing programs, or creating new funding programs at the state level, institutions can better do the work that we know helps Latinos.

2. *Update federal data to more accurately capture Latino students' pathways and how federal funding impacts Latino student success.*

Federal data does not capture Latino students' postsecondary experiences because they are not likely to follow what a "traditional" pathway looks like. The "traditional" pathway is one where a student enters postsecondary education right after high school and graduates in four years with a bachelor's degree from the institution where they first enrolled. When federal graduation rates are reported, they reflect "traditional" students who began and graduated from the same institution within three or six years (for two- and four-year institutions, respectively).

Latino students follow a post-traditional pathway and are often not included in federal graduation rates, which are often used as a measure of success. Latino baccalaureate degree holders are more likely

than all other racial/ethnic groups to begin at a two-year institution (33% vs. 28% for all). In fact, about half of Latino students transfer to a two-year institution at some point in their enrollment, regardless of their starting institution.⁵ Consider the following key points on Latino students:

- **Lateral Transfer:** Latino transfer students' most common pathway is transferring from a two-year to a two-year institution or from a four-year to a four-year institution (also known as Lateral Transfer).⁶
- **Stop-out:** Latino students are overrepresented in the undergraduate population that “stops out” (withdrawing from enrollment at a college or university for a period of time). While Latino students only make up 21 percent of the overall undergraduate population, 24 percent of all undergraduate students who stop out are Latinos.⁷
- **Still enrolled:** Latinos are most likely to remain enrolled beyond the traditional time period for a degree. At two-year institutions, 13 percent of Latino students are still enrolled three years after beginning their degree compared to nine percent of their White peers, while at four-year institutions, four percent of Latino students are still enrolled six years after beginning their degree compared to two percent of their White peers.⁸

Current data systems count those transfers or remaining enrolled as a dropout, which can reflect negatively on the institution. Additionally, the data don't show important points along the path to graduation, including retention and persistence disaggregated by race/ethnicity. With better data there are opportunities to incentivize retaining students, improving transfer, and ultimately, increasing degree completion.

3. **Provide financial incentives to institutions to retain Latino students on their path to graduation.**

While access to higher education for Latino students has increased steadily, degree attainment has not. Only 1 in 4 Latino adults hold an associate's degree or higher.⁹ Currently, most funding programs are based on rewarding graduation or degree completion but do not consider the work done to retain students. Leading indicators to completion, including year-to-year retention, are key to ensuring Latinos are on track.

Notable institutions in *Excelencia's* network have demonstrated successful retention strategies that serve Latino students. At [P4LSS](#) and [Seal-certified](#) institutions, students' full-time and part-time retention rates are higher than at all institutions.¹⁰ For example, California State University, Los Angeles' Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) supports first-generation, low-income students, of which 81 percent are Latino, to overcome social and economic barriers to higher education, from middle school through college completion. EOP provides academic support, leadership development, and peer mentorship. In Fall 2021, first-time EOP Latino students were retained at the same rate (74%) as all students. The 6-year EOP Latino graduation rate is 55 percent, compared to 51 percent for all students.¹¹ The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) is another Seal-certified institution that has demonstrated successful retention strategies. UTSA prioritizes financial support to ensure Latino student retention. Through coordinated programs, such as Bold Promise, Bold Scholars, and Bold Futures, students receive support to cover tuition and fees, on-campus housing, and/or experiential learning opportunities. This strategy has been successful in retaining Latino students, as the one-year retention rate for Bold Promise Latino students is five percentage points higher than that of other first-time-full-time Latino students with similar family incomes, and the second-to-third year retention rate is 10 percentage points higher.¹²

These P4LSS and Seal-certified institutions serve as examples of intentionally serving Latino students by implementing evidence-based strategies to increase retention rates. Providing more financial

support to institutions that are retaining students by recognizing their efforts year-to-year can help scale such efforts to ensure more Latino students stay on track to graduate.

4. Strengthen partnerships between higher education institutions and high school districts for high-quality dual enrollment programs.

Earning college credit in high school can be an influential tool for exposing students to colleges and universities as well as earning a postsecondary degree. Dual enrollment (DE) is a partnership between school districts and institutions of higher education that allows high school students to enroll in college courses and earn transferable college credit.¹³

One of the benefits of DE is limiting college costs. Participating students under this program get early access to college-level learning and potentially reduce some of the financial burden of college costs.¹⁴ Second, DE increases the chances of students enrolling and persisting through college. Taking college courses in high school has been found to benefit Latino students, and its positive effects on college degree attainment are even stronger for low-income students.¹⁵ For example, at the Dual Enrollment Academy, high school juniors earn an associate degree from South Texas College tuition-free while completing their high school graduation requirements. From 2005 to 2023, over 1,500 students graduated from high school with an associate's degree through the program.¹⁶ Overall, the benefits can provide a long-term impact to accelerate Latino student success.

Dual enrollment has expanded in many states. Nationally, approximately one-third (33%) of high school students take these courses. However, fewer Latino students are participating, lowering their opportunities to access early college. A lower percentage of Latino students (30%) took courses for postsecondary credit in high school than did White or Asian students (both 38%).¹⁷

One way students are able to pay for DE is through the Pell Grant program. While Latinos are already active participants in the program, using these funds for DE has demonstrated potential long-term barriers. By using Pell, students started their "Pell clocks" and had fewer years of funding available when they eventually enrolled in college as undergraduates.¹⁸ Moreover, Latino students have to navigate limited access to dual enrollment in schools. DE is often less accessible at schools that serve larger proportions of lower-income communities and communities of color.¹⁹ Thus, while Pell is an important resource for students who have enrolled in college post-high school, it is not sufficient to ensure access to DE.

Given the growth of these programs, we need to ensure that Latino students are participating and taking advantage of these opportunities for accessing higher education. This not only benefits their journey in education but also their long-term careers. Many institutions across the country are implementing this program and incentivizing them to scale their efforts can help additional communities access DE. To reduce gaps in participation in DE, the federal government should strengthen partnerships between higher education institutions and high school districts to provide high-quality and affordable access to higher education.

¹ National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2022). *Current Term Enrollment Estimates, Fall 2022*. Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Retrieved from: <https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/>

² Excelencia in Education. (2024). *Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) Factbook: 2022-23*. Washington, D.C.: Excelencia in Education.

³ National Center for Education Statistics. (2020). *One Year After Bachelor's Degree: A Profile of 2015-16 Graduates*. Washington, DC.: US Department of Education.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Excelencia in Education analysis of Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Huie, F., Wakhungu, P.K., Bhimdiwali, A., Nathan, A., & Youngsik, H. (2018, July). *Transfer and Mobility: A National View of Student Movement in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2011 Cohort (Signature Report No. 15)*. Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

⁶ Excelencia in Education analysis of Causey, J., Cohen, J., Gardner, A., Karamarkovich, S., Kim, H., Lee, S., Randolph, B., Ryu, M., and Shapiro, D. (March 2023), *Transfer and Progress Fall 2022*, Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

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- ⁷ *Excelencia* in Education analysis of Causey, J., Gardner, A., Pevitz, A., Ryu, M., and Shapiro, D. (April 2023), *Some College, No Credential Student Outcomes*, Annual Progress Report – Academic Year 2021/22, Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.
- ⁸ *Excelencia* in Education Analysis using the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2021 Fall Enrollment, Graduation Rates Survey and Institutional Characteristics Survey.
- ⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, 2021 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.
- ¹⁰ *Excelencia* in Education. (April 2024). *Presidents for Latino Student Success Network and Seal-Certified 2024 Profile*. Washington, DC.
- ¹¹ *Excelencia* in Education. (2023). *Seal of Excelencia Certified Institutions*. Washington, D.C.: *Excelencia* in Education.
<https://www.edexcelencia.org/seal/seal-excelencia-certified-institutions>
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ *Dual Enrollment*. (2023). The Education Trust.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ An, B. P. (2012). *The Impact of Dual Enrollment on College Degree Attainment: Do Low-SES Students Benefit?*.
- ¹⁶ *Excelencia* in Education. (November 15). *Growing What Works Database*. Washington, D.C.: *Excelencia* in Education.
<https://www.edexcelencia.org/programs-initiatives/growing-what-works-database>
- ¹⁷ *Dual enrollment: Participation and characteristics*. (2019). National Center for Education Statistics
- ¹⁸ Matheny, K.T., Lu, Amanda., Bettinger, E. P., Kienzl G. S. (July 2022). *Do Pell grants increase dual enrollment for low-income students?*. Brookings.
- ¹⁹ Rhine, Luke. (2022). *The Power of Dual Enrollment: The Equitable Expansion of College Access and Success*. U.S Department of Education.