

**Faculty as Change Agents:
Why Faculty Development is Crucial for
Hispanic-Serving Institutions**



Dr. Melissa L. Salazar

The Rise of Latino College Students

Latinos are enrolling in college in higher numbers than ever before (Fry and Lopez 2014), and in addition show signs of catching up to their white peers in college completion rates (*Excelencia in Education*, 2014). These positive trends show that Latino students, and the institutions that serve them, are finding ways to counteract the factors that have so far dominated the last decade of discussion of Latinos in college: their academic under-preparedness (Swail et al. 2005), their low self-concept and “sense of belonging” in college (Pryzmus 2012), and their clash with the ‘culturally monolithic’ traditional college environment that favors low- context cultural learning and communication styles (Greene 2008; Ibarra 2011).

Hispanic-Serving Institutions’ Role in Latino Student Success

Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) have undoubtedly played a large role in the upward trend in the Latino college success story: more than 400 HSIs enroll the majority of Latino college students (58.6%) and HSIs award over 40% of all Bachelor’s degrees earned by Latinos each year (HACU 2015). The growth of HSIs has paralleled the increase in the Hispanic population in the U.S., supporting the proposition that in due time, most institutions of higher education will become HSIs.

The mere existence of HSIs is not enough to close the completion gap, however—HSIs do not have significantly higher completion or transfer rates for their Latino students than non-HSIs (Rodríguez & Calderón Galdeano 2015). Recent scholarship on the institutional conditions of HSIs show that HSIs as a whole struggle with a myriad of capacity issues that weaken their ability to meet their academic mission (Núñez, Hurtado & Calderón Galdeano 2015). HSIs serve a higher percentage of low-income, first-generation students who require extra academic as well as financial support (Núñez & Bowers, 2011), both factors that are correlated with college attrition. At the same time HSIs are underfunded compared to non-HSIs, resulting in larger student-faculty ratios, and fewer dollars to spend on instruction (Rodríguez & Calderón Galdeano 2015).

Faculty as Change Agents in HSI Student Outcomes

Because HSIs have high minority enrollments and limited funds, they are ideal places to study how colleges can sustainably close the achievement gap for Latino students by developing and leveraging resources they already have.

One of these resources is HSI faculty. Required instructional time means faculty have the most face to face time with students, and the types of interactions they foster can be a catalyst for *student engagement* in college, which is defined as the extent to which students participate in “educatively purposive activities” (Kuh 2009; Kuh et al. 2005). Engagement has gained traction in the field of minority education since it has been shown empirically to have a compensatory effect for students of color and entering students who are academically underprepared. Student engagement in the first year of college positively affects grades as well as persistence to the second year, even after controlling for a host of pre-college characteristics such as parental education and financial aid (Hu & Kuh 2002; Kuh et al. 2007).

Faculty who understand student engagement, and implement strategies to foster it, can therefore be a huge asset to HSIs. Decades of empirical research has operationalized engagement into two levels—academic/cognitive and social/behavioral, although the two are interrelated. Academic engagement occurs when faculty apply “active learning” techniques, insist on high academic standards, and embed higher order thinking tasks during classroom time (Chickering & Gamson 1987; Prince 2004; Kelly 2007). Academic engagement also includes the use of purposefully designed collaborative activities that help historically underrepresented and minority students co-construct knowledge in the academy, fostering feelings of competence and at the same time counteracting their isolation from peers (Haak 2011; Greene et al. 2008; Kuh et al. 2005).

Neuroscientists have confirmed that the learning mind has a deeply socio-emotional facet (Clark 1995), making relational work a core part of faculty’s job description. In a 2015 study of 30,000 college graduates, students rated “supportive relationships with professors,” as the most important factor in evaluating whether or not their college experience was worth the cost (Gallup-Purdue Index Report 2015). When Umbach and Wawryznsk (2005) used National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data from 137 institutions to investigate the relationship between student engagement, faculty teaching strategies, and student persistence, they found a similar positive correlation between student engagement, learning gains, and faculty-student interactions—but only when the interactions with faculty occurred *during class*.

Empirical educational research, cognitive science, and now research on HSI student outcomes make it very clear what should be happening in HSI classrooms in order to foster student academic and social-behavioral engagement in college. With faculty development on student engagement, HSI faculty can take a more active role in becoming change agents within HSIs. By applying engagement techniques as a compensatory measures they can assist the large percentage of students who enter HSIs with weak academic preparations, and also be part of a shift in deficit model thinking about Latino students and the causes of their attrition.

What HSIs Can Do to Support Faculty as Change Agents

HSIs are ideal places to study ‘what works’ as well as serve as laboratories for developing and fostering best practices for learning. As such, HSIs should create spaces for faculty to discuss, experiment, and also collect data on student learning and engagement. There is no need for

HSIs to follow models that do not work for minority underrepresented students—models that privilege research disconnected from context, and devalue the study of effective teaching and learning. HSIs need to take bold steps to involve their faculty in a culture akin to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), by considering action research on instruction as research that is both tenurable, and highly valued in helping the college and its surrounding community.

There is some preliminary evidence to show that some HSI faculty already see their role as change agents, by either choosing to work in an HSIs, or at least find purpose in their work in an HSI by knowing they are working with students who are historically underserved (Murphy, Araiza, Cardenas, & Garza (2013). But at the same time faculty at HSIs are also more likely to say they are less satisfied with their students, which may result in deep frustrations or misconceptions about what it means to teach them (Hubbard & Stage 2009). HSIs need to use faculty development time to explain high/low context disconnects many cultures feel in the college environment, so that there is less blame and misattribution of student behaviors.

Changing habits and attitudes towards a job takes time. Faculty development therefore should be sustained and compensate faculty for lengthy faculty development projects such as teaching study groups or professional development courses. In addition faculty in HSIs are already stretched thin with teaching loads and wide ranges of student preparations. Faculty should be encouraged and supported as they find ways to implement strategies that work for their particular teaching situation, and not penalized for experimenting with student learning techniques.

In *The Horizon of Possibilities* Leslie Gonzales writes

HSIs can be sites where new knowledge that advances alternative perspectives can be created, rather than where existing knowledge is reproduced as if it is a static and objective that never changes and must simply be dispensed to students (p.132).

In similar fashion, HSIs also have the potential to create alternative perspectives on the purpose of teaching as a closing of the achievement gap for minority students. Research shows this can be done through advancing highly effective practices in the classroom. By investing in faculty and redesigning their position to focus on student learning, HSI faculty can participate in the HSI mission in a more meaningful way.

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