

Improving Hispanics college success rate

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Here's some eye-opening math as college students settle into their courses: 30 million Americans are enrolled in higher education. Thirteen million of these students are enrolled in a community college, and 2.3 million of these community college students are Latinos.

Recent Census data show that Latino college enrollments are surging. Unfortunately, back-to-school time means that many of these students are renewing their annual struggle to stay in school.

Students struggle to stay enrolled in community college because academic, social and financial barriers come between them and focusing on their education.

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The result: fewer than half of all students who enroll in community college will complete a

degree within six years. That's millions of Americans denied a more productive and prosperous life.

If you think this is sad but irrelevant to you, you're wrong. The American economy is a shadow of its former self. The steady manufacturing jobs that gave high school graduates middle-class living standards have disappeared, never to return.

Instead, we face a looming skills gap. According to the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, 65 percent of all jobs will require some post-secondary education in 2020. With our current college graduation rates, 3 million jobs will go unfilled because too few students will complete a college degree.

Without doing more to support our nation's Latino community college students, the story of American competitiveness may be drawing to a close.

Or, we can write a more hopeful story that begins by recognizing America's changing demographics. Latinos are our nation's youngest and fastest growing ethnic group. Helping these students complete a college education could eliminate much of the national skills gap.

Excelencia in Education, a national nonprofit focused on Latino student success in higher education, researched these students. It found that Latino students are often the first in their family to attend college, limiting their knowledge of “the system.” They enroll in community college to avoid acquiring student debt. And many attend school part-time, juggling work and classes. These competing demands hinder college completion for Latino students. In 2012, just 21 percent of Latino adults had earned at least an associate’s degree, compared to 40 percent of all adults.

The hopeful news is that community colleges are beginning to use this information to develop new ways to support their students and raise graduation rates.

Take Miami Dade College, for example. MDC is our nation’s largest public college, educating 170,000 students annually. Seventy percent of MDC students are Latino and many face financial barriers that lead to drop out or stop out. To address these barriers, MDC is helping its students access a range of tax credits, government benefits and counseling advice through “Single Stop” offices on campus. Using these existing resources, MDC has been able to effectively double the value of students’ financial aid, clearing the way for them to focus on completing their education.

While MDC and other leading community colleges are a good start, effective practices in isolation will not improve college success rates. But when national organizations like Excelencia in Education and the Association of Community College Trustees share evidence of success from colleges like MDC with local, state, and federal policymakers, we have a chance to take innovations to scale. We can move the needle on college completion in America.

As the national conversation shifts to debate on President Obama’s higher education proposals, the time is now to help our students succeed. Findings from innovative college programs should lead to policies that incentivize colleges to address barriers to college completion facing today’s students.

With these new programs, the nation can make sure its growing Latino workforce is among the most educated in the world. Together, we can ensure a new era of American economic prosperity, if we give all students the tools they need to succeed. That’s a worthwhile goal for our students, our colleges, our employers, and our country.

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