LATINO POLICY INSTITUTE
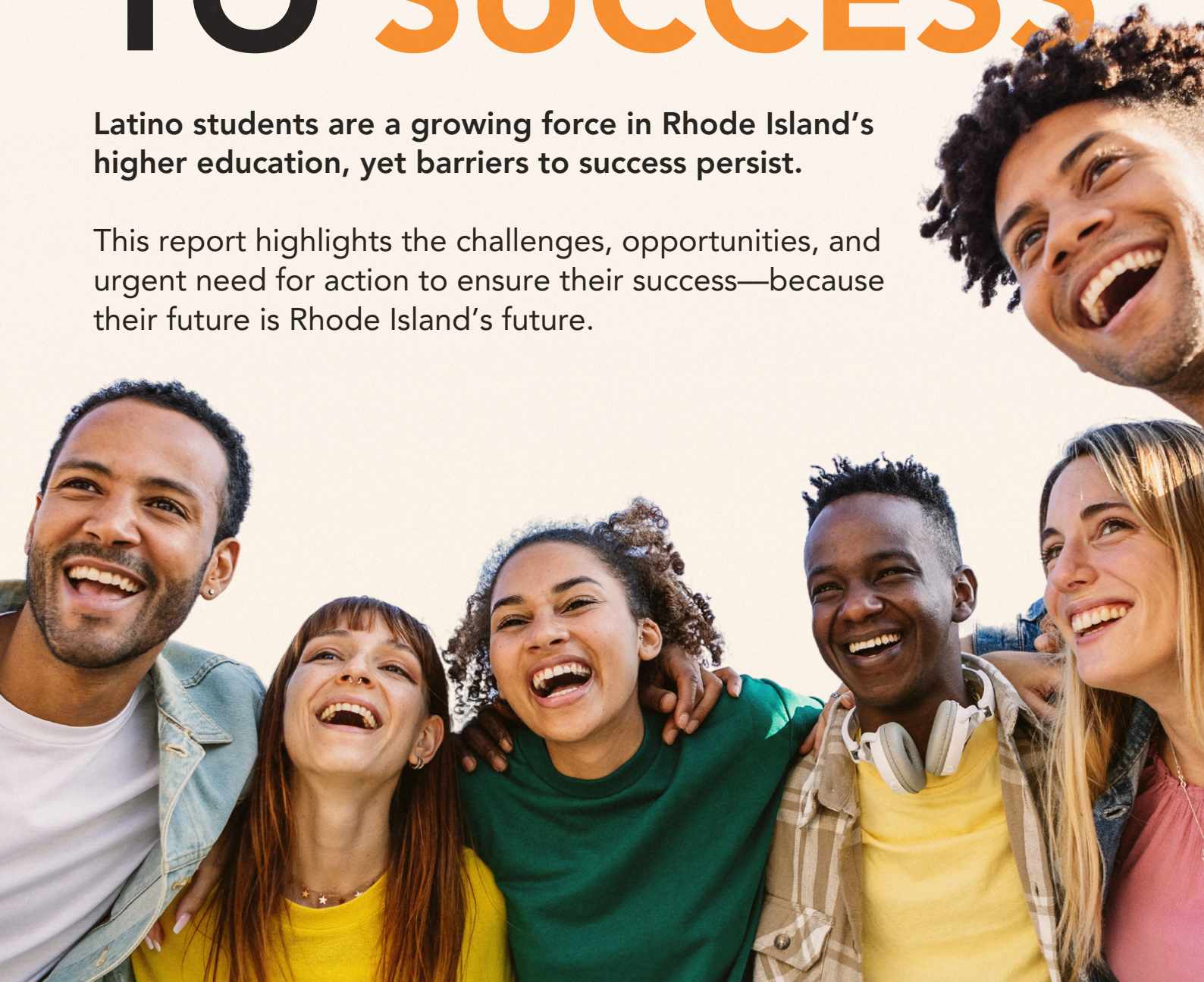Research | Advocacy | Education

RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE

LATINO PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS

Latino students are a growing force in Rhode Island's higher education, yet barriers to success persist.

This report highlights the challenges, opportunities, and urgent need for action to ensure their success—because their future is Rhode Island's future.

Executive Summary

As the Latino population continues to become a significant demographic force in the United States, understanding and addressing the educational disparities they face is imperative for ensuring equitable growth and opportunity. For nearly two decades, the Latino Policy Institute (LPI) has been deeply committed to analyzing and communicating the evolving experiences, opportunities, and barriers of Latinos in Rhode Island, especially in the education sector. Since the summer of 2023, LPI has been working with our partners at Rhode Island College, members of the General Assembly, and other policy and educational advocacy organizations to develop a report and recommendations that analyze the state of Latino students in higher education and what opportunities and barriers exist for them. LPI is proud to work collaboratively with our partners in higher education to underscore important recommendations and best practices to continue the work and promote the success of Latino students in our state.

> *Latinos will account for 60% of the population growth in the United States from 2005 to 2050. Latinos are also expected to constitute 29% of the U.S. population by 2050, up from 14% in 2005 (Pew Research Center, 2008).*

Yet, Latinos continue to have the lowest education attainment levels among all demographic groups in the country (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). This demographic shift, now encompassing one out of every five individuals in the country, has profound implications for various sectors, including education and higher learning. This growth is not limited to national trends alone; it is also evident at the state level. According to the latest data from the U.S. Census in Rhode Island, about 17.6% of the state's population identified as Latino. In addition, 9,786 Latino undergraduate students, representing 15.5% of the total enrollment, attend colleges and universities in Rhode Island *(HACU State Enrollment List, 2023)*. Despite the demographic growth, Latinos continue to have the lowest education attainment levels among all demographic groups in the country *(U.S. Census Bureau, 2003)*.

As of 2024, three higher education institutions in Rhode Island have been designated as HSIs, College Unbound (2019-20), Rhode Island College (2020-21), and the Community College of Rhode Island (2021-22). This report highlights the imperative need to prioritize the educational success and equity of Latino students in Rhode Island, focusing on Rhode Island College (RIC) as a four-year college HSI in the state.

As an HSI, RIC is crucial in ensuring Latino students have access to the resources, opportunities, and support they need to thrive academically and professionally. By fostering a culture of inclusivity and educational equity, the college can serve as a model for other institutions in the state, creating pathways to success for Latino students and strengthening Rhode Island's educational landscape.

The message is clear: it takes a village to support these students, and we all have a role in creating possibilities and empowering future generations of Latino students.

Key Findings

These key findings were derived from a comprehensive analysis of quantitative and qualitative national, regional, and local sources, which looked at the opportunities and barriers within the higher education landscape for the growing Latino demographic. In particular, during the spring of 2024, LPI conducted a series of focus groups and surveys for RIC students, faculty, and staff to learn more about their views and feedback regarding the college's HSI status and the opportunities and challenges Latinos may face at RIC.

1. **Rhode Island College (RIC) and Latino Student Representation**
2. **Graduation and Retention Challenges**
3. **Comparative Trends Across New England**
4. **Equity Gaps and Support Needs**
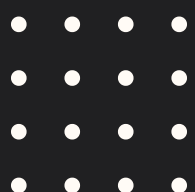
1. Rhode Island College (RIC) and Latino Student Representation

RIC's Latino undergraduate enrollment steadily increased from 21.1% in 2018 to 26.1% in Fall 2022, making **Latino students the second-largest ethnic group at the institution.** However, despite strong enrollment figures, Latino students experience challenges with graduation rates. The gap between enrollment and graduation rates, particularly for Latino students, underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to improve persistence and completion. In addition to enhancing support services, there is a critical need for culturally responsive curricula and pedagogy reflecting Latino students' diverse backgrounds and experiences. Addressing support systems and the academic environment is essential to fostering an inclusive, equitable educational experience supporting Latino student success.

Latino graduate student enrollment also grew, with representation increasing from 10.8% in 2018 to 16.0% in 2022 and 16.9% in 2023, underscoring the expanding presence of Latino students in advanced academic programs.

Key Insights
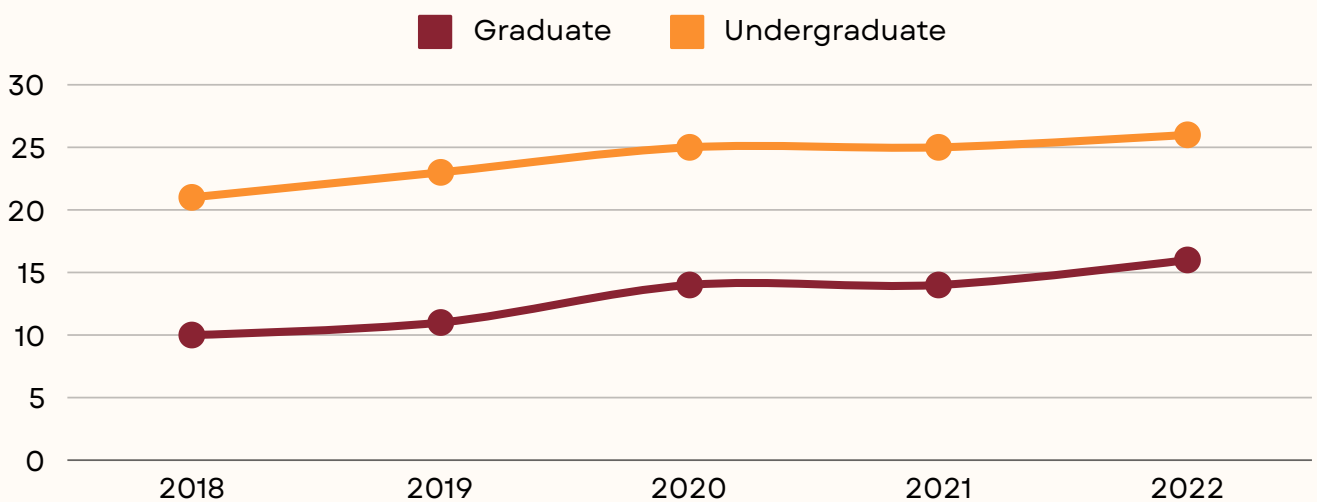
▲ 21.1%

- Rhode Island College (RIC) is a federally designated Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI).
- Latino undergraduate enrollment at RIC grew from 21.1% in 2018 to 26.1% in 2022, yet disparities persist in retention and graduation rates.
- Latino graduate student enrollment has also increased, reaching 16.9% in 2023.

2. Graduation and Retention Challenges

While experiencing consistent enrollment growth, Latino students at RIC face unique challenges influencing their timely graduation. The 4-year graduation rates for Latino students declined from 18.3% (Fall 2012 cohort) to 12.8% (Fall 2016 cohort). However, the relatively stable 6-year graduation rates suggest that many Latino students may be pursuing more flexible, post-traditional academic paths. This could reflect various factors, such as balancing work, family responsibilities, or a preference for taking longer to complete their degrees. Understanding these dynamics is crucial to developing strategies that align with Latino students' diverse needs and aspirations, particularly in fostering academic success and completion within their chosen timelines.

Retention rates for Latino students have fluctuated, with one-year retention rates averaging 71.4% over five years and only 56.3% still enrolled by the start of the third year, pointing to additional hurdles students face as they progress in their studies. These challenges highlight the need for targeted interventions to improve persistence, particularly in the critical sophomore-to-junior transition.

Challenges in Retention
& Graduation

■ Graduated within 4 years   ■ Graduated within 5 years

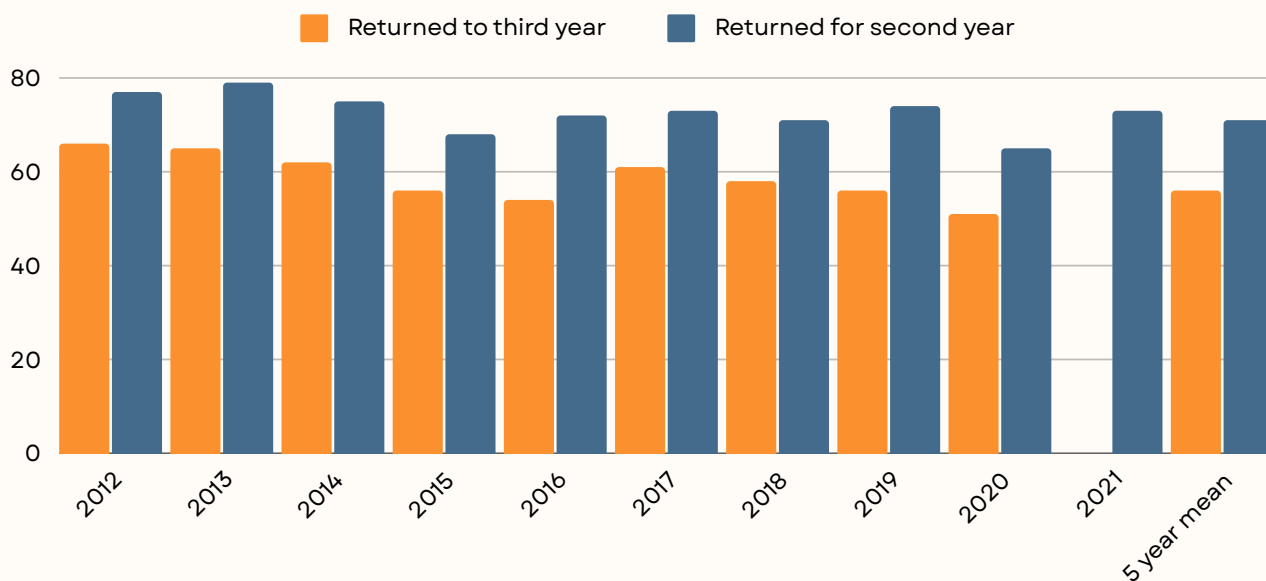■ Graduated within 6 years
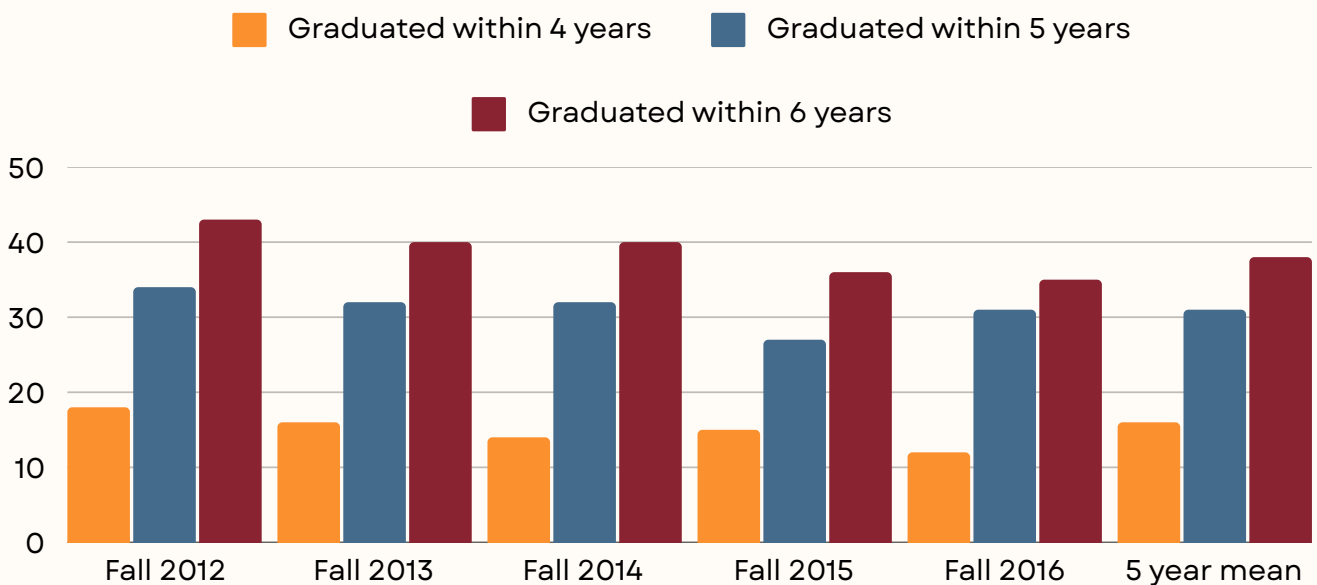
▼ **12.8%**

- The **four-year graduation rate for Latino students declined from 18.3% (2012 cohort) to 12.8% (2016 cohort)**, highlighting barriers to timely completion.

3. Comparative Trends Across New England

Latino enrollment data from 2019-2022 reveals that trends in Rhode Island contrast with those in neighboring states such as Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania. While Rhode Island has seen robust growth in Latino full-time enrollment, Massachusetts experienced slight fluctuations in Latino enrollment during 2020 and 2021 but has been experiencing a surge in Latino student enrollment post-2022. This growth reflects the broader demographic shifts in the state, where the Latino population is steadily increasing (Excelencia in Education, 2023). Many Massachusetts institutions are now emerging as Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) or have already reached HSI status, signaling a response to the growing Latino student population (Excelencia in Education, 2023). Rhode Island's gains, particularly post-2020, signal the effectiveness of its initiatives aimed at fostering Latino student success. At the same time, Massachusetts' recent surge highlights the importance of continued investment in higher education to support the expanding Latino community. Both states' trends underscore the need for further research to understand regional patterns and the impacts of national events like the COVID-19 pandemic on Latino student enrollment.

▲ 56.3%

- **Only 56.3% of Latino students remain enrolled by their third year**, signaling a need for stronger support systems.

Legend: Returned to third year (orange), Returned for second year (blue). Years: 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 5 year mean.

- Many Latino students are balancing work and family responsibilities, requiring more flexible academic pathways and financial aid options.

4. Equity Gaps and Support Needs

The disparities in graduation rates and retention rates between Latino students and their White non-Latino counterparts reflect systemic inequities that require concerted institutional responses. Improving retention and graduation outcomes for Latino students is crucial to ensuring educational equity and addressing their challenges. Continued efforts to expand academic support, mentorship programs, and financial assistance are essential for bridging these gaps.

Recommendations

In partnership with a workgroup composed of General Assembly leaders, RIC staff and faculty, as well as advocacy and education policy leaders, LPI put together a set of comprehensive recommendations to address systemic barriers faced by Latino students—such as academic preparedness gaps, financial challenges, lack of culturally responsive support, and limited engagement with Latino communities—by combining immediate actions with long-term strategies. This approach provides RIC with a framework to support Latino students from enrollment through graduation and career readiness, fostering an inclusive and equitable academic environment.

Policy & Institutional
Recommendations

Short-Term Actions

- Implement **cultural competency training** for faculty and staff.
- Increase **mentorship and internship opportunities** for Latino students.

Mid-Term Strategies

- Expand **scholarships and financial aid** tailored to Latino students.
- Strengthen **student support networks** to improve retention.

Long-Term Commitments

- Establish **Latino Student Success Centers** to provide academic, career, and mental health support.
- Develop a **culturally responsive curriculum** that reflects Latino experiences and histories.
- Secure **state and federal funding** to sustain these initiatives.

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Create Comprehensive Student Success Centers

- **Establish Dedicated Centers**: Create student success centers specifically tailored to the needs of Latino students. These centers would provide academic counseling, career services, mental health support, and other resources in a centralized location designed to meet the unique needs of this demographic.

- **Embed Support in Key Departments:** Also, create liaisons in key student-facing, supporting, and serving departments (such as admissions, academic advising, career services, and mental health counseling). These staff members would be dedicated to ensuring that Latino students receive personalized, culturally relevant support throughout their academic journey. This approach integrates targeted assistance directly within departments that regularly interact with students, enhancing accessibility and support.

2. Develop a Culturally Relevant Curriculum

Work with faculty to revise curricula, ensuring they are inclusive and reflect Latino students' diverse backgrounds and experiences.

3. Advocate for Increased Funding

Lobby for additional state and federal funding to support Latino-focused scholarships and retention programs, ensuring sustained investment in the success of Latino students at RIC.

Certain recommendations are more time-feasible than others at RIC and higher education institutions. For example, a comprehensive analysis of Latino students' financial aid, scholarships, mentorship, and internship opportunities can be implemented quickly. Expanding internships and mentoring programs with local businesses and community organizations may take longer but should remain a high priority for the institution.

Additionally, enhancing faculty and staff training on cultural competency is an initiative that can be launched within a year, with direct benefits to the student experience. Long-term recommendations, such as establishing student success centers and developing a culturally relevant curriculum, will take more time to implement fully. However, these are crucial investments for building a supportive infrastructure for Latino students at RIC and should be prioritized as part of the institution's long-term strategic plan.
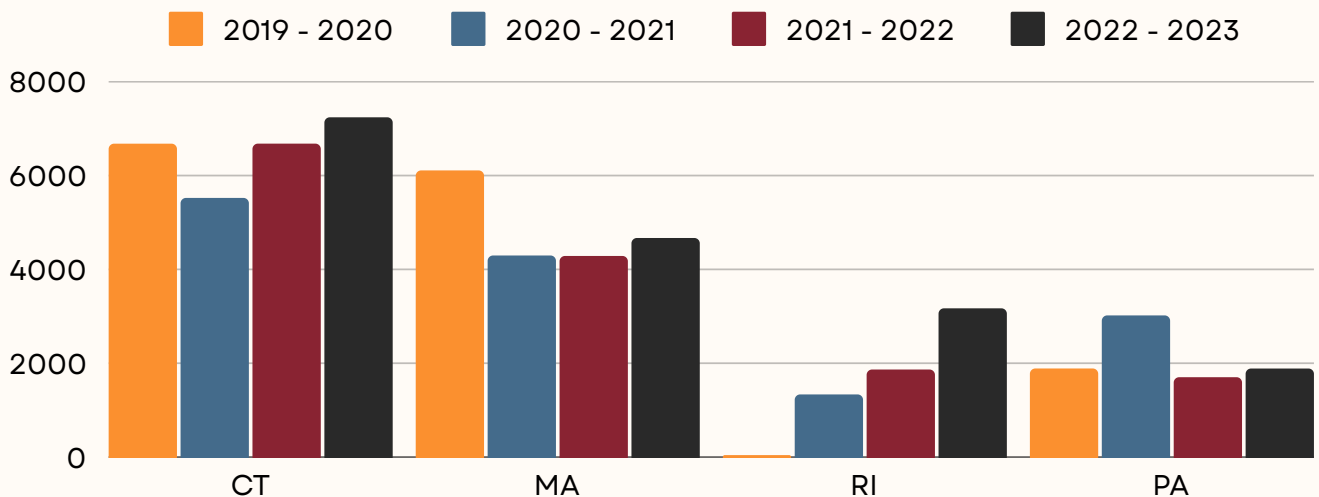
State & Regional Trends

- The analysis reveals varied trends in Latino FTE enrollment across Rhode Island and its neighboring states from 2019 to 2022.
- **Rhode Island's Latino student enrollment growth outpaces neighboring states like Massachusetts**, demonstrating the impact of focused initiatives.
- Yet, **equity gaps remain**, emphasizing the need for sustained investment in student services, culturally responsive teaching, and financial aid

Total Undergraduate FTE Latino Enrollment at HSIs 2019 - 2022

Legend:
- 2019 - 2020
- 2020 - 2021
- 2021 - 2022
- 2022 - 2023

(Bar chart showing FTE Latino enrollment for CT, MA, RI, and PA. Y-axis ranges from 0 to 8000.)

How can RIC and other institutions of higher education utilize this report?

This report is a **strategic framework** for RIC and other institutions to align its goals and initiatives with the broader mission of promoting educational equity for Latino students.

- **Strategic Planning**: While RIC has made progress by adding some of these recommendations within their current Strategic Compass, HSIs must ensure that the longevity and sustainability of these efforts are supported through ongoing investments and institutional commitment as part of their recurring strategic planning and budget processes.

- **Policy Development**: Use the recommendations to inform policy changes that enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion within the institution, particularly regarding Latino students.

- **Resource Allocation**: Guide resource allocation decisions, ensuring that necessary funding and support systems are in place to implement these recommendations and drive meaningful change.

By prioritizing the success of Latino students, RIC can promote educational equity, strengthen community ties, and foster a diverse and inclusive campus environment. More importantly, fostering educational equity for Latino students at RIC and other higher education institutions is not only a moral imperative—it is a strategic priority for the institution and the state as a whole. By implementing the recommendations in this report, RIC can serve as a leader in promoting educational opportunity and success for Latino students, setting an example for other institutions in the state and beyond.

Recommendations

This report's findings critically impact RIC as an HSI while emphasizing the importance of policymakers' and stakeholders' continued commitment to enhancing educational opportunities for Latinos and other historically underserved communities. To effectively address the multiple needs at both the state and RIC levels, it is essential to prioritize resource allocation and capacity building. By investing in programs that enhance support for Latino students and fostering collaboration among institutions, government agencies, and community organizations, we can create a more inclusive educational environment that promotes the success of all students.

The following sections outline the necessary policy and institutional investments that RIC and the state of Rhode Island must make to tackle our community's growing challenges, disparities, and needs.

LPI outlined the government and legislative policy recommendations as a reflection of our active commitment and involvement in advocating for improved higher education policies and investments. The additional recommendations were developed in partnership with a group of leaders from RIC, state legislators, policy organizations, and government agencies to create comprehensive, evidence-based steps for RIC to consider as they build their HSI strategic plan. These recommendations aim to provide a comprehensive view of the various sectors and issues that impact the RIC community, particularly Latino students, and to ensure their success.

GOVERNMENT & LEGISLATIVE POLICIES

Funding Formula

- Revise funding formulas such as Title IV to ensure HSIs receive equitable funding that reflects their unique needs and challenges. This may include adjusting the base funding levels to account for higher percentages of low-income students and additional support for programs to increase student success.

- Implement a performance-based funding model that rewards institutions for meeting specific benchmarks related to student success, such as graduation rates, retention rates, and degree completions. Ensure that these benchmarks are realistic and consider the demographic and socioeconomic contexts of HSIs.

- Provide flexible funding options that allow HSIs to allocate resources where they are most needed, such as faculty development, student support services, or infrastructure improvements. This flexibility can help institutions more effectively address the diverse needs of their student populations.

State's Role

- The Rhode Island state government should work to pass legislation that supports equitable funding models and ensures consistent funding for HSIs. This could involve revising state public higher education funding formulas and advocating for increased state investments in HSIs.

- Establish state-level oversight committees to monitor the impact of funding changes and ensure that resources are being used effectively to support student success at HSIs.

ACCESS TO AID

- Expand state and federal financial aid programs to provide more support to Latino students, including scholarships, grants, and work-study opportunities. Ensure that these programs are accessible and that students know available resources.

- Streamline the financial aid application process to reduce barriers for students. Assist with completing applications and offer resources in multiple languages to accommodate diverse student populations.

- Establish emergency financial aid programs to assist students facing unexpected financial hardships, preventing them from dropping out due to financial difficulties.

State's Role

- Advocate for increased funding and expansion of financial aid programs at the state level. Support legislation simplifying the aid application process and improving accessibility for Latino students.

- Invest in outreach programs to educate students and their families about available financial aid resources.

- Partner with HSIs to ensure that information is disseminated effectively.

RETENTION & TRANSFER

- Develop and fund targeted retention programs that address the specific needs of Latino students, including academic advising, mentoring, and counseling services. Implement initiatives that foster a sense of belonging and cultural competence within the campus community.

- Create straightforward and streamlined transfer pathways between HSIs and other institutions, including community colleges and universities. Enhance articulation agreements that facilitate the transfer of credits and ensure that students progress smoothly through their educational journeys.

- Use data analytics to identify students at risk of dropping out and implement early intervention strategies. Track retention rates and develop programs based on evidence of what works best for Latino students.

State's Role

- Allocate state funds specifically for retention programs at HSIs and create grants or incentives for institutions that implement successful retention strategies.

- Facilitate collaboration between HSIs, community colleges, and four-year universities to develop and maintain effective transfer agreements. The state can help standardize transfer credit policies and promote partnerships among institutions.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT & PARTNERSHIP

- Foster partnerships between Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) and public and private sector employers to create student internships, apprenticeships, and job placement opportunities. These partnerships help align educational programs with workforce needs and improve employment outcomes for graduates.

- Invest in career services at HSIs to provide students with career counseling, job search assistance, and professional development opportunities. Strengthening ties between academic programs and industry needs to ensure graduates are prepared for the job market.

- Collaborate with industry leaders to develop curricula and training programs that meet current and future workforce demands, particularly in high-growth sectors.

State's Role

- Offer grants or tax incentives to companies collaborating with HSIs on workforce development initiatives. Support programs that align educational outcomes with the labor market's needs.

- Develop a statewide strategy integrating education and workforce development, involving HSIs, businesses, community organizations, philanthropy, and workforce development agencies in planning and implementation.

WORKGROUP FORMATION

- Institute a multi-year dedicated workgroup consisting of representatives from HSIs, state education departments, policymakers, and community organizations to address the specific needs of HSIs to develop and implement targeted solutions and accountability metrics.

- Ensure the workgroup meets regularly to review progress, assess challenges, and propose policy recommendations. Require periodic reports to track the implementation and impact of proposed policies.

- The workgroup should include diverse stakeholders, particularly Latino students and faculty from HSIs, to ensure that a broad range of perspectives is considered.

State's Role

- Provide funding and administrative support for the workgroup's activities. Ensure the workgroup can access necessary data and resources to make informed decisions.

- Facilitate legislative support for the recommendations made by the workgroup and advocate for their integration into state education policies.

RIC HSI WORKGROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

Institutional Leadership & Oversight

Policies and Procedures

- Establish a sustained and dedicated role for oversight and leadership of HSI Initiatives.
- Establish a permanent standing HSI Advisory Board for strategic planning.
- Strive for a comprehensive transformation of institutional facets impacting student services, including—but not limited to—governance, leadership, curricular and co-curricular programs, decision-making processes, incentive structures, training and development, assessment and evaluation, and community engagement.
- Review and adjust re-enrollment policies to address potential barriers to adult learners and justice-involved populations.

Strategic Planning

- Develop a comprehensive strategy focused on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and HSI to promote a more inclusive and diverse environment.
- Establish a dedicated HSI Office or Department Center to centralize efforts and resources to advance institutional goals.
- Define a strategic plan for HSI, emphasizing providing student success wrap-around services. Commit to piloting critical initiatives aimed at enhancing student success and engagement.
- Formally incorporate its HSI designation into its mission statement.

Diversity Equity & Inclusion Initiatives

- Formulate a DEI strategy tailored to RIC's unique needs and aspirations, fostering an inclusive culture and environment.
- Create and implement organizational initiatives promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Develop and support programs encouraging underrepresented groups to thrive and excel within the institution, contributing to a more diverse and vibrant community.

Grant Funding

- Establish a clear vision and goals for grant acquisition aligned with the institution's strategic plan.
- Create a dedicated grant management role with adequate resources, training, and streamlined processes.
- Create a multi-year grant acquisition strategy that outlines specific objectives, target deadlines, and responsible personnel.
- Allocate sufficient resources for grant development, writing, submission, and administration, including personnel, time, and budget.
- Monitor federal, state, foundation, and corporate grant databases regularly for funding opportunities relevant to HSI's mission and goals.
- Prioritize grants designated explicitly for HSIs or supporting programs that serve Latino students.
- Provide professional development opportunities and training workshops for faculty and staff to enhance grant writing skills and stay updated on best practices.
- Develop robust evaluation plans to assess the effectiveness and impact of grant-funded programs and initiatives.

Human Resources

Faculty Staff & Retention

- Establish a dedicated research center focused on niche scientific studies, serving as both an avenue for collaborative research and a valuable retention tool.
- Increase bilingual and bicultural faculty and staff, particularly in student-facing areas.
- Prioritize recruitment and retention of diverse faculty and staff, including individuals who identify as Latino.
- Establish inclusive hiring practices and professional development opportunities for underrepresented faculty and staff.
- Engage in an equity review of hiring processes.

Professional Development

- Offer ongoing professional development opportunities that align with career goals and promote continuous learning to administrators, faculty, and staff.
- Establish a clear pathway for career advancement and provide resources for faculty and staff to enhance their skills.
- Involve faculty and staff in decision-making processes that affect their roles and the overall direction of the institution.
- Create avenues for collaborative decision-making, allowing diverse voices to contribute to key initiatives.
- Implement diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives to create a welcoming and supportive environment for faculty and staff from all backgrounds.
- Address unconscious biases and promote a culture of fairness and equity.
- Deepen and broaden the administrative capacity to advocate for RIC's distinctiveness as an HSI campus through professional development, such as attendance at Excelencia in Education or HACU Conferences.

Data & Technology

Data Collection Strategy & Analysis

- Develop a DEI & HSI-focused data strategy for RIC.
- Create a system to collect disaggregated data of racial and ethnic categories and their subcategories for all-inclusive decision-making.
- Conduct a qualitative study on Latino student experiences to complement quantitative data and emphasize the importance of narratives.
- Survey instruments and data collection materials should be provided in both English and Spanish to accommodate the language preferences of Latino students.
- Invest in advanced data analytics platforms that enable sophisticated data processing , and visualization.

Longitudinal Tracking

- Implement longitudinal tracking systems to follow the educational journeys of Latino students over time.
- Assess and report regularly on educational outcomes, identifying trends and areas for improvement in Latino student success and retention.
- Monitor enrollment metrics regularly and adjust recruitment strategies to address emerging challenges or opportunities.
- Utilize data analytics to identify trends and patterns in Latino student enrollment and retention.

Data Transparency

- Establish transparent communication channels to inform Latino students about how their data will be used, ensuring compliance with privacy regulations.
- Share aggregated and anonymized data findings with the broader community to enhance accountability and foster a collaborative approach to improvement.

Continuous Improvement

- Evaluate and refine data collection methods regularly based on feedback, emerging trends, and changes in the Latino student population.
- Stay informed about best practices and innovations in data collection within the higher education landscape to enhance processes continually.

Mental Health and Well-being Focus

- Incorporate questions related to mental health and well-being, recognizing that Latino students may face unique stressors and challenges.
- Develop targeted support services based on the mental health data collected to improve overall student success.

Student Involvement

- Analyze data through an intersectional lens to identify and address specific challenges subgroups face within the Latino student population.
- Involve Latino student organizations and leaders in the development and execution of data collection initiatives.
- Create student advisory boards to provide ongoing input on data collection strategies and ensure the student perspective is considered.

Culture & Climate

Cultural Competency and Support Services

- Build cultural competency across all RIC departments.
- Implement intentional Latino Advising & Career support.
- Enhance and strengthen Multilingual Learning (MLL) support for students.
- Increase bilingual and bicultural faculty and staff, particularly in student-facing areas.
- Invest in professional advisors for first-year students.

Inclusive Campus Environment

- Foster an inclusive and welcoming campus environment that celebrates diversity.
- Implement training for staff and faculty to raise awareness of cultural competence and unconscious biases.

Community Engagement

Partnerships

- Establish a seamless and collaborative K-12 to higher education pipeline, such as pipeline programs with local high schools, to enhance educational continuity and student success.
- Involve the local community in supporting the K-12 to higher education pipeline, fostering a sense of shared responsibility for educational success.
- Forge partnerships with high schools with a track record of supporting co-concurrent and dual enrollment initiatives.
- Identify high schools with strong academic programs and engaged faculty willing to collaborate on developing and promoting these opportunities to their students.
- Establish clear pathways for credit transfer from high school to college, ensuring that credits earned through co-concurrent and dual enrollment programs seamlessly transfer to the institution.

Cultural Empowerment Collaborations

- Establish partnerships with Latino-focused organizations and community groups, including parental engagement, workshops, and resources for parents to support their children's education and collaborative efforts to address cultural and generational gaps.
- Create access to legal resources and support, such as building partnerships with legal aid organizations, providing resources addressing immigration concerns, and supporting students facing legal challenges.

Civic Engagement and Leadership Opportunities for Students

- Promote civic engagement and leadership opportunities for Latino students within the campus and local community.
- Establish student organizations and leadership programs that empower Latino students to make a positive impact

Family & Community Engagement and Outreach

- Develop targeted marketing and communication efforts for Latino students.
- Expand Latino Heritage Celebration activities.
- Collaborate with community organizations and leaders to build trust and promote the participation of Latino students in data collection efforts.
- Conduct outreach programs within local Latino communities to raise awareness about the importance of accurate data for improving educational experiences.
- Develop strategies to involve families and communities in the educational journey of Latino students.
- Establish outreach programs to inform parents about college processes and resources available to their students.

Academic Success

Curriculum Development

- Infuse curriculum with content that reflects Latino students' cultural diversity and experiences. Include texts, examples, and case studies that resonate with their backgrounds.
- Implement language support initiatives, such as bilingual resources, language enrichment programs, and English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, to assist Latino students in their academic journey.
- Develop curriculum elements that involve community-based projects, internships, or service learning. This approach connects classroom learning to real-world experiences within the Latino community.

Language and Cultural Programs

- Create an inventory of course offerings and programs that focus and highlight the Latino community.
- Support and provide resources to the Spanish and the Latin American Studies programs.
- Enhance curriculum design and provide information in the native language(s) of Latino students.

Academic and Transition Support Programs

- Expand the Project ExCEL program.
- Enhance Summer Bridge programs for Latino students interested in career and workforce pathways, including nursing, social work, education, STEM, and the humanities. This could be a cohort within the existing Preparatory Enrollment Program Summer Bridge program for students.

- Provide additional resources for specialized Summer Bridge programs.
- Implement targeted support mechanisms for individuals with foreign credentials, facilitating their integration into higher education pathways.

Transfer and Articulation Agreements

- Enhance substantial transfer and articulation agreements with community colleges to facilitate the seamless transition of Latino students to four-year institutions.
- Provide clear pathways for degree completion and academic success.

Student Success & Support Services

Student Enrollment and Retention

- Develop peer mentorship programs that pair Latino students with experienced mentors who can guide academic and personal challenges. Create a supportive network that fosters a sense of community.
- Train academic advisors to understand and address Latino students' unique needs and challenges.
- Provide resources that facilitate effective communication and cultural sensitivity in advising interactions.
- Develop targeted outreach campaigns tailored to Latino communities, including high schools with high Latino student populations, community centers, and cultural events.
- Engage with community leaders, organizations, and influencers to foster trust and promote the institution's higher education opportunities.
- Promote the Hope scholarship's benefits and eligibility criteria while highlighting how it aligns with Latino students' academic and career aspirations.
- Implement mandatory exit surveys for students who withdraw from the institution.

Bilingual and Bicultural Services

- Offer bilingual services, including academic advising, counseling, and administrative support.
- Ensure campus communications, website, and materials are available in English and Spanish.
- Establish accessible and culturally sensitive mental health services. Provide resources, counseling, and support that recognize and respect the cultural nuances of Latino students.
- Implement comprehensive wraparound support services, including academic advising, financial aid & scholarship guidance, and personal counseling. Ensure these services are culturally sensitive and readily accessible.
- Develop a robust crisis intervention plan with counseling services tailored to Latino students. Ensure that staff is trained to respond effectively to crises with cultural sensitivity.
- Offer workshops addressing stress management, resilience, and overall mental health. Tailor programs to incorporate cultural elements and encourage participation from the Latino student community.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this report carry significant implications for RIC as an HSI, policymakers, and other stakeholders. To address the identified disparities, it is essential to implement targeted policy reforms, including prioritizing funding initiatives that cater to Latino students' needs. This includes increasing financial support for HSIs, implementing targeted retention programs, and fostering policies that promote greater diversity among faculty and staff. Advocates should push for legislation supporting equitable funding and resources for HSIs to better serve their diverse student populations.

RIC needs to take several strategic actions to tackle these issues effectively. HSIs should enhance their support systems for Latino students by implementing comprehensive academic advising, mentoring programs, and financial aid resources. Additionally, a concerted effort should be made to recruit and retain Latino faculty and staff to ensure a more inclusive and representative academic environment. Collaboration between legislators and HSIs is crucial in developing and promoting policies that support these objectives and ensure equitable access to higher education.

Furthermore, there is a clear need for additional research to fill gaps in the current understanding of Latino student experiences and outcomes at HSIs. Future studies should focus on longitudinal analyses of student success, including retention and graduation rates, and evaluate the impact of various support programs. Research should also explore the effectiveness of existing policies and practices in improving educational equity and student outcomes. Additionally, investigating the K-12 pipeline and its influence on higher education and workforce development would offer valuable insights into how to support Latino students throughout their educational journey.

Based on the report's findings, HSIs should consider making several operational adjustments. Institutions should refine their data collection methods to ensure more accurate and detailed reporting, facilitating better benchmarking and comparison with other HSIs. Moreover, reviewing and adjusting strategies to enhance Latino student success—focusing on academic support, career services, and community engagement—is crucial. By adopting these changes, HSIs can better address the needs of their students and improve overall educational outcomes.

Highlighting Hispanic-Serving Institutions

The institutions highlighted in this report—Salem State University, Holyoke Community College, Dominican University, Mercy University, the University at Albany, and Florida International University—were selected for their proven track records of success in advancing Latino student achievement. Though Rhode Island College (RIC) is a public four-year institution, these institutions provide valuable insights into how to effectively support and uplift Latino students, making them exemplary models for RIC to learn from as it works toward becoming a designated Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Each of these institutions has demonstrated, over several years, that their intentional focus on Latinx student success results in measurable outcomes, including improved retention rates, graduation rates, and overall academic performance. Many of them have earned the prestigious Seal of Excelencia, a distinction that Rhode Island College aspires to achieve, further affirming their evidence-based effectiveness in serving Hispanic and Latino communities.

These examples are not just theoretical; they have implemented robust strategies, supported by institutional leadership, community engagement, and innovative programming that make a tangible difference in the lives of Latino students.

While RIC may be at a different stage in its journey, these institutions share similar values and challenges, especially in serving gateway communities and fostering student success. The success stories from these institutions highlight the importance of culturally responsive support, holistic wraparound services, and financial literacy initiatives—strategies that RIC can emulate in its own efforts. By studying the outcomes of these HSIs and applying lessons learned to its own context, RIC can effectively build a comprehensive framework that prioritizes educational equity, social mobility, and student achievement for its Latinx population. The similarities in institutional mission, community engagement, and focus on civic responsibility underscore a shared commitment among HSIs to promote educational excellence for Latino students, a vision that aligns with RIC's aspirations.

Salem State University

Salem State University, is on a promising trajectory toward becoming a designated Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and Minority-Serving Institution (MSI). Although the formal recognition is expected to take another year, with full designation anticipated by Spring 2026, Salem State is already demonstrating a strong commitment to Latinx student success and community engagement. **As Dr. Castillo, President of Salem State University, emphasized, the institution's focus on serving its gateway communities and fostering civic engagement aligns with its natural trajectory toward HSI status.** What sets Salem State apart is its unique approach—Salem State is the only institution in the region with a dedicated leadership position focused on "servingness," ensuring intentional and strategic efforts to support diverse student populations.

A key component of this commitment is the **Roadmap to Servingness**, a community-driven initiative designed to guide the University in its efforts to better serve its Latinx students. The roadmap outlines concrete actions and goals to improve services, outreach, and academic opportunities, further solidifying Salem State's position as a leader in inclusive higher education. Additionally, the University's role in hosting the inaugural **HSI-MSI conference this summer** showcased its leadership not just in New England, but across the nation, positioning Salem State as an emerging leader in advancing Hispanic and minority-serving initiatives.

Leadership position focused on servingness

Leader in inclusive higher education

Holyoke Community College

Holyoke Community College, Holyoke Community College (HCC) is proud to highlight the work of *El Centro*, a dedicated resource center designed to support Latinx and Spanish-speaking students on their academic journey. **El Centro** aims to create a thriving, culturally responsive learning community that fosters a sense of belonging, academic success, and personal advancement for Latinx students. With its focus on providing tailored support services, El Centro has become a cornerstone for students seeking guidance that aligns with their cultural and linguistic needs.

El Centro offers a range of bilingual (English/Spanish) services for both students and their families, ensuring accessibility and inclusivity. Key services include academic advising, one-on-one support, and holistic wraparound services that address students' academic, social, and emotional needs. Additionally, El Centro provides crucial assistance with financial aid processes, including FAFSA application support and financial literacy workshops, ensuring that students are equipped with the tools they need to succeed financially. Cultural events and celebrations are also central to El Centro's mission, providing students with opportunities to connect with their heritage and build community. These efforts help support students throughout their academic careers, from graduation to transfer or entry into the workforce, reinforcing HCC's commitment to advancing Latinx student success and achievement.

Bilingual (English/Spanish) services for both students

Provides crucial assistance with financial aid processes

Dominican University

<u>Dominican University (DU)</u>, a private Catholic institution located on the outskirts of Chicago, has been designated as an HSI since 2011. It has successfully obtained several federal grants to support its mission. With a student body of 3,200, including 2,100 undergraduates, **66% of DU's students identify as Latino.**

Through its 140 full-time instructional staff members, the university supports a favorable 10:1 student-to-faculty ratio. Offering 50 undergraduate and 25 graduate programs, **DU is committed to advancing educational opportunities and social mobility for Latino students.**

The university has reinforced its role as a leader among HSIs, and its emphasis on promoting itself as Chicago's premier Catholic HSI underscores its dedication to fostering academic success and opportunity within the Latino community.


66% of DU's students identify as Latino

Offering 50 undergraduate and 25 graduate programs

Mercy University

Mercy University, an HSI that received the Seal of Excelencia Certification from 2022-2025, stands out for its robust support system and significant impact on Latino student success. As the largest private HSI in the region, Mercy enrolls 5,860 undergraduates, of whom **42% identify as Latino.**

The university is nationally recognized for its **leadership in awarding bachelor's degrees to Latino students.** Mercy's commitment to closing equity gaps is evident in its Personalized Achievement Contract (PACT) Program, which provides **tailored mentoring and support,** including advising, career exploration, and financial literacy. Since implementing PACT in 2008, the retention rate for Latino, first-time, full-time students rose from 60% to 77%, eliminating a 15% retention gap by 2019.

Mercy's STEM mentoring program offers targeted support, fosters a growth mindset, and integrates resources and mentoring for Latino students. This program has proven successful, with Latino participants achieving an average GPA of 3.2 and a retention rate of 93% from Fall 2020 to Spring 2022, significantly surpassing non-participants and the overall university average. These initiatives highlight Mercy University's effective strategies in enhancing Latino student achievement and exemplify best practices for HSIs aiming to improve educational outcomes.
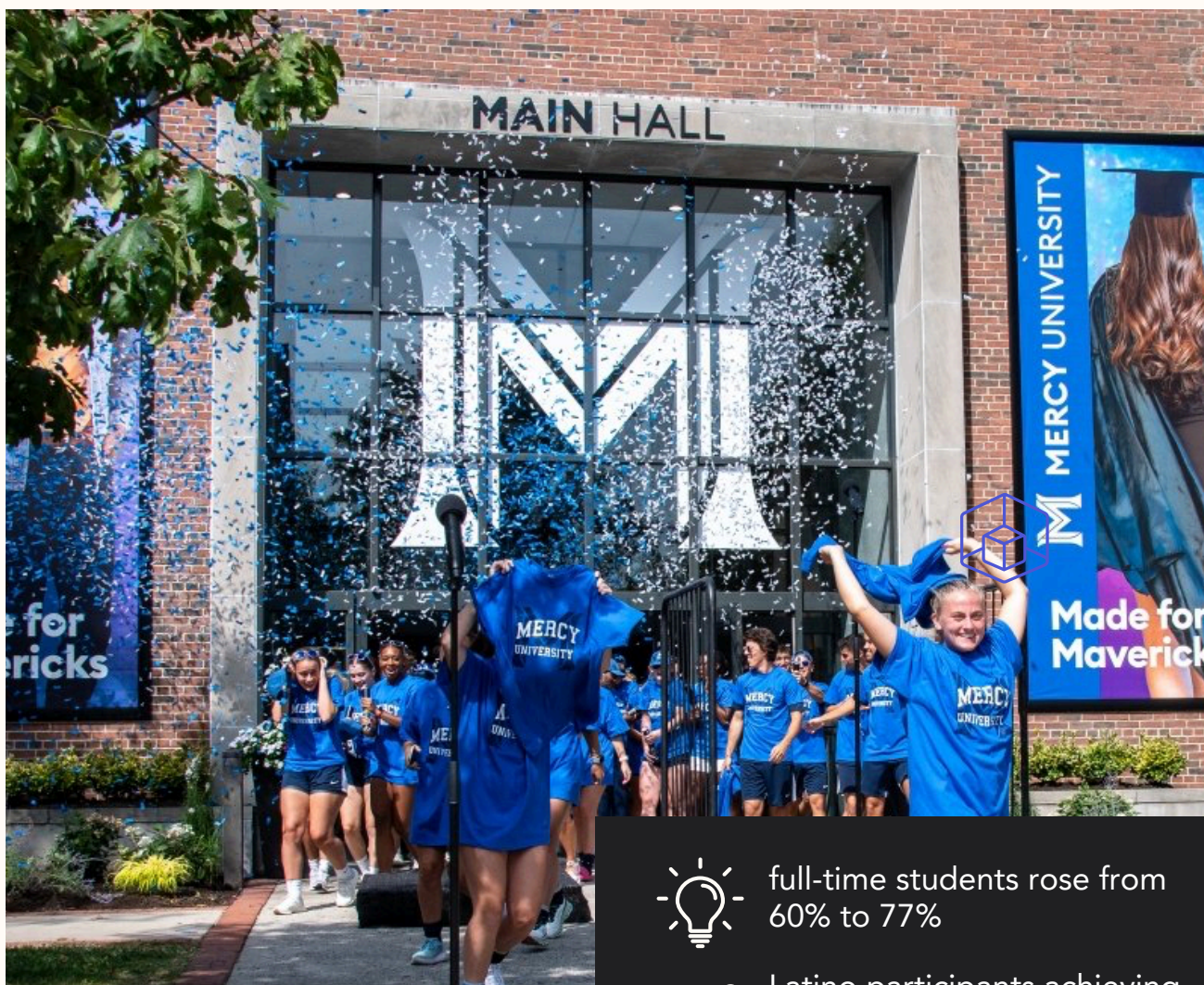
full-time students rose from 60% to 77%

Latino participants achieving an average GPA of 3.2 and a retention rate of 93%

University at Albany

The University at Albany (UAlbany) is a compelling model for emerging Hispanic-Serving Institutions (eHSI) due to its effective strategies in supporting Latino student success. With 18% of its undergraduate population identifying as Latino, **U. Albany is recognized for its commitment to inclusivity.**

Nearly 40% of its students come from underrepresented backgrounds, and about one-third are first-generation college students. UAlbany's approach includes the Science Technology Entry Program (STEP) and Collegiate (CSTEP), which provides comprehensive support from K-12 through college, including peer mentoring, tutoring, and career development. This has led to a 9-10% higher retention rate for Latino CSTEP participants than non-participants and an 81% four-year graduation rate for Latino students in 2016, significantly higher than their peers.

U. Albany's Living Learning Communities (LLCs) enhance Latino student retention and academic performance by fostering smaller, interest-based groups within the university. Latino students in LLCs achieve higher GPAs and graduation rates than non-participants, underscoring the success of UAlbany's inclusive strategies. These initiatives exemplify how targeted support can significantly benefit Latino students and contribute to the overall goals of HSIs.

9-10% higher retention rate for Latino CSTEP participants

U. Albany is recognized for its commitment to inclusivity.

Florida International University (FIU)

Florida International University (FIU), a prominent HSI based in Miami-Dade County, Florida, is dedicated to supporting its substantial Latino student population, which constitutes two-thirds of its nearly 40,000 undergraduates.

FIU has implemented several strategic initiatives to address institutional and financial barriers hindering student success. The university has expanded its outreach efforts by **hiring additional staff to provide targeted support,** particularly for Latino students, to resolve re-enrollment, registration holds, and graduation eligibility issues. Since 2020, these efforts have significantly contributed to the graduation of over 1,000 students, including 668 Latinos, and have resulted in a notable **34% increase in the four-year graduation rate for Latino students over five years.**

FIU has tackled financial barriers by enhancing its support infrastructure, which includes providing emergency aid and increasing the budget for completion grants. With 74% of FIU's Pell Grant recipients being Latino, the institution's Financial Wellness Program has notably decreased course drops due to nonpayment by 62% from 2020 to 2021, and 98% of Latino completion grant recipients graduated within one year of receiving their grant. These strategies underscore FIU's commitment to fostering academic success and degree completion among its Latino students.

Since 2020, these efforts have significantly contributed to the graduation of over 1,000 students, including 668 Latinos

Miami Dade College (MDC)

Miami Dade College (MDC) exemplifies commitment to its predominantly Latino student body, enrolling nearly 90,000 students, of whom **72% identify as Latino.** Reflecting the county's demographics, MDC serves a diverse population, of which 51% are first-generation college students, 43% come from low-income households, and 78% work while studying.

MDC is a leader in economic mobility and awarded 16,650 degrees in the 2019-2020 academic year. The college's intentional efforts to serve its students are demonstrated through programs such as the Honors College Dual Language Program and the Shark Path initiative. **The Dual Language Program provides Latino students with bilingual education in English and Spanish, offering significant cognitive and economic benefits in a global marketplace.** This program has achieved a remarkable 100% retention rate from fall to spring and 98% from fall to fall, surpassing other Honors College cohorts and highlighting its success. Shark Path is a comprehensive support system guiding students from admission through graduation.

By integrating a three-tiered advisory model with pre-college advisors, Assigned Advisors, and College Mentors, MDC has **increased Latino student retention rates**, with fall-to-spring rates rising to 91% and fall-to-fall rates to 75%. Furthermore, the program has contributed to a five-percentage-point increase in the 150% completion rate, from 31% to 36%, demonstrating its effectiveness in supporting student success and degree completion.

The Dual Language Program provides Latino students with bilingual education in English and Spanish, offering significant cognitive and economic benefits in a global marketplace

Taking Action

At LPI, we believe **education equity is a policy imperative.** We continue to work with policymakers, educators, and community leaders to ensure Latino students thrive in higher education and beyond.

Contact info@thelatinopolicy.org or visit thelatinopolicy.org for more information.

Support our advocacy, read our full executive summary, and help us push for systemic change.