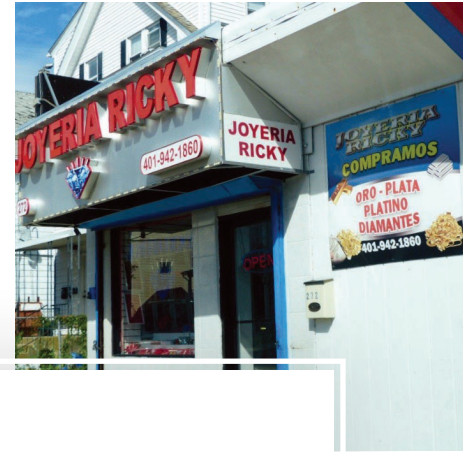


SPECIAL REPORT



Engaging Latinos in Rhode Island Small Business Initiatives

By J. Alejandro Tirado-Alcaraz



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Introduction

“I started [my business] since I arrived here [to Rhode Island] in 1989. I realized there was no [Latino] food around. There were only two restaurants in Providence. I grew up eating tacos. My mom used to sell food [back in my country]. [Here] we started selling food at home. It wasn’t easy to start. I didn’t speak English at all back then, but my kids did and I used to bring them with me everywhere. They were my translators. I never felt discriminated [against], people knew I was [Latino] but they probably thought I was serious about my business. I enjoy doing my job and now I have a brand new truck.”

“We do business because we identify needs, if it’s phone cards, we start selling them. If someone asks for bottles of water, then I find a way to start selling them.”

These stories emulate what this report is about. They illustrate the entrepreneurial spirit of Latino Rhode Islanders. They, as other Latinos in the United States, have a strong belief that hard work and dedication are the keys to succeed and secure a better future. It is no surprise that recent polls show that Latinos tend to believe, more than other groups, in the idea of the American Dream (Vasilogambros, 2016). With Rhode Island having one of the highest concentrations of Latinos in New England, including the highest rate of Latino-owned firms in the region, we consider it relevant to know more about the challenges they faced when they open their businesses. This also helps us to better understand the underlying factors that push them to move forward and contribute to a state where productivity and creativity are much needed.

Last year, Latino Policy Institute at Roger Williams University (LPI) in partnership with the Center for Women & Enterprise (CWE) embarked on a research project to learn more about the initiatives available to Latino entrepreneurs interested in starting their own business. The study consisted of two stages. In the first stage, we explored the self-reported business needs of participants in CWE’s free 10-week Community Entrepreneurs program called “Business Planning – Getting Started.” This short course, supported in part by the U.S. Small Business Administration and the Rhode Island Foundation, aims to help engage members of four (4) Rhode Island communities in the process of entrepreneurial business planning. The course was open to the public and classes were hosted in a multitude of languages, to include: Spanish, Cape Verdean, Portuguese Creole, and English.

During the second stage of the study, we used a mix of judgment and respondent driven sampling with a maximum of three participants within each social network. Focus groups were organized and in-depth personal interviews were conducted. Combined, 50 Latino entrepreneurs who were in the process of starting their own business, as well as those who were already business owners, were invited to participate. We also spoke with service providers from the public and private sectors who have been working closely with the Latino business community in Rhode Island. This provided us with a more comprehensive perspective on the matter. From the findings, we learned about the resources available for small businesses and the difficulty service providers face when outreaching to the Latino community. In addition, we also learned about the perception Latino entrepreneurs have about the business environment in Rhode Island. Based on our analysis, we offer policy recommendations that could serve as the basis for local and state authorities to make the necessary changes to allow Latino and other minority entrepreneurs to take advantage of the resources available to them.



“Business Planning – Getting Started” class graduation at Progreso Latino.

Background

Just as immigrant groups before Latinos were critical to Rhode Island’s early economic success, Latinos are an important factor in Rhode Island’s current and future economic well-being. The Latino population is growing fast in Rhode Island and across the country. Between 2000 and 2014, there was a 67.5 percent increase in the Latino population. This occurred at a time of nearly zero net population growth. Today, Latinos make up 14.6 percent of the state’s population, which is projected to nearly double to 26 percent by 2040. Nationally, 17.4 percent of the population is Latino, a 63.5 percent overall increase from 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2016).

According to the Boston Federal Reserve, the “loss of manufacturing jobs in the 1980s and 1990s,” as well as a “lack of in-demand skills,” led to an increase in Latino-owned small businesses (Spitzer & Carbonell, 2012). The entrepreneurial spirit was strong among Latinos in Rhode Island and they were able to overcome many obstacles in order to begin businesses. Data from the Survey of Business Owners and Self-Employed Persons show that Rhode Island was the state with the highest percentage of Latino-owned businesses in New England in 2012. This is a relevant finding considering that it is the second state in the region with the highest concentration of Latinos, yet remains below the national figures (Figure 1).

From a local perspective, 28 percent of all firms in Providence were Latino-owned in 2012. This put the city in second place among a group of comparable cities in the neighboring states of Massachusetts and Connecticut¹ (Figure 2). Other Rhode Island cities like Woonsocket, Central Falls, North Providence, and Johnston experienced relevant increases in the number of Latino-owned firms between 2007 and 2012. We can infer that not only the population share of Latinos in Rhode Island is changing, but so is the geographical distribution of their businesses.

¹ Peer cities were selected based on an analysis by Kodrzycki and Muñoz (2009). They looked at population trends, family income, poverty rates, manufacturing employment shares, and regional significance.

Figure 1
Percent of Latino-owned Firms and Latino Population in New England States, 2012

Source: Survey of Business Owners and Self-Employed Persons (2012), American Community Survey (2012)

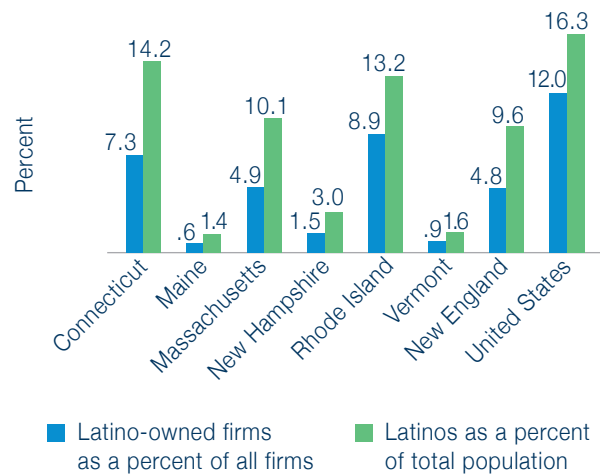
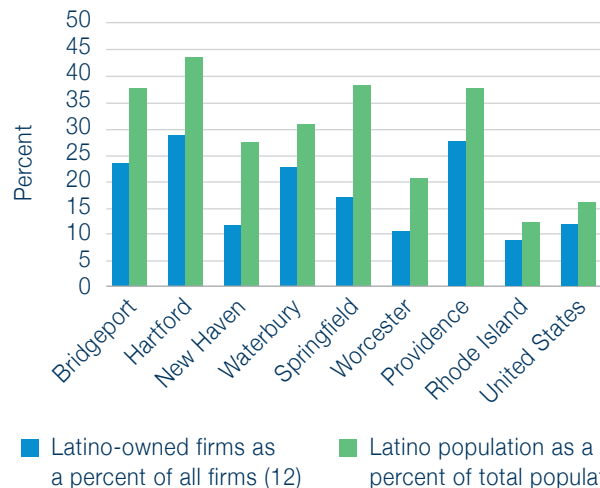


Figure 2
Percent of Latino-owned Firms and Latino Population in Providence and Comparable Cities, 2012

Source: Survey of Business Owners and Self-Employed Persons (2012), Census (2010)



When we compare growth rates of Latino-owned businesses with non-Latino-owned firms, we found that between 2007 and 2012 the number of non-Latino-owned firms in Rhode Island went down. During that same time period however, the number of Latino-owned firms had an increase of 46 percent. Except for Massachusetts, where there was virtually no growth in the number of non-Latino-owned firms, all of the New England states followed a similar pattern. In the case of Providence, the number of non-Latino-owned firms had a near 2.5 percent decrease, while the number of Latino-owned firms grew almost 60 percent (Figure 3). The striking numbers show that Latinos make important contributions to the local and state economies. It seems that the last recession hit non-Latino-owned businesses harder, while it was not enough to stop the entrepreneurial and hardworking spirit of Latinos.

Since the data has been available, the growth of Latino-owned firms in Rhode Island has been constant. Between 1997 and 2012, there was over 280 percent growth in Latino-owned businesses, growing from 2,186 in 1997 to 8,439 in 2012. This put Rhode Island above the other New England states, as well as the nation. During the same period of analysis, the city of Providence experienced a higher growth (552 percent). When compared to other small and midsize cities, Providence was the third city with the highest percentage of growth in Latino-owned businesses. (Table 1).

Figure 3
Percent Growth of Latino-owned Firms and Non-Latino-owned Firms, 2007 – 2012

Source: Survey of Business Owners and Self-Employed Persons (2007 and 2012).

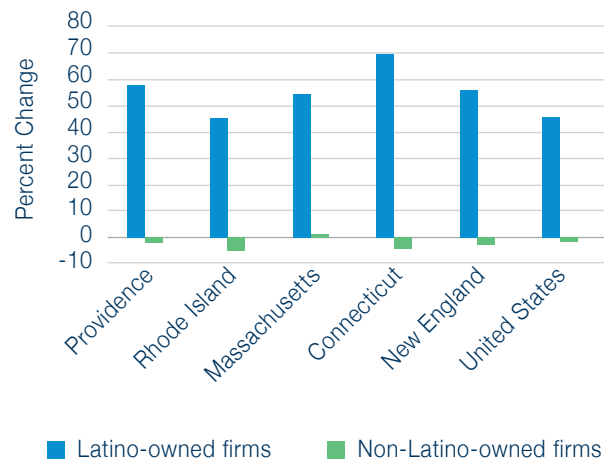


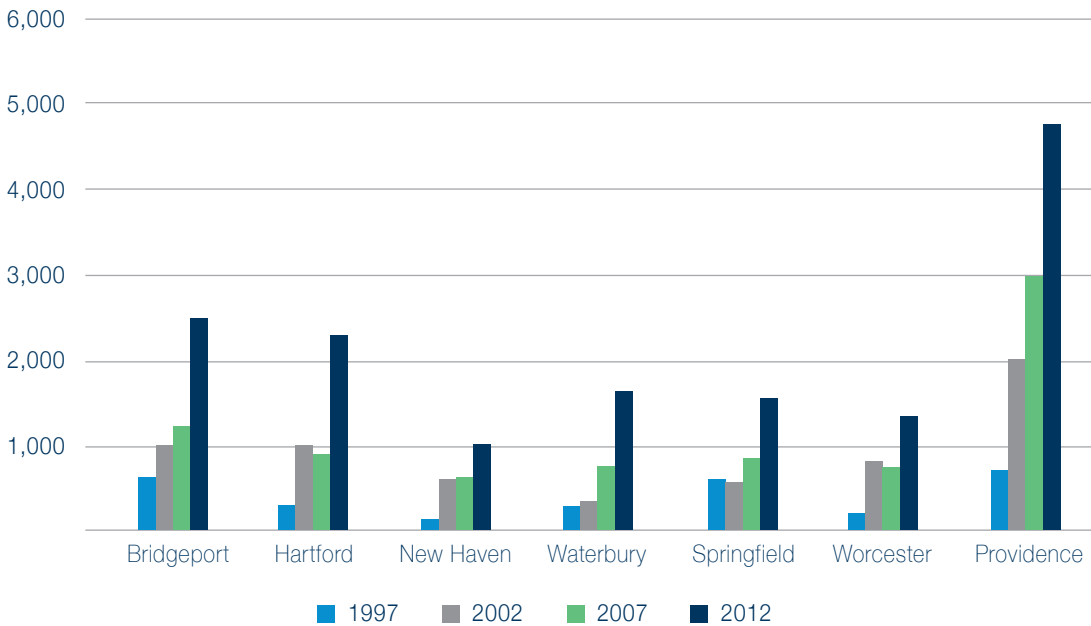
Table 1
Latino-owned Businesses

Source: Survey of Business Owners and Self-Employed Persons (1997, 2002, 2007, and 2012)

	Number of Businesses				Percent Change
	1997	2002	2007	2012	1997-2012
Peer New England Cities					
Bridgeport, CT	662	993	1,242	2,502	278
Hartford, CT	320	998	931	2,311	622
New Haven, CT	153	593	643	1,024	569
Waterbury, CT	287	340	785	1,632	469
Springfield, MA	614	591	852	1,562	154
Worcester, MA	226	820	761	1,361	502
Providence, RI	731	2,022	3,001	4,764	552
New England					
Maine	545	731	979	906	66
Vermont	898	452	470	684	(24)
New Hampshire	735	913	1,441	1,913	160
Massachusetts	12,725	15,933	19,410	30,022	136
Connecticut	6,594	9,408	14,081	23,996	264
Rhode Island	2,186	3,415	5,765	8,439	286
United States	1,199,896	1,573,464	2,260,269	3,305,873	176

Figure 4
Number of Latino-owned Firms

Source: Survey of Business Owners and Self-Employed Persons (1997 - 2012)



Since 1997, Providence has been the city with the highest number of Latino-owned firms (Figure 4).

The data shows that Rhode Island has consistently been the poorest state in New England (Figure 5), and Latinos in Rhode Island are the population with the highest rates of poverty (Figure 6). Given those statistics, we were interested in better understanding these findings through the lens of a Latino entrepreneur. In particular, we wanted to understand why the high growth in Latino-owned firms has not translated into a sustainable source of income and lower poverty rates for the Latino population. We analyzed the possibility that Latinos are not taking advantage of the resources available through the state, non-governmental organizations, and private institutions; which could be limiting their business potential. In turn, this lack of engagement limits Rhode Island’s economic outlook.

Figure 5
Poverty Rates in New England States

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey, 1-year estimates

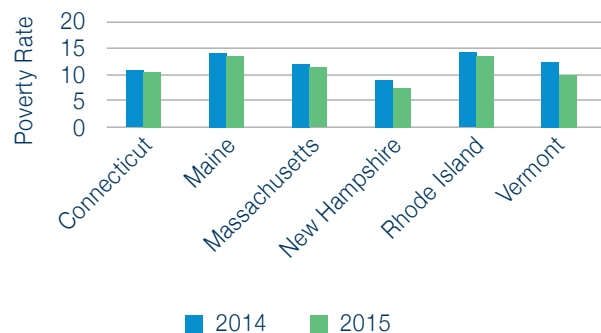
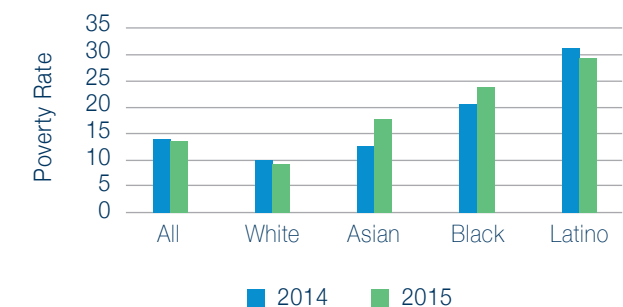


Figure 6
Poverty Rates by Race, Rhode Island

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey, 1-year estimates



Findings

First Stage: Self-reported Questionnaire

In the first stage of our research, we administered a questionnaire to a group of 32 participants during one of the CWE's free 10-week Community Entrepreneurs program called "Business Planning – Getting Started." This was an exploratory research stage where we gathered information about the participants' motivations for starting a business, their self-assessed competencies, and their perception about municipal services and access to credit.

Most of the respondents had a strong desire for independence and self-sufficiency. Comprising 70 percent of responses, the most popular motivations selected were "to do what you're interested in" and "to set your own schedule." Another popular answer was "to create jobs for others." In Latino communities especially, small businesses provide an important source of employment for family members and members of the community, contributing to the betterment of the overall economic environment.

With respect to participants' competencies, respondents could score themselves along four different metrics: personal readiness, business industry knowledge, marketing, and business management readiness. On average, participants' highest scores were in "personal readiness," and their lowest in "business management readiness." The "business management readiness" section asked participants about their experience keeping financial records, managing employees, setting financial goals, and creating marketing plans, to name a few of the provided subcategories.

In regards to the municipal services offered to encourage entrepreneurship, 57 percent of the respondents indicated "the city provides me with information about permitting and licensing that is easy to find." Only 29 percent however, agreed that the city offers services that help entrepreneurs obtain permits and licenses. Notably, in the Spanish-spoken course, 60 percent of the respondents reported that the state helps entrepreneurs to access resources such as financial assistance, networking opportunities, or educational events.

The final aspect that we explored, was access to credit. We found that 70 percent of the respondents reported a mostly negative or negative experience with a loan application process. Some of them indicated feeling confused and unable to ask for clarification, while others felt the terms of their loan were unreasonable. In their own words, entrepreneurs reported difficulty meeting loan requirements such as "having a stable job for 2 years" and "having a low credit score." In addition, language barriers also gave some respondents difficulty in their interactions with financial institutions. Some respondents however, indicated that banks offered accommodations for their preferred language.

These preliminary findings revealed the perception of the average Rhode Island entrepreneur. However, due to the fact that the CWE course was open to the public, not all of the participants were Latinos, representing a bias in our findings. Since our research interest is specific to Latino entrepreneurship, we took it a step further and continued with the second stage of our research.

Second Stage: Focus Groups and In-Depth Personal Interviews

LPI reached out to Latino business owners, Latino entrepreneurs, and service providers in the public and private sectors. We were interested in learning more about the availability of resources and the challenges each of them faces. We organized two-focus groups and conducted in-depth personal interviews. We covered a diverse range of business activities that included radio broadcasting, art, bakery, wine distribution, retail stores, trade schools, marketing services, home services, restaurants, and flower design. We included foreign born Latinos and Latinos who were born in the United States.

Six emerging themes were identified:

1. The Process

Although the process (including regulations) of opening a small business applies to everyone, including Latinos, we found a mismatch between the existing definition of a small business and the typical size of Latino-owned businesses in Rhode Island. At the same time, there are inconsistencies between entrepreneurial initiative requirements and the way most Latino businesses operate. We also found an overwhelming bureaucracy that sometimes can be discouraging.

- According to the Small Business Administration (SBA), a company with up to 500 employees is considered small. The wide range in the number of employees creates inconsistencies, and opens the door to unfair competition for resources among companies within this category. One of the interviewees mentioned two well-known Rhode Island based companies.

“If these companies [of roughly 500 employees] are considered by this definition small businesses, this has consequences [for other small businesses with fewer employees and even fewer resources]. For instance, if you go to a bank as a small business, and they offer resources for small businesses, if you have not been in business for 2 years with certain revenue, you cannot get a loan. So here we have a problem.”

- All of the interviewees agreed that it would be ideal to have one multiservice location where entrepreneurs can get all of the information needed to start their businesses, and where they can also comply with all local and state requirements. This would contribute to a user-friendly entrepreneurial environment that could reduce the underlying uncertainty of the process of starting a business.

“The way Rhode Island regulations are set up is problematic. One department doesn’t really communicate with the other department, and sometimes this clashes with the regulations that need to be in place in order to be able to open up the doors.”

- We also found that some initiatives are created more for the mainstream entrepreneur and therefore many Latino entrepreneurs are not benefiting from them. The Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses program is an exciting and innovative initiative that is reaching some Latino business owners. Developing programs for micro business owners and entrepreneurs would add value to, and would complement this much needed program. In addition, this multifaceted strategy would act as a pipeline that would ultimately land at the Goldman Sachs program and/or at other programs of larger scale. The following quotes come from different participants:

“The [Goldman Sachs] idea is brilliant, but most of the time the Latino entrepreneur doesn’t have the skills [required], and in some way there’s a disconnect from reality and the Latino community is not taking advantage of these programs.”

“In order to access the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses program, an entrepreneur needs to show certain records [proof of gross revenues of at least \$100,000 for the most recent fiscal year]. Many [Latino entrepreneurs] don’t have that, and this is why we can’t access this initiative.”

2. Trust

For Latinos born outside the United States, trust is an important factor to operate their business. There were two identified barriers that contribute to the lack of trust in the system:

- *Language.* We learned that even if an entrepreneur is fluent in English, there are certain technicalities and codes that are difficult to understand. The following quotes are from different entrepreneurs that highlight the problem:

“I used to watch my mom going from one office to the other, and the language barrier for her was a big setback.”

“The last time I renewed my business license it was complicated. I went to City Hall and sometimes there’s a person who speaks Spanish, but the person is not always there. That makes things complicated because I don’t speak English.”

- *Culture.* There are cultural differences other than language that deplete trust and can pose further challenges for Latino entrepreneurs, particularly those born outside the United States. Distrust is a cultural extension brought by Latinos who migrated to the U.S. They knew how things were done back home but now, they are faced with a system that is foreign to them. At the same time, Latino immigrants come from environments where government institutions are weak and sometimes corrupt, which contributes to the culture of distrust in government. However, even for Latinos who were born in the U.S., dealing with state regulation creates distrust.

“The smartest thing I can do is to speak to somebody, preferably Latino, and have him explain to me what it is that I need to do. Because I have my business model clear, I have many things clear, but I’m not sure. I would love to have someone to hold my hand and walk me through [the process] because it is overwhelming with all the information I have.”

“One challenge I faced was to learn about the dynamics of businesses here as compared to those in our countries of origin.”

“One day I had an inspection from the Health Department. I passed it and asked the inspector when I would receive my license. She said that she would submit the report immediately. The days passed by and I didn’t hear anything from them. I made a phone call and nobody knew about my case.”

3. Education

Most of the time Latino entrepreneurs start a business because they have identified a need. The lack of business and financial literacy represents another challenge when they are in the process of starting their business, or when they try to expand and take it to the next level.

- Business literacy means knowing the steps to start and operate a business. It means being able to solve the everyday problems related to business activity. It means knowing the regulatory framework of the business activity of interest and being able to identify the agencies and the requirements to operate.
- Financial literacy is closely related to business literacy. It means learning the basics about credit score and how to keep it in good standing. It also means having an understanding of accounting and how to work with financial institutions.
- There are different programs aimed to provide the knowledge and the skills, but there is a perception among Latino entrepreneurs that the courses offered by different organizations are “designed in isolation” and “do not complement each other.” Both business and financial literacy are something which can only be acquired with experience.

“I’ve been an artist for 13 years – that doesn’t give me business administration. You can have a great idea but if you don’t know how to execute it and be organized, you can’t do it.”

“I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know how to start a business. I understood the legal structure because I took marketing and management classes but even then, I didn’t know how to apply it because I learned the theory.”

4. Financial Resources

All Latino entrepreneurs either used their savings, asked for money from a family member or a friend, or looked for a money-lender when they started their businesses. Some entrepreneurs tried to get loan from a bank but realized they did not meet the requirements. Most of them never considered going to the state to look for alternatives because they did not think of it as a viable option. These findings are similar to those found by Spitzer and Carbonell (2012). Access to credit, loans, or grants is limited in part because of the lack of financial literacy among Latinos. In the case of first-generation immigrants there is a cultural barrier with respect to credit. In Latin America, small businesses operate based on the amount of cash flow, and loans are avoided due to high interest rates. When they arrive to the U.S. they do not see credit score as an integral part of their business and as consequence, most of the time they do not qualify for loans. The process is even more complicated for startups than for established businesses. For financial institutions, small startups are riskier than well-established businesses.

This might be a reason why their requirements do not make sense for small entrepreneurs. In addition to credit scores and collateral, they asked for previous financial reports, sale projections, and other things that startups simply do not have.

“They offer you an umbrella when there’s sunshine, and they take it away from you when it is raining.” This means that financial institutions offer their products when the company is doing well, but in times of crisis, when resources are most needed, they refuse to help.

“Trusting in someone or in a system doesn’t happen overnight, which is something financial institutions are missing. If a bank invests in financial advisors for the IRA accounts, why not do it for someone who needs credit to start a business?”

5. Marketing and Human Capacity

According to service providers working with Latinos and other people of color, it seems that there are several resources available for small business entrepreneurs. These include advisory services, workshops, loans, and grants. These resources are available through the state, cities, private financial institutions, and non-governmental organizations. However, language makes a difference in terms of access. An entrepreneur who doesn’t speak English is less likely to have access to the initiatives and other resources. Even if they speak the language and were born in the U.S., most of the entrepreneurs participating in the study were unaware of the existing initiatives and programs for small business entrepreneurs in Rhode Island.

It seems that the information about these resources has not been consistently and effectively communicated.

“Sometimes people come with great ideas and programs, but they forget about the outreach. And sometimes, those hard to reach audiences need more resources.” This indicates that there needs to be an adequate budget, plan, and staffing in place in order to ensure a successful outreach campaign.

“First generation immigrants don’t know the system and are the ones who need more outreach, and unfortunately those resources are not there. The resources to reach out to [Latinos] are very limited. People working [at the state] level with these communities need more support from within the institution.”



Ivonne Cam, past *Práctico Innovation* competition winner

Práctico Innovation

Práctico Innovation is a private company in Rhode Island that is uncovering ingenious business ideas with science and technology product and service solutions by communities of color. In a three year time frame, they have discovered over 80 business ideas and have invested in eleven of those ideas, to help them grow and expand their operations. Of the eleven companies, 45% are owned by women. 64% utilize smart manufacturing to create physical products. (robots, recycling machines, smart windows, cleaning tools, gaming devices) and 36% of the business ideas are applications using software and mobile technology. 27% of the companies have patented products. Green energy, smart manufacturing, e-Commerce and retail are all segments currently targeted by Práctico Innovation. While the development of these companies continues to prepare them for introductions to institutional investors, they are exciting examples of how 260,000 people of color viewed as a valuable asset can contribute to the development of new and innovative approaches to meet consumer and business needs in the 21st century.

At the state level, there is an online Spanish portal for Latino small businesses however, it is not part of a larger comprehensive outreach strategy. In fact, there are limited resources budgeted for the maintenance of the portal, as well as for further development of this innovative communications tool.

In terms of human capacity, there is a scarcity of bilingual and bicultural staff at all levels. Since Latinos, particularly first-generation immigrants, are more likely to need assistance and guidance, an investment in a diverse staff at the state and local levels and within private organizations is key. In addition, the management and leadership of programs that offer services to Latino small businesses need to reflect the communities that they serve.

6. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce

There is also an increasing need for having a Hispanic Chamber of Commerce (HCC). Latino entrepreneurs in Rhode Island are navigating the system with uncertainty. The business network of the Latino community in Rhode Island is relatively insular. Besides uniting the Latino business community, a HCC presents an opportunity to represent the Latino businesses themselves, gain access to regional and national resources, connect with local business networks, and advocate for systemic engagement. This is a shared view by all of the participants in the second stage of this study.

A HCC could contribute to fill the vacuum of information that is needed for the Latino business community. They can provide advisory services about the existing regulation, as well as the steps required to open a business. They can also connect small and micro business entrepreneurs with the larger Rhode Island business community. In this way, they would contribute to an effective flow of information about programs, loans, grants, and other resources.

It is important to note that presently, other business associations (i.e. Blackstone Valley Merchants Association, Providence Latino Business Association) are coordinating entrepreneurial activities in their local communities. These models add value to the broader strategic coordination that is typically led by chambers of commerce at the state level. Rhode Island has a unique opportunity in learning from these local networks and creating an informed Hispanic Chamber that will help to grow the Rhode Island Latino entrepreneurial spirit.

Policy Recommendations

Based on our analysis, we consider a set of policy recommendations that could influence the existing discourse on the matter. We also hope our findings could serve as the basis for changing current policies and make Rhode Island a business friendly state for Latinos and other people of color. The state's economy depends so much on small and micro businesses that we believe it is important to create a business environment that encourages the entrepreneurial spirit of all Rhode Islanders.

These recommendations are not intended to promote special treatment for Latino entrepreneurs. They are rather based on our evaluation of the current business environment in Rhode Island, which we believe is not fully engaging Latinos and other people of color from having equal access and taking advantage of the programs and resources available for small businesses.

- Although the definition of a small business is regulated at the federal level, the state of Rhode Island could find ways to be more inclusive and offer more resources for micro businesses. Two examples are: *Práctico Innovation* and *Center for Women and Enterprise*. Both are working with individuals to cultivate and expand their entrepreneurial ideas as well as to assist as they implement those ideas in the form of a small business or micro business.
- Having a Hispanic Chamber of Commerce based on effective leadership that could promote a sense of solidarity among micro and small businesses can make a significant difference in ensuring that the voices of entrepreneurs

and business owners from the Latino community are heard and engaged. A high functioning Hispanic Chamber of Commerce would add value in disseminating business best practices, communicating new initiatives, and brokering social and cultural relationships between business engagement agents and the Latino community.

- State and local authorities should find a way to simplify and expedite the steps to start a business. More coordination and closer collaboration is needed between the different departments, offices, and levels of government. A multiservice location and/or tools would help demystify the multistep processes for entrepreneurs.
- This study creates a snapshot in time of the lives of Latino entrepreneurs however, further research in the areas of innovation, national models, and specific demographics is needed. In addition, Rhode Island should be collecting data on Latino small businesses and utilizing the data to inform programs and initiatives. Currently, most of the data tied to Latino small businesses is dependent on the Census.
- The needs of Latino entrepreneurs are similar to those of other communities of color. In order to promote fair and creative competition, programs and initiatives should be customized to the specific needs of these segments of the business community. Rhode Island would be well served in developing a robust portfolio of support to small businesses that is nimble enough to be individualized according to readiness, industry, and cultural diversity.
- State and private financial institutions should invest in human capacity in order to have bilingual and bicultural staff that could provide more effective service to this segment of the business community. Diversity, inclusion, and equity are pillars of a vibrant organization. Ensuring that programs and outreach portfolios are properly staffed and resourced is key to achieving goals successfully.
- Redesigning the existing educational programs offered by different institutions in a way that they complement each other could be beneficial for both the participants and the institutions themselves. Providing a stackable and scaffolded menu of programs that will reach the most hidden of entrepreneurs will require a coordinated effort by all existing programs and agencies.
- Financial institutions could design lending options with an aggregate value. For instance, in addition to lending money, institutions may be interested in offering advice or guidance to their customers to secure and promote financial success. To a certain extent this is already happening in some lending institutions and additionally, with the help of private philanthropy, has been investing by way of creating micro lending funds. These efforts need to be scaled up and promoted in order to obtain higher participation rates.
- State and local authorities, and private financial institutions who want to outreach to Latino entrepreneurs need to invest in an effective and consistent marketing campaign. This campaign should include social media, radio and print, as well as marketing and public relations talent within their organizations dedicated to this large and evolving market.
- Lending institutions, state agencies, and private philanthropy could establish a public private partnership to create a scaled up micro lending program and/or grants program to incentivize and help micro enterprises grow. This lending model should be further studied and can be customized based on business size, field, and readiness.



'Business Planning – Getting Started' class graduation at the Pawtucket Public Library.

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Acknowledgments

Latino Policy Institute is grateful to each and every one of our participants for taking time out of their busy schedules to share their experiences with us.

Center for Women & Enterprise

Rhode Island Foundation

Práctico Innovation

Amy Cola, LPI's Communications Assistant, for editorial assistance.

This report is produced through the generosity of:



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Credit Union
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at Roger Williams University

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