

COMMENTS ON THE RETENTION AND COMPLETION OF LATINO STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION*

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The purpose of this memorandum is to provide recommendations for the expansion of early college and innovative partnerships between K–12 and higher education through federal incentives to support all eligible high school and college students. The memorandum provides a summary of the current proposals along with data that supports the positive impact these programs are currently having in every state of the United States.

Overview

Legislation allowing transitional programs such as Dual Credit and Tech Prep will provide a stepping stone for many Latinos to begin their journey to a life of continuous learning. Additionally, college support programs such as TRIO, which unfortunately our schools are currently not part of, have also proven to have a strong positive impact on Latino students by increasing the number of low-income students that enroll and complete a postsecondary education.

George I. Sanchez Charter School is a campus that serves students in 6–12th grade, located in the Southeast of Houston, Texas. Our school vision is to create a better tomorrow for our students by providing opportunities for college preparation and career readiness and fostering lifelong relationships beginning in middle school and continuing through adulthood. Our student population is composed of 98% Latinos, 93.7%



economically disadvantaged, 48% English language learners, and a graduation rate of 93.2%. Many of our students are at risk of dropping out or likely to drop out. They come to us two to three grade levels behind and with a variety of social issues. By their junior year, our students are functioning on or above grade level. We also offer dual credit course opportunities and every one of our seniors is lead through the application and financial aid process needed to enter our nearest community college (Houston Community College). In our school report card for 2013, our dual credit course completion rate was 22%, enrollment in Texas institutions of higher education (IHE) was 30.3% and graduates in Texas IHE completing one year without remediation was 63.3%. After analyzing this data and working daily with these first-generation

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college-bound graduates, it is clear that academic advice is not the only support they need. Extra wrap-around services, such as counseling, parent meetings, campus tours, real-life experiences, peer support groups, and parent involvement measures are external factors that play a deciding role in whether our students will stay and complete their four-year degrees.

Alta Vista High School is a public charter located in the Westside of Kansas City, Missouri. Our student population consists of 320 students, 94% Latino, 71% English language learners, and 92% economically disadvantaged. The average percentage of graduates attending postsecondary institutions for the last two years has been 46%, however, only 24% have remained in college after their first year.

Low rates of Latino college completion is not just happening in Missouri or Texas but persist in states with high numbers of Latinos, according to Excelencia in Education, a nonprofit focused on increasing Latino college completion. There is a huge need to focus on the institutions that are not just enrolling but graduating Latino students. Deborah Santiago, co-founder and Vice President for Policy and Research at Excelencia in Education, asserts that in order for the United States to regain the top ranking in the world for college degree attainment, Latinos will need to earn 5.5 million more degrees by 2020. She states, “the competitive strength of the United States in a global economy depends and will continue to depend on the positive educational outcomes on Latino students. That is to say that as the Latino population grows, the U.S. economy becomes more and more dependent on its success.”¹

On a daily basis we see the struggles that our young, at-risk Latinos face as well as the positive impact that college-gear programs such as our dual credit program and college access programs have on them. These programs serve as pathways to their success and they are the reason we are pleased to submit comments on the Higher Education Act (HEA) that will not only impact accessibility,

but support retention and completion of our students in higher education institutions. Accordingly, we believe HEA should be strengthened to:

- Increase access to early college programs by creating pilot programs for early Pell Grant.
- Incentivize partnerships between K–12 and higher education to ensure college accessibility and affordability.

Results Prove that Early College Initiatives Work for Low-Income Students

According to a recent report by Jobs for the Future (JFF) and the American Institutes for Research, data show early college programs improve postsecondary persistence and credential completion significantly, including among low-income students.² Sixty-one percent of students in JFF’s 280 early college partner schools are low-income, 94% earn transferable college credit in high school, and 30% earn a full associate degree by the end of high school. Up to the present time, the funding to sustain early colleges has not been available even though they create dramatic savings in the affordability and accessibility of higher education. By expanding the Pell Grant program to eligible high school students who earn college credits through early college or dual enrollment programs, it will create a consistent funding stream for early colleges. This would provide critical support for early college programs and would lead to a reduction in the cost of higher education, both to the student and to the federal government. This would also allow the U.S. Department of Education to demonstrate savings to the Pell Grant program through a more effective use of dollars. According to the JFF report, the use of Pell Grants by high school students to cover the costs of taking college courses increases the efficiency of federal investments in higher education in the following ways:³

- Students will earn degrees at higher rates so each Pell dollar pays for more college completers.

- Students will complete a degree in less time, further lowering the cost per college completion subsidized by Pell.
- The need for remedial course-taking will be reduced, decreasing the inefficient use of Pell dollars to pay for students to catch up when they enter college.
- Because many states already support some costs of college course-taking by students in these programs, their investments will combine with Pell Grants to lower loan amounts taken on by graduates to pay for college.

Many Latino students face obstacles when deciding whether to pursue a college education and the greatest challenge continues to be a lack of financial resources to pay for college. Expansion in the use of Pell Grant funding would allow Latino and other first-generation low-income students to get a head start on college courses in high school, thereby improving their chances of completing a college degree. I agree with Senator Warner who states, “expanding the Pell Grant program so that students are able to earn meaningful credits for college while they are still in high school will increase college completion rates, reduce the time and cost of earning a degree, and give more talented, low-income students a fair shot at a college education.”⁴

The recommendation in this proposal is to pilot the early Pell Grant to early college high schools and other dual credit programs with similar structures to student access and support in college courses. These types of proven programs are designed with the goal of raising the college readiness and degree attainment of low-income youth and would be prime sites for testing the cost-efficiency of early Pell Grant use by high school students likely to be eligible for Title IV aid. Growth of early college programs has been hindered by the rising tuition costs that are too great to be assumed by sponsoring high school and college partners. The federal government should allow greater flexibility within the need-based Pell Grant program to increase opportunities for students to earn college credits and degrees. This

proposal would allow tuition-free early college programs to be sustained and scaled nationally to serve more students, thereby increasing college access and helping more low-income students afford and complete college degrees. Higher college completion rates and reduced time to earn a degree would ultimately save money within the Pell Grant program.

Additional Ways to Expand Access to Early College Programs

Other ways to expand access to early college high schools is to provide incentives for colleges to partner with early college high schools and dual enrollment programs. The HEA should include flexible funding and incentives for evidence-based early college designs and partnerships. Competitive grants can be offered to colleges for tuition-free early-college high school partnerships. The Continue College Access Challenge Grants should increase emphasis on enrolling low income early college and dual-enrolled students by encouraging states to allow them to be eligible for any CACG funds for need-based grant aid.

The use of the Investing in Innovation Fund can also focus on ideas that can support and scale up early college and dual enrollment programs. Grants can support research and development of new models that will reduce the cost of college and increase college completion rates for low-income first-generation college students. In addition, any federally funded STEM-related programs can include early college and dual enrollment strategies.

Early College Programs Decrease Remedial Courses and Increase Retention

In an effort to continue to decrease Latino high school dropout rates and support the U.S. Census Bureau prediction of almost “one in five college-age adult Latinos by the year 2020,” an increase in funding for pilot programs that build and solidify partnerships between K–12 and higher education must be implemented.⁵

Innovative programs are needed to increase the amount of Latino high school graduates

that are attending college. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, 44% of Hispanic high school graduates were attending college. Both high school and higher education programs need to ensure that their students are prepared for college-level coursework to reduce the amount of remedial courses needed. According to data provided by the National Conference of State Legislatures, 41% of Hispanic students and 42% of Black students require remediation compared to 31% of White students. Overall, costs and time that is not required for graduation is increased by the high number of remedial courses students have to take. In addition, a “U.S. Department of Education study found that less than half of students in remedial courses actually complete them with only 17% of remedial reading students and 27% of remedial math students completing their bachelor’s degrees” (NCSL).⁶

At George I. Sanchez, after looking at an increase in our graduation rate and seeing firsthand the struggles that most of our students face due to a lack of financial support as well as academic support, we have formed a partnership with Houston Community College, where qualified high school juniors and seniors can take courses to earn both high school and college credit at the same time. Dual credit courses are offered at no charge to our students, reducing the amount of remedial courses that they will take and the overall cost of college tuition and fees they will face.

For many students, these dual credit and tech prep programs are the first step to inquiring about higher education. Project Grad, a local college access program, works with every one of our seniors at Sanchez to provide support with college applications, financial aid, college tours, and transition workshops. These transition workshops are held on local college and university campuses where students experience the transformation of going from a recent high school graduate to a college student. In addition, we have recently partnered with NCLR to launch the Escalera Program, which provides a curriculum

that models career exploration, academic support, and development of multiple skills (technology, leadership, personal).⁷

- Project Grad scholars are on track to achieve a 60% college completion rate—nearly 2.5 times the rate of their peers throughout Texas.⁸
- To date, 87% of Escalera Program graduates have enrolled in postsecondary institutions.
- Escalera graduates are persisting in college past year one at an average rate of 89%.
- The 2011 graduating cohort of the Escalera Program earned a combined total of \$779,675 in scholarships.

In an effort to increase college entrance and retention for our economically disadvantaged high school students, we must provide a variety of academic, counseling, and college preparatory services such as the ones mentioned above. Our schools’ waiting lists are evidence that an expansion of these innovative programs is needed to meet the demand of our Latino youth. This is why, as they move to reauthorize the Higher Education Act of 1965, we would like to see an increase in federal funds for incentives that cultivate partnerships between secondary and post-secondary organizations.

Recommendations

Increase access to early college programs by creating pilot programs for early Pell Grant.

Research has shown that high school students who complete college courses before graduating are significantly more likely to enroll in and complete college than similar students who do not, including those from low-income backgrounds who would likely qualify for financial assistance in college. The rising cost of college tuition has made it difficult for high schools or college partners to cover these expenses. If Pell Grants could be used to cover tuition for eligible students, more K–12 local education agencies and higher education institutions would be able to expand access to early college programs and

increase the efficiency of federal funding in postsecondary financial aid. These types of proven programs are designed with the goal of raising the college readiness and degree attainment of low-income youth and would be prime sites for piloting the cost-efficiency of early Pell Grant use by high school students likely to be eligible for Title IV aid.

Incentivize innovative partnerships between secondary and postsecondary education to ensure college accessibility and affordability.

Strong American Schools estimate the cost of remedial education courses for states and students to be “at around \$2.3 billion each year.” In addition, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, “50% of remedial students complete their recommended courses and less than 25% complete their college degrees within eight years.” However, college support programs such as TRIO, which served nearly 880,000 students in 2005, only serves 785,000 students today.⁹ For this reason, we recommend that an increase of \$40 million be made so that TRIO projects can double in the year 2016. With our recommendation we aim not only to restore services for “53,000 students whom have lost access to TRIO since Fiscal Year 2009,” but to expand programs such as Project Grad, Gear UP, Dual Credit, and Tech Prep which target charter schools like ours.¹⁰

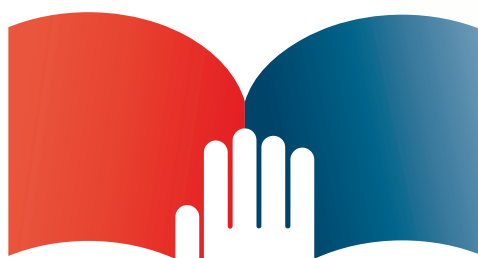
Summary

The reauthorization of the Higher Education Act presents an important opportunity to address low college completion rates and the rising cost of college for low income first-generation college students through innovative, evidence-based solutions such as early college high schools and dual enrollment programs. At Alta Vista High School and at George I Sanchez Charter School, we have personally witnessed firsthand how these strategies have reduced the costs for Latino students while improving college going and completion rates. With the recent focus of the Department of Education on College and Career Readiness, there is public support for early college and dual enrollment strategies which can be included in the Higher Education Act. Given the research findings indicating that early college students are significantly more likely to graduate from high school, enroll in college, and earn a college degree than comparable students who did not attend an early college, expanding Pell eligibility to students of early colleges is a wise investment of scarce federal resources and is aligned with the goals of improving student outcomes and reducing the costs of higher education.

This is why we strongly urge you to give these HEA recommendations your highest consideration to make a dramatic impact on the success of economically disadvantaged, first-generation students and program effectiveness. We would welcome the opportunity to work with Congress to ensure that a reauthorized HEA accomplishes our shared goals. Please contact Eduardo Mendez at emendez@altavistacharterschool.org and Bianca Arriazola at barriazola@aama.org if you would like further information or to set up a meeting to continue the conversation.

Endnotes

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