



Beyond the Classroom:

Creating Pathways to College and Careers for Latino Youth

AN INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OF THE NCLR ESCALERA PROGRAM

NCLR
NATIONAL COUNCIL OF LA RAZA



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The National Council of La Raza (NCLR)—the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States—works to improve opportunities for Hispanic Americans. Through its network of nearly 300 affiliated community-based organizations, NCLR reaches millions of Hispanics each year in 41 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. To achieve its mission, NCLR conducts applied research, policy analysis, and advocacy, providing a Latino perspective in five key areas—assets/investments, civil rights/immigration, education, employment and economic status, and health. In addition, it provides capacity-building assistance to its Affiliates who work at the state and local level to advance opportunities for individuals and families.

Founded in 1968, NCLR is a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan, tax-exempt organization headquartered in Washington, DC. NCLR serves all Hispanic subgroups in all regions of the country and has operations in Atlanta, Chicago, Long Beach, Los Angeles, New York, Phoenix, Sacramento, San Antonio, and San Juan, Puerto Rico.

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Foreword

The impact of the current economic crisis on vulnerable communities, particularly youth, cannot be overstated. While today's economy requires immediate solutions and today's workers need immediate supports, we cannot neglect the development of future generations of workers.

There are currently nearly 47 million* Latinos in the United States with 34%† under the age of 18; by 2050, it is projected that one in three workers will be Latino. Clearly, Hispanics represent a key segment of the future workforce. However, Latino youth face significant challenges to accessing and completing advanced education and training and moving into careers that support upward economic mobility.

In 2001, NCLR began to establish a framework for addressing the many challenges that Latino youth face in postsecondary and workplace preparation. We launched a small pilot program called the Escalera Program: Taking Steps to Success. We wanted to reach those youth and their families who valued education but had little understanding of education systems or how to develop the skills and networks needed to pursue a meaningful career. We tested the program at six of our community-based Affiliates, all trusted and credible resources for Latino families which often serve as a family's lifeline in times of need. Early assessments of the Escalera Program in 2007 were promising, with high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment rates in the 90th percentile, and today the program demonstrates similar success rates.

* U.S. Census Bureau, "Facts for Features, Hispanic Heritage Month 2009." Target Latino, <http://hispanic-marketing.com/blog/market-segments/hispanic-women/u-s-census-facts-for-features-hispanic-heritage-month-2009-sept-15-oct-15/> (accessed February 1, 2010).

† This figure represents the national average for Latinos for 2007 as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau.

After seven years of successful program implementation, NCLR commissioned this independent outcome evaluation to measure the effectiveness of the Escalera Program in preparing Latino youth for academic and career success, and comparing the participants' results with those of their peers. Furthermore, the evaluation sought to identify key challenges and propose recommendations for broad-scale replication.

At one level, the evaluation speaks for itself—the Escalera Program produces students with higher levels of educational attainment and career readiness than their peers and other student segments. At another level, however, we know that no single program, or set of programs, can alone ensure the full development of future generations of productive, high-skilled Hispanic workers. For that to happen, we need public policies that support the broader-scale replication of effective practices embodied in Escalera.

Thus, NCLR is committed to a two-pronged strategy—continuing to develop and refine successful practices while simultaneously advocating for the public policy framework that ensures their wide-scale replication.



Janet Murguía
President and CEO
National Council of La Raza

Acknowledgments

This report is the result of a collaborative effort between the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) and Contigo Research, Policy, and Strategy (Contigo), which is a social business that provides research, policy, and strategic thinking services to schools and the nonprofit, philanthropic, and government sectors. The report was researched and written by Frank A. Mirabal and Steve Lucero of Contigo.

Dr. Claudia Isaac from the University of New Mexico provided assistance in designing the study, developing the research questions, and reviewing documents at various stages of the process. Simon Lopez, Daniel Silva, Felicia Medellin, and Emma Oppenheim from the NCLR Workforce Development team provided guidance and conducted statistical analysis. Jennifer Kadis, Editor, and SW Creatives, LLC, provided overall technical support and prepared the report for publication. Sandra Ventura, Alexander Martinez, Ada Rodriguez-Tazi, Raúl Murguía, Vanessa Ramirez, and Toni Moreno from NCLR's Affiliate organizations helped by coordinating focus groups in their cities.

NCLR acknowledges PepsiCo Foundation and Shell Oil Company for their generous support to produce this report.

Special gratitude is extended to the high school and college students from around the country who participated in this study, offering their valuable insight into the Latino academic and career preparation experience.

Executive Summary

Latinos* continue to be the fastest-growing segment of the American workforce. Yet, few Latinos are able to access the types of jobs that lead to greater economic mobility. The jobs in which they are concentrated rank low in wages, educational requirements, and other indicators of socioeconomic status. Moreover, an alarming number of Latino youth drop out of school each year, which only increases the number of Latinos in jobs with limited upward mobility opportunities. Furthermore, this is exacerbated by Latino students' lack of social supports to navigate the postsecondary and career landscape.

In 2001, with support from PepsiCo Foundation and PepsiCo, Inc., the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) created the NCLR Escalera Program: Taking Steps to Success. The purpose of the program is to promote economic mobility for Latino youth by increasing educational attainment, career planning, and access to professional career paths while eliminating barriers to basic and advanced education and employment. The program incorporates best practices in youth employment and development to provide academic support, work-readiness, leadership development, technology skills development, and career exploration and planning. In particular, Escalera targets Latino youth who, because of academic, financial, or familial challenges, may need additional support to fortify their demonstrated high potential for success.

Characteristics include but are not limited to youth who are low-income, English language learners, or first-generation college-bound.

NCLR commissioned a two-year study to uncover some of the most significant challenges that Latino students face in graduating from high school, enrolling in college, completing a college education, and advancing in the workforce. This report is an assessment of how the Escalera Program model is working to meet the academic and career preparation needs of participating students throughout the country. Furthermore, this study sought to understand the impact that the Escalera Program is having on graduation rates, college enrollment and retention, and participation rates for its student population.

This study evaluated more than 300 Latino students in six U.S. cities: New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Austin, Houston, and Kansas City. The students included those from the 2008 and 2009 Escalera cohorts as well as Escalera alumni and their non-Escalera peers. The study compared attitudes and behaviors of Escalera and non-Escalera students on a variety of academic and career indicators.



* The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race.

KEY FINDINGS

- **86% of Escalera students from the 2008 cohort graduated from high school or obtained a General Equivalency Diploma (GED).** Escalera students graduate from high school at a much higher rate than the national average for Latinos (58%).[†] Escalera student success rates can be attributed, in large part, to a strong social support structure that the NCLR Escalera Program provides. Program strategies such as case management, academic preparation, and academic tutoring have proven to be effective in closing the achievement gap for Latinos.
- **95% of eligible Escalera students from the 2009 cohort enrolled in college.** Escalera students enroll in college at a much higher rate than their Latino peers (61%).[†] Many of our nation's Latinos are first-generation college students. Through intensive support, the NCLR Escalera Program provides a roadmap for students to effectively navigate the postsecondary terrain and sets up a much-needed accountability system for first-generation Latino college students making their way through the enrollment process.
- **99% of Escalera graduates from the 2008 cohort persist in college past year one.** Escalera students not only enroll in college, they also persist past that critical first year.

The program's alumni engagement efforts and continued mentorship of Escalera staff are key factors in student persistence rates.

- **Escalera students have more work experience and career knowledge than their non-Escalera peers.** In year two of the program, Escalera students demonstrate greater career knowledge and are more likely to have work experience than their non-Escalera peers. Greater career literacy begins with early exposure to careers through educational and experiential opportunities. Furthermore, connecting career interests to work experience allows young people to develop transferable skills, build social capital, and gain valuable experience that will enhance their chances of economic mobility over time.
- **Students who have access to college and career exploration activities have a greater knowledge of career paths and associated academic requirements.** Students who participate in program-based activities, such as Escalera or school-based college and career exploration, have greater knowledge of career paths and associated academic requirements than those who do not. This suggests that college and career preparation activities are effective in developing a roadmap to guide students through the postsecondary and career planning process.



[†] This figure represents immediate college enrollment rates for Latinos for 2007 as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Methodology for Research

OVERVIEW

In the fall of 2007, the principal investigators of this study convened an evaluation planning session with key stakeholders, including Escalera Program staff and leadership from the National Council of La Raza's (NCLR) Affiliates to outline a set of research goals and objectives for the two-year study. What emerged was a dual emphasis on understanding the college and career readiness of NCLR Escalera Program participants and the contextual variables that impact Latino students in general.

Based on stakeholder input, this study incorporated a comparison group design that allowed the researchers to understand convergence and divergence among NCLR Escalera Program participants and their non-Escalera peers on a variety of college and career readiness indicators. The researchers studied two Escalera Program cohorts (2008 and 2009) over a two-year period. Over the same period, the researchers also studied Escalera Program alumni to better understand the long-term outcomes of the program. Comparison groups were recruited based on similar characteristics, including race/ethnicity, school environment, culture, and socioeconomic background.

SAMPLE

Research was conducted with more than 300 Latino students in six U.S. cities: New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Austin, Houston, and Kansas City. Students were divided by treatment group (Escalera students and alumni) and comparison group (non-Escalera high school and college students).

DATA SOURCES

The researchers applied a mixed-method research approach to measure how well Latino students were prepared for college and careers. Qualitative data were collected through focus groups and key informant interviews over a two-year period to assess college and career readiness across groups (Escalera and non-Escalera) and at various points in the high school and college experience (junior year, senior year, first year of college, etc.). The value in a qualitative approach is that it provides a detailed narrative, bringing Latino youth voices to the data. Quantitative data, such as participation rates, graduation rates, and college enrollment and retention rates, were collected at the program level and analyzed by the researchers. Further quantitative data from NCLR Escalera Program alumni were collected using a survey instrument (N=109; 31% of total alumni sample).*

* Alumni sample represents students who graduated from the Escalera Program from 2002 through 2008.

Purpose of This Report

Through this study, NCLR sought to shed light on some of the most significant challenges that Latino students face in graduating from high school, enrolling in college, completing a college education, and advancing in the workforce. NCLR also sought to assess the effectiveness of the Escalera Program model and uncover whether or not Escalera students are more prepared for college and careers than their peers.

This study sought to answer the following broad questions:

- How well are NCLR Escalera Program students prepared for college and careers in comparison to their peers?
- What are the significant challenges that Latinos face in enrolling for and completing college?

- What are the key components of the NCLR Escalera Program model which contribute to student success?
- How successful is the NCLR Escalera Program in graduating its students from high school and enrolling them in college?
- How well do NCLR Escalera Program alumni fare once they leave the program?

There is always a compelling story behind the numbers, so student testimonials and stories are woven into the broader fabric of this report to illustrate essential points and to personalize the NCLR Escalera Program experience in a meaningful way.

ESCALERA

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The Latino Socioeconomic Landscape

Today, nearly 21.6 million Latinos work in the United States, representing more than 14.1% of the labor force. Estimates show that by 2050, one in three working-age Americans will be Latino.¹ Although they will represent a significant portion of the future workforce, Hispanic youth still face considerable barriers to gainful employment and upward economic mobility.

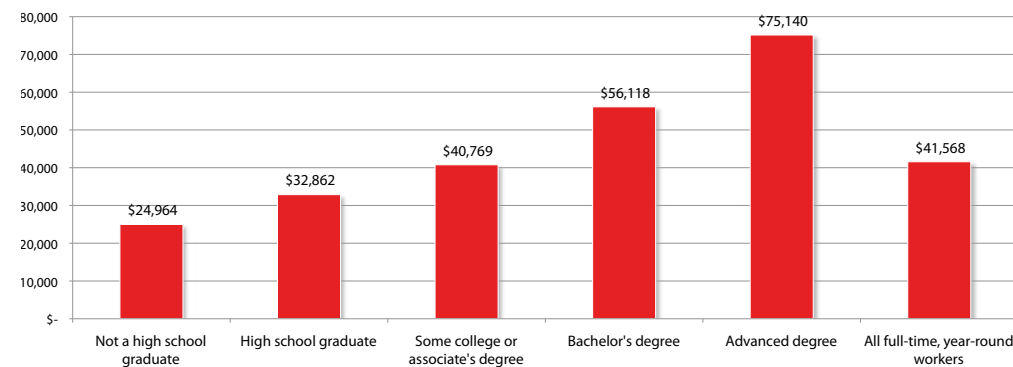
Hispanics tend to be highly concentrated in low-wage service-oriented positions with limited opportunities for economic mobility. In 2007, the highest percentage of employed Hispanics age 16 and over was in service occupations at 24%, followed by sales and office occupations at 21% and natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations at 19%. Conversely, only 18% of Latinos age 16 and over were employed in management, professional, and related occupations in comparison to 37% of Whites, 27% of Blacks, and 48% of Asians age 16 and over in these same occupations.²

There are many factors contributing to the workforce gap between Latinos and other groups. One of the most pervasive is low educational attainment. The number of Latinos dropping out of high school is alarming; in 2008, only 67.1% of adult Latino workers had completed high school or postsecondary education, compared to 92.5% of White workers and 88.2% of Black workers.³

Education is the key force for moving up the economic ladder, and postsecondary education in particular brings the greatest gains. Recent data demonstrate that high school graduates earn up to 25% more than high school dropouts, and college graduates earn almost double what high school graduates earn per year (see Figure 1).⁴

While more Latinos are enrolling in college than ever before, the percentage remains significantly low compared to their White peers. In 2009, only 48% of Latinos nationally were considered college-ready, compared to 77% of their White counterparts.⁵

Figure 1: Median Earnings for Full-Time Year-Round Workers Age 25 and Over by Educational Attainment



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2007.



Barriers to Latino Academic and Career Success

Latinos face significant challenges to improving their educational attainment and overall economic mobility. The findings of the study both affirm what is already known about the Latino population and add additional insight into the socioeconomic barriers to academic and career success that Latino students face.

Over the two-year research period, there was significant convergence between Escalera students and their non-Escalera peers around some broad themes. Most notably:

- **Latinos are highly concentrated in low-income, low-wage jobs.** Consistent with U.S. Census Bureau data, this study confirms that Latinos are heavily concentrated in low-income, low-wage jobs. Through focus groups, individual interviews, and surveys, Latino students self-reported the occupations of their parents who were stratified in the lower-economic-tiered occupations, such as food preparation, cleaning, maintenance, and construction. Also, a significant number of parents were unemployed. Furthermore, data from the Escalera Program Alumni Survey found that more than nine out of ten (92%) parents of Escalera students had a high school diploma or less.⁶ Data suggest that low educational attainment for Latinos contributes to poor career outcomes.

- **Latino parent involvement can be characterized as passive.** Several studies have shown that parent involvement is a strong indicator of student success.⁷ However, this study finds that Latino parent involvement is best characterized as passive. For example, only 4.9% of Escalera alumni reported receiving academic support from their parents.⁸ Escalera and non-Escalera students agree that Latino parent involvement is limited to emotional support in the form of encouragement at home. Students cited low educational attainment of parents, the language barrier, and the school environment—specifically, a lack of bilingual professionals in schools—as significant barriers to parent involvement.
- **Latino high school juniors lack career knowledge.** At the high school junior level, Latino students show a pronounced disconnect between career aspirations and career knowledge. To illustrate this point, one high school junior’s stated interest was to become a pediatrician. When asked about the academic requirements for this career, she simply stated, “I think you need some college.” Furthermore, when asked about the entry-level wage for pediatricians, she replied, “I think they [pediatricians] make about \$18,000 per year.”⁹ Latino high school juniors across Escalera and non-Escalera focus groups were far less knowledgeable about careers than high school seniors and college students.

- **Money is a significant barrier to college enrollment and completion for Latino students.** Not surprisingly, one of the most significant stressors for Latino students is money. Specifically, they were concerned about how they were going to be able to afford the rising cost of tuition and the sustenance costs incurred during the college years. Data suggest that financial support from Latino parents is limited. Less than a quarter (24%) of Escalera alumni reported receiving financial assistance for college from their parents.¹⁰
- **Latino students, in general, lack social supports to effectively navigate the postsecondary system.** Findings of the study suggest that Latino students have high academic and career aspirations, but most lack support in helping them to navigate the system

to achieve their aspirations.¹¹ As stated earlier, parental support for Latino students is passive. Many Latinos are first-generation college students with limited exposure to postsecondary culture. Conversely, support from caring adults is critical in helping Latino students reach their academic and career goals. Thus, social support is often needed outside of the family system. A significant finding from this study shows that Latino students from their junior year in high school and beyond seek out nonacademic supports—assistance in filling out college applications, applying for financial aid, writing personal statements, and navigating the postsecondary system—more than academic supports, such as tutoring and homework help.



The NCLR Escalera Program: Taking Steps to Success

OVERVIEW

NCLR and its community-based Affiliates, recognizing that many Latino youth face barriers to employment and economic success, sought to design a replicable program model for serving Latino youth which could be implemented by NCLR Affiliates throughout the country. In 2001, NCLR proposed to develop and implement a youth workforce development initiative that would promote economic mobility for Latino youth. The goal was to make an impact on the diversity of the nation's workforce by enhancing Hispanics' skills and abilities to respond to the workforce needs of Corporate America and to prepare them to successfully compete in the 21st century.

The result was the NCLR Escalera Program:

Taking Steps to Success, an after-school employment and college readiness program. The Spanish word “*escalera*” means “ladder” in English, and the Escalera Program links the rungs of career planning, educational attainment, and personal development to economic mobility—preparing Latino youth to compete successfully in the 21st century and, in turn, increasing the diversity of the nation's workforce.

NCLR piloted the program in 2002 with support from PepsiCo Foundation and PepsiCo, Inc., and in partnership with local NCLR Affiliates, employee affinity groups, and educational and vocational institutions with the resources to add value to the program.

Following successful pilots in Los Angeles (AltaMed Health Services Corporation) and Chicago (Instituto del Progreso Latino), the program has expanded to a total of seven sites, including New York (Promesa Systems: East Harlem Council for Community Improvement, Inc.); Kansas City, Missouri (Guadalupe Centers, Inc.); Española and Las Vegas, New Mexico (HELP–New Mexico, Inc.); Austin, Texas (American YouthWorks); and Houston, Texas (Knowledge Is Power Program Houston). This expansion was made possible through continued support from PepsiCo Foundation and from private funders such as Shell Oil Company, Best Buy Children's Foundation, and public partners such as the New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions and the New Mexico Commission for Community Volunteerism.

The Escalera Program has proven to be an effective and sustainable model that prepares Latino youth for college and the workforce, maintaining strong outcomes while serving Latino youth most in need of services. Since its launch in 2002, the program has helped vulnerable Latino youth participants graduate from high school and make informed plans for their futures; to date, 92% of Escalera participants have graduated from high school and 89% have enrolled in postsecondary institutions.

NCLR continues to expand and refine the program model, leveraging \$3 million in additional resources and new strategic partnerships to design and implement customized program models and to expand the scale and reach of the program to additional Latino communities.

ESCALERA PARTNERS

The NCLR Escalera Program is implemented in partnership with local Hispanic-serving community-based organizations (CBOs), national corporations, and educational institutions. NCLR Affiliates are the lead operational partners, implementing and coordinating the Escalera Program as subgrantees of NCLR. Partnering schools or school districts ensure that guidance counselors and other staff are engaged in student recruitment and selection and program oversight. Postsecondary institutions, vocational schools, and other certification programs partnering with NCLR assist students with the college and scholarship application process and help track alumni attending their institutions.

Corporate partners support the program's efforts to develop students' understanding of the corporate work environment, its expectations, and career opportunities. These companies and their employees provide field visits, job-shadow days, and summer internships; volunteer as mentors or coaches; connect Escalera participants with colleges and/or technical schools; assist with fundraising; and provide scholarships for graduates.

In addition, a national Escalera Advisory Group (EAG) guides the program's replication and expansion. EAG membership includes leaders from private foundations, corporations, Affiliates, and NCLR. Local Escalera Advisory Groups (LEAGs) provide specific support to

Escalera Program sites, with membership of local community, education, and corporate partners.

ESCALERA PROGRAM MODEL

The NCLR Escalera Program is a 15-month after-school program for Latino youth which is implemented by NCLR Affiliates throughout the country, with the goals of increasing both the number of highly-skilled and educated Latino youth and the capacity of Hispanic CBOs to effectively cultivate the future talent pipeline. Escalera targets Latino youth who, because of academic, financial, or familial challenges, may need additional support to fortify their demonstrated high potential for success. Characteristics include but are not limited to youth who are low-income, English language learners, or first-generation college-bound.

The participants are recruited as a cohort for the duration of the program. They are enrolled during the second semester of their junior year of high school and continue activities through the summer and their senior year (see Table 1). Throughout the program sequence, the Escalera Program seeks to enhance students' foundational education levels and technology skills, expose them to career opportunities, increase their educational attainment, and maximize their leadership and personal development. Students also receive case



management and referral services to ensure that they receive the support they need to continue and succeed in the program.

During their junior year, the program focuses on case management, assessing skills and interests, creating individual development plans, improving academic skills, initial career exploration, and computer literacy. Students also learn team-building and basic workplace skills and gain access to community-based supportive services through referrals and workshops. After their junior year, the summer leadership component offers a six-week paid summer internship in the career interest of the program participants, college exploration

programming, and the opportunity to attend the NCLR Annual Conference and *Líderes* Summit.

During the students' senior year they continue receiving mentoring and academic tutoring and access to support services provided by community agencies and organizations. In the first semester of their senior year, the students also participate in activities that focus on college or technical training options and admissions. In the second semester of the school year, senior participants serve as peer tutors to the junior participants, and together they conduct a community service project and/or participate in leadership development activities.

The program graduates receive continued case management and leadership opportunities. These services are provided to ensure that participants earn a postsecondary certification and have continued access to careers that will promote economic mobility.

school high school sophomores, test the impact of early intervention, and integrate the sophomores into the traditional Escalera Program once they are juniors. The Early Escalera pilot focuses on academic enrichment, cross-cultural learning, leadership and technology skills development, and career exploration over the course of 12 months.

CUSTOMIZING THE ESCALERA PROGRAM MODEL

NCLR and its participating Affiliates have customized the existing Escalera model to serve various youth populations while retaining the core components of the program.

Early Intervention

The Early Escalera Program is being implemented in Chicago in collaboration with Instituto del Progreso Latino—an NCLR Affiliate—and with support from the Best Buy Children's Foundation to serve in-

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Focus

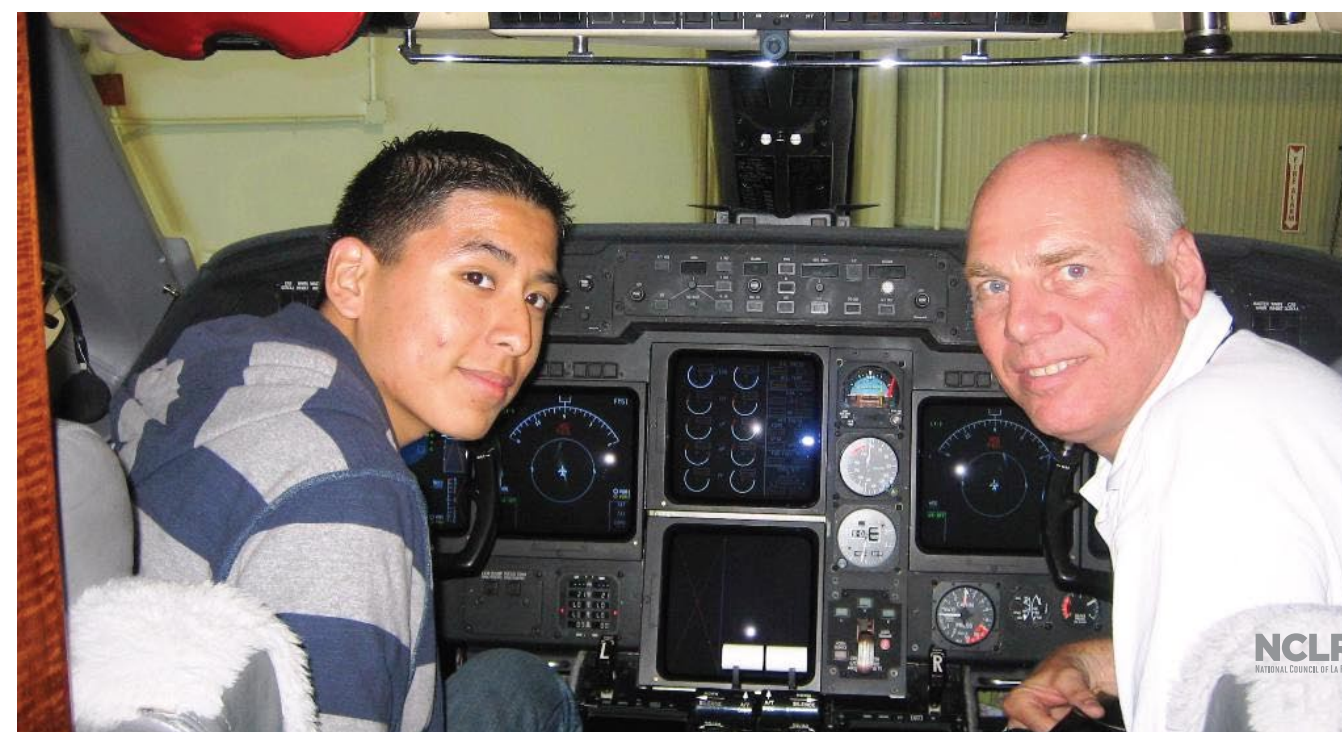
NCLR—in partnership with its Affiliate Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) and with support from Shell Oil Company—is currently implementing the traditional Escalera Program at the KIPP site with an emphasis on career exploration in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields.



Table 1: Escalera Program Sequence

Junior Year	Senior Year	Post Program
<p>First Semester (Junior In-School I)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program planning • Program marketing • Recruitment and selection <p>Second Semester (Junior In-School II)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual assessment and planning • Technology • Work readiness • Academic tutoring • Support services • Career exploration <p>Summer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internships • Group research project • College exploration 	<p>First Semester (Senior In-School I)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College applications • Mentoring • Academic tutoring • Support services • Career mapping <p>Second Semester (Senior In-School II)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community service • Career mapping • Financial planning • Academic tutoring • Support services <p>Summer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NCLR Youth Leadership Conference/ <i>Líderes</i> Summit • Job/academic support • Graduation • Postsecondary enrollment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow-up through alumni engagement and tracking • Case management support • Scholarships • Referrals to other support services (e.g., employment and transportation) • Alumni activities that bring together Escalera graduates for peer support • Participation in the <i>Líderes</i> Initiative • Postsecondary retention, including access to study resources and financial planning • Opportunity to mentor younger Escalera students <p>Summer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NCLR Youth Leadership Conference/ <i>Líderes</i> Summit

Source: Data provided by participating Escalera Affiliates.



Escalera Affiliate Network

Seven NCLR Affiliates are currently implementing the Escalera Program in their communities. However, this report is focused on the first six organizations listed here:

AltaMed Health Services Corporation—Los Angeles, California

Founded in 1969, AltaMed Health Services Corporation provides medical care to socially and economically diverse communities and administers one of the largest community-based long-term care programs for the elderly in California. AltaMed is a community-based comprehensive health care center in East Los Angeles with a 95% Hispanic clientele. It also provides multispecialty medical services, case management programs, adult day health care, and substance abuse treatment, and conducts an AIDS prevention and awareness program.

Instituto del Progreso Latino—Chicago, Illinois

Founded in 1977, Instituto del Progreso Latino (IPL) is dedicated to promoting the full development of Latinos and their families with programs in education, training, employment, and leadership. IPL was established as an Alternative Adult Education high school and now offers educational services to youth and adults. Some of the programs offered include English as a Second Language, manufacturing training, GED courses, a citizenship program, a Spanish literacy program, a family literacy program, a workers' rights program, job placement services, and technical training. In addition, IPL is actively involved in advocacy efforts concerning immigration issues.

Promesa Systems: East Harlem Council for Community Improvement—New York, New York

Founded in 1977, Promesa Systems, Inc. is a multicultural health, human services, and community development organization whose mission is to enable New York City residents, particularly Hispanics, to become self-sufficient citizens who contribute to the quality of life in their communities. The organization has evolved over two decades and now serves the needs of families in all of Harlem, Washington Heights, the Lower East Side, and the South Bronx. Programs include a drop-in center for homeless youth, health education services, day care, homework assistance, substance abuse prevention and treatment, community development through collective efforts and revitalization, and vocational and educational services.

Guadalupe Centers, Inc.—Kansas City, Missouri

Guadalupe Centers, Inc. is a community-based organization that seeks to serve the needs of the elderly, youth, and other residents of the Westside community, as well as Hispanics throughout the Kansas City metropolitan area. It provides comprehensive services in education, elderly services,

day care, teen pregnancy, recreation, and employment and training. It operates an alternative high school and helps operate a neighborhood parochial elementary school.

American YouthWorks—Austin, Texas

American YouthWorks (AYW) began in 1976 as a jail arts and education program. In 1981, AYW established Austin's first program to serve high school dropouts, and in 1996 AYW began one of the first open enrollment charter high schools in Texas. AYW has learned over the years from its clients that, in order to achieve success, they would have to directly address the multiple barriers that youth face. In response, AYW developed an educational methodology that combines diploma/GED education with real-world experience and training focused on preparing the student for a job. The Service Learning Model teaches young people how to give back to their community while they learn. Now, with the recent completion of a new building, AYW offers a complete spectrum of support services, educational programs, and job training opportunities, all in a one-stop empowerment center.

Knowledge Is Power Program—Houston, Texas

Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) was founded in Houston in 1994 to help children from underserved communities develop the academic and character skills necessary to succeed at all levels of prekindergarten through twelfth grade, college, and the competitive world beyond. KIPP has grown into a nationwide movement of more than 50 schools. In Houston, KIPP serves early childhood/elementary, middle school, and high school students with a growing family of schools. Success requires students to master the core academic disciplines, as well as critical thinking, self-discipline and organization, self-advocacy and communication, and leadership.

HELP—New Mexico, Inc.*—Española and Las Vegas, New Mexico

Founded in 1965, HELP—New Mexico, Inc. has promoted self-sufficiency and provided economic opportunities to strengthen families throughout New Mexico. HELP—New Mexico, Inc. (formerly the Home Education Livelihood Program, Inc.) is a statewide community-based organization, a community action agency, and a faith-based organization with many decades of experience providing community-based services. Headquartered in Albuquerque, HELP—New Mexico has 35 offices and Head Start and prekindergarten centers throughout New Mexico. Its services include adult education, job training, early childhood development and education, youth development and care, self-help housing construction, rural health clinics, land development, job placement, literacy training, affordable housing, nutritious meals, and family counseling.

* HELP—New Mexico, Inc. became an Escalera site in December 2008 and was not part of the evaluation study.

Disconnected Youth

The Disconnected Youth Program serves youth who are disconnected from school and/or employment and are therefore more likely than others to engage in crime, become incarcerated, and rely on public systems of support.

With support from the New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions and the Commission for Community Volunteerism, NCLR launched a pilot model which is customized to serve Latino youth who are disconnected from school and/or employment in rural areas. In partnership with its Affiliate HELP—New Mexico, Inc. (HELP), NCLR identified five core outcomes for this pilot program: reconnection to school and community, leadership development, employability, educational attainment, and economic mobility.

American YouthWorks (AYW), an NCLR Affiliate, is implementing a disconnected youth model serving urban Latino youth in Austin, Texas. Escalera

was initially launched at AYW in 2008 as a traditional Escalera Program, but based on AYW's extremely high-risk population, recommendations from Escalera evaluators, and NCLR analysis, its program was customized to focus on intensive case management, academic and career preparation, leadership development, and employability and/or educational attainment.

In addition to implementing a traditional Escalera Program at Garfield, Roosevelt, and Wilson high schools in East Los Angeles, AltaMed Health Services Corporation, an NCLR Affiliate, has customized the program to serve adjudicated youth and help students obtain their General Equivalency Diploma (GED) and secure employment, or graduate from high school and enroll in postsecondary education. The adjudicated youth model is implemented at the East Los Angeles Occupational Center.

Academic and Career Preparation Findings

OVERVIEW

Using a comparison group design, data were gleaned from more than 40 focus groups and key informant interviews which took place over a two-year period. This section is devoted to understanding Latino student attitudes and behaviors toward academic and career preparation and whether or not the Escalera Program plays a significant role for those enrolled in the program in comparison with those who are not. This section also outlines convergence among the two groups, illuminating generalizations for the Latino community as a whole, and explains social support and its role in the academic and career preparation of Latino students. Student stories are included to help describe the impact of the NCLR Escalera Program in real-life terms.

KEY FINDINGS

- Participation rates in internships are low for high school juniors. However, juniors do have a basic understanding of the benefit of interning.
- In year one, there were no significant differences in work experience and career knowledge between Escalera and non-Escalera students.
- In year two, Escalera students had more work experience and career knowledge than their non-Escalera peers.
- Escalera students are creating social capital by expanding their networks.
- Escalera students access external supports more frequently than their non-Escalera counterparts.

- There are no significant differences in study habits between Escalera and non-Escalera students.
- Students who have access to college and career exploration activities have a greater knowledge of career paths and associated academic requirements.
- Latino students have a variety of career aspirations.
- A desire for social change influences career aspirations for Latinos.

SOCIAL SUPPORT

After interviewing hundreds of Latino students throughout the country, one of the major emerging themes was the importance of a variety of relationships and their impact on academic and career success. This type of social support structure can be characterized as currency that can be used to advance one's social, educational, and economic mobility. Throughout this document, evidence will be presented on how social support impacts Latino student academic achievement and career preparation.

As described previously, Latinos are highly concentrated in low-wage service jobs with low educational requirements. This perpetuates a trend in which Latinos are undereducated, underemployed workers and, thus, young Latinos find themselves with limited access to educated professionals in their communities. A vast body of literature shows that strong social support systems are essential for smooth transitions both into and through college, particularly for students from disadvantaged academic backgrounds.¹² Furthermore, studies

have shown that a social support structure is the strongest predictor of academic retention.¹³ What is less known, however, is how a social support structure impacts economic mobility.

The lack of access to social capital is one of many contributing factors that explain a general lack of economic mobility for Latinos. According to the Economic Mobility Project: An Initiative of the Pew Charitable Trusts, social capital as it relates to economic mobility is “the non-financial resources available to individuals through their relationships to people or institutions that shape the capabilities of an individual to take advantage—or not to take advantage—of the opportunities that are linked to mobility.”¹⁴

The NCLR Escalera Program, as a surrogate social capital network, provides young Latino students access to networks they may not have had access to otherwise. Through programmatic functions such as mentoring, internship opportunities, presentations, networking events, and dedicated support from staff, the program creates external supports that guide young Latinos to and through college and careers.

CAREER PREPARATION

“It’s a great experience [internship], you get to see what’s really going on inside different places, you actually get to feel, well, you’re actually doing the job that you want to do and you learn, you learn whether you like it, whether you don’t like it, if it could be something that you actually really want to keep pursuing to do in the future.”

—Escalera student, Kansas City

This study used work experience, participation in internships, and career knowledge as broad indicators to measure career preparation. The rationale for choosing these indicators was supported by extensive research on the correlation between work experience and future career orientation. Literature shows that early employment has an impact on employment retention.

In a 20-year study of high school students, the U.S. Department of Education discovered that those graduates had an increased likelihood of being continuously employed in their adult years based on the number of hours they worked per week in their junior year of high school.¹⁵ Furthermore, literature on service-learning suggests that experiential activities that are work-based are an effective way to connect classroom learning to real-life learning.¹⁶



Finding Her Way: A Search for Social Support

Alone, without her parents, a high school freshman arrives at a new school in a new country. The halls are crowded with students eager to take on the school year and experience all the social opportunities that come with it. Smiles abound as small groups of her peers get reacquainted and huddle to hear the stories of summer vacation. “How wonderful it must be to feel at home,” she thinks while wandering alone among the laughter and excited chatter. “Will I ever be able to feel like that again? Will I ever have that carefree smile that so many have today?”

She doesn’t understand the language, but she knows by the smiles and interaction that these other students are happy for this first day of school to have arrived. She says to herself, *“Todo lo que tengo en mi mente es mi familia, mi familia que me dejó aquí en este país sola con mi tía.”** How she envies those students who feel at home and excited to be there on that day. “How can anybody be happy for school to have arrived?” she thinks again, searching for anyone, anything to rescue her from this sense of loneliness.

This story could be that of many thousands of young people who arrive at new schools every day throughout this country. It could be about a Navajo student who leaves the small reservation town to attend a large school

in the city, or a new Russian immigrant with home literally halfway around the world. It could also be about any of the students who leave rural America and suddenly find themselves immersed in a strange new urban world. The story above, though, belongs to a young woman in Los Angeles, California. Her name is Claudia. She arrived in this country without most of the social ties that many of us take for granted—parents, close family, and a network of peers who act as our support in times of need, individuals who take an interest in us and our success. Fortunately for Claudia, she found rescue from a social structure that would change her life. One day a classmate told her about a program called Escalera. “I had never thought about college before,” but the people in Escalera “saw more in me than I saw in myself” and since that time “everything has changed.”

**Translation: The only thing I could think about was my family, the family that left me alone in this country to live with my aunt.*



Hence, assessing career preparation through an experiential lens is appropriate.

Another reason that work experience was chosen to assess career preparation is because a core function of the Escalera model is to provide internship opportunities and other work experiences to its students. Thus, comparing early work experiences between Escalera and non-Escalera students provides a context as to how young people acquire career knowledge and how in-depth that knowledge may be.

Key Finding: Participation rates in internships were low for high school juniors. However, juniors did have a basic understanding of the benefit of internships.*

As one may predict, high school juniors had limited internship experiences. Interestingly, however, some of the students without internship experience were able to articulate the benefits of work experience. For example, a high school junior in Los Angeles said:

“It’s a way to get experience in a certain field and

get paid for it, but at the same time get hands-on training on certain stuff.”

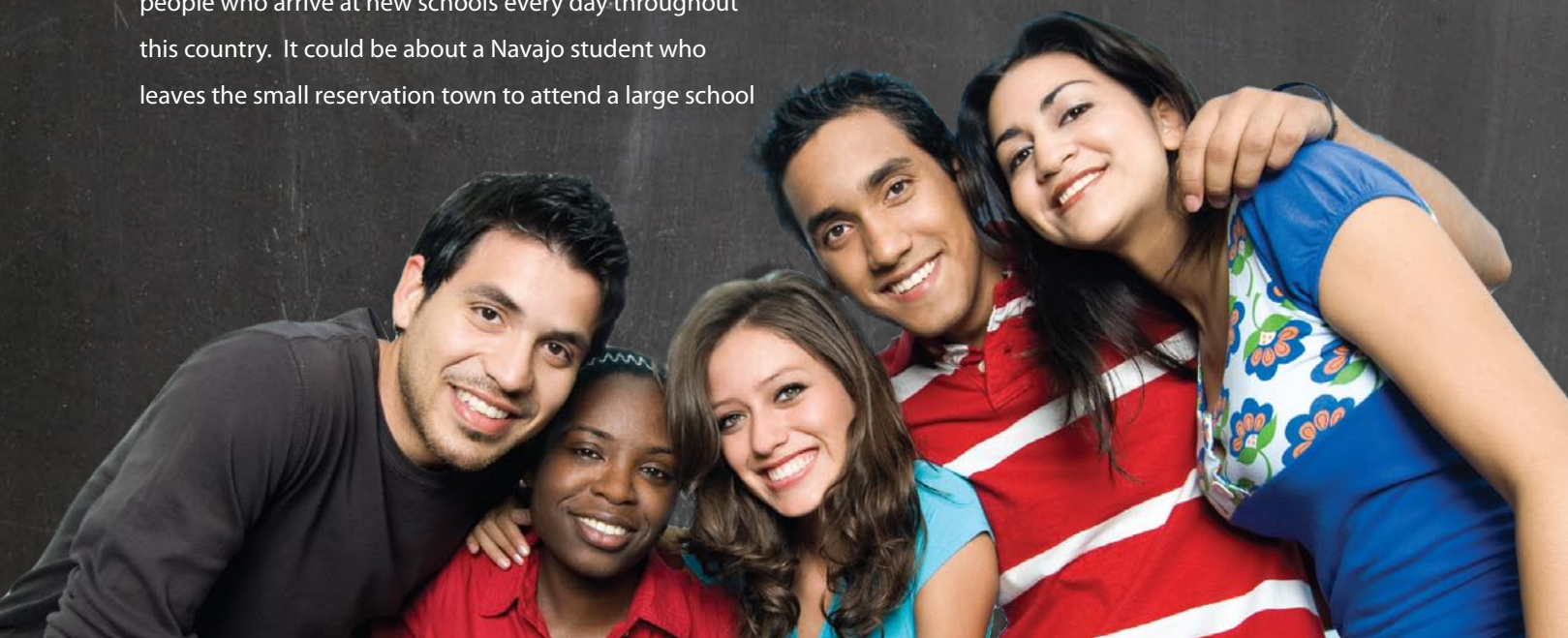
A junior in Chicago added:
“They help you develop skills; it also helps you find out if that’s what you really want to do in the future.”

Neither of these two students had participated in an internship program; however, they clearly understood the benefit.

Generally, seniors knew more about internships than juniors. For example, a high school senior in Los Angeles who had not participated in the Escalera Program stated this about internships:
“You go into them for the field you want to be in and it just gives you hands-on experience and lets you know whether or not you actually want to do that career.”

Another non-Escalera student in Los Angeles added:
“Maybe it’s [internship] not right for you and you realize it’s not for you and try something else.”

* It is important to note that the researchers conducted their site visits in the spring semester prior to Escalera students completing internships.



Key Finding: In year one, there were no significant differences in work experience and career knowledge between Escalera and non-Escalera students.

A majority of students from both sample groups had limited work experience and limited career knowledge. However, Escalera students are beginning to describe the benefits of work experience in a much more detailed way. The study generally found responses about internship knowledge from the non-Escalera students to be one-dimensional. Most responses explained internship benefits as, “You find out if you like that type of work or not.”

The following quote from an Escalera senior in East Harlem, New York illuminates an additional level of internship benefits:

“You may never know what you’ll need from whoever you meet, so it’s like if you need someone’s help it’s always good to keep in contact and just remember the people that you work with and think about how they can help you when you’re starting whatever it is that you want to start.”

The above response speaks to the social benefit of internships and the importance of establishing relationships. When asked about the importance of relationships developed while participating in internships, this Escalera senior in Chicago said: *“Primarily it’s not only about the relations but knowing people that are successful already, people that can help you get to the top because they’re already there.”*

When asked how this student came to that realization, the student simply replied, “Escalera.” These two responses shed light on some of the ways that the Escalera Program can have an impact on young people as they prepare themselves for the world of work.

Key Finding: In year two, Escalera students had more work experience and career knowledge than their non-Escalera peers.

When looking at year two data, there was a marked difference in the number of students who had participated in internships and possessed the ability to articulate their knowledge of the benefits of interning. In year two, the incidence of work experience grows for Escalera students but remains relatively stable for non-Escalera students. In contrast to non-Escalera students in year two, Escalera students began to better articulate their experiences with internships and generally what the goal of an internship might be.

Giving students the opportunity to experience the world of work in an area of their interest influences future career orientation. Research shows that when career aspirations are linked with interests, average salary increases.¹⁷ The next step is giving students the skills to identify the importance of building their social capital toward that end. The vast majority of career knowledge statements were from Escalera seniors. Escalera students are beginning to articulate the added value of an

internship program and, although they may not be cognizant of social capital, they can explain its benefits.

An Escalera senior in Houston said:

“Well it kind of opens doors ’cause after you’re done with college you can go back and give them a call and probably they will have something for you, a job or they can have someone else who is looking for someone in the career that you have studied for. So that’s very important to network and meet other people that have the same career you want to pursue.”

This high school senior has developed an understanding that there is a current and future benefit to networking and that there is a link between academic preparation, work experience, and future career orientation. To cognitively capture and package this as a tool for the future is something that Escalera staff can promote and bring to the forefront. This activity is commonly known as networking. However, the ability to take advantage of networks assumes that the student has an established set of social and business contacts to tap into.

How can staff involved in the Escalera Program assist students in building the social capital necessary to fully bear the fruits of networking activities? The next section will explore this question.

EXPANDED NETWORKS

“I was one of the few lucky to go to Washington, DC for NCLR Advocacy Day. It was like, Wow! It was funny because I was able to meet [Senator] Barbara Boxer, and the person that was sitting next to me had a friend that was part of the Berkeley Alumni Association. He told me there’s a scholarship coming up and if [I] want more information just contact [him] after. So it’s like I met people that I was able to create that connection with. At the time, I was waiting for my letter of acceptance.”

—Escalera senior, Los Angeles

ESCALERA
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One of the most striking differences between year one and year two data is in the area of networking as a capacity-building function. It was not necessary for students to have claimed networking experience to be able to answer questions about networking knowledge. The study sought to discover if students could draw a correlation between networking experiences and future career orientation. In year one, there was no significant difference in the students’ knowledge of networking opportunities or its value. In year two, Escalera students began to articulate more clearly an in-depth benefit of networking experiences compared to their non-Escalera counterparts.



Key Finding: Escalera students are creating social capital by expanding their networks.

The following statement from an Escalera senior at AltaMed Health Services Corporation clearly shows how the program has provided opportunities to increase social capital:

“I think once it comes out that you obtain your degree, you pretty much come down to say, okay, I study, I have my degree, and now what? You got to know someone that will help you get a job. Someone told me once that it’s not so much what you know but who you know. You got to know people that are there so they could help you out.”

The Escalera Program provides the opportunity for many of its students to attend the NCLR Annual Conference where young people from all over the country gather to share their experiences, develop essential leadership skills, and meet influential people. Some students also have the opportunity to travel to the nation’s capital to advocate on policy issues. The student above understood the benefit and value of participation in these activities.

Other students don’t have access to national networks, yet their experience at the local level is just as valuable. They understand the importance of networking opportunities and what they may yield in the future, as stated by this senior from the Escalera Program in Chicago:

“Throughout your education you can go get help from them [contacts], or maybe they’ll have some kind of job opportunity open for you and make it easier for you to get a job after you graduate.”

This senior from the Escalera Program in Austin shared the value gained from learning certain technical skills from her networking experience: *“The PepsiCo people came, and they were telling us how to do work, how to do interviews for jobs. They were professionals already there. They make money, tell you what they do, how they got there and everything, and that really helped too.”*

Seventy percent of Escalera students had their first networking experience through the Escalera Program.¹⁸ However, only 57.3% of Escalera alumni stated that they will remain in contact over time with the career professionals with whom they

interacted.¹⁹ If the expectations of these alumni hold firm, and only a little more than 50% of these students will maintain contact, many will never draw from their “social capital account.” There is, however, insufficient longitudinal data to indicate whether those expectations will be fulfilled, or whether Escalera alumni will decide to take advantage of contacts made in the Escalera Program as they progress in their careers. In any case, the exposure to these opportunities is valuable. By building explicit program elements to teach this to participants, the program could potentially enhance the likelihood that students will use networking for capacity-building, which will assist them in meeting their academic and career goals.

Students articulated the benefits of networking and how it impacts career orientation. Furthermore, valuable skills such as interviewing, communication, and socialization in a workforce environment are all added benefits to the networking experience. Although some students understand the benefits of a networking experience, many stated that they did not intend to remain in contact with those they met. The ability to take their contacts and use them as social capital in the future is yet another level of building and sustaining social capital.

ACADEMIC PREPARATION

Consistent with U.S. Census Bureau data, this study confirms that Latinos are heavily concentrated in

low-income, low-wage jobs. Through focus groups, individual interviews, and surveys, Latino students self-reported the occupations of their parents, who are stratified in the lower-economic-tiered occupations, such as food preparation, cleaning, maintenance, and construction, and a significant number of parents are unemployed. Most students involved in this study also have parents with less than a high school education. As first-generation college students, the majority of students involved in this study stated that parental involvement in their education was passive. In fact, eight out of ten (80%) Escalera alumni stated that parent involvement is limited to providing encouragement at home.²⁰ In some cases, students are able to access support from a sibling who is attending or had attended college. Generally speaking, however, Latino students do not have access to the type of social capital through the family to assist with academic preparation in a meaningful way.

This study chose to focus on the support structure surrounding students and their attitudes and behaviors toward accessing that support. Furthermore, the study sought to find out when and under what conditions Latino students seek out external supports. Moreover, the research focused on levels of family support, relationships with adults outside the family structure, school environment, and peer influence. This is important because



A Noble Man: A Story of Perseverance and Determination



Young men dream of being noble men like their fathers. As a very young boy, Quinti was moved by the genuine concern his father had for the people in the community. “My father’s noble cause was

to help his community,” Quinti explains. “He was a policeman, but he was more of a helper than an enforcer.” With his father by his side, Quinti felt safe and secure. However, those feelings of safety and security quickly changed one fateful day in front of the family home. “My father was robbed and didn’t have any money on him, so he was shot and killed right in front of my mother. Ironically, he was a victim of the very thing he was trying to fight—crime.”

The aftermath of this tragedy left Quinti searching for answers. “I wasn’t into academics. I actually failed second grade. The whole thing with my father really had an effect on me.” Still living in fear, the family left Mexico in search of a new life. They settled in Chicago hoping for a better academic and economic future for the children.

The hope of greater opportunities was balanced by the harsh realities of living in a foreign place with a single mother supporting young children. There were many other barriers Quinti had to overcome in accessing the American Dream. “I had the language barrier and the cultural barrier even though I was among Latinos in my school. I had no choice but to advocate for myself. I felt alone in this new world.”

Over the next several years, Quinti’s perseverance and sheer determination started to pay dividends. A college education was now well within his reach. However, he did not have the slightest idea of where to start. That is where Quinti got introduced to the NCLR Escalera Program. “My friend told me about it [Escalera]. I was like, ‘I have a college program here in my high school. Why do I want to go to another college program?’ But, then I looked it up on the Internet and got excited about the opportunity.”

Through the dedicated support of Escalera staff and coaches, Quinti was accepted into DePaul University, where he is pursuing a degree in communications. “Escalera staff helped me with my essays, résumé, and my portfolio. They also made sure I was prepared for the ACT and other college entrance requirements. I had a support network with Escalera that I didn’t have before.”

In addition to the academic support, Quinti gained work experience through a media internship at a local bilingual radio station. “I started as an intern at Radio Arte, and I’m still working there.” The internship opportunity also shaped Quinti’s choice of a major and eventual career. “I see myself working in an organization or creating my own organization where Latinos have a say in the media. We need a diversity of perspectives.”

Quinti’s hope is to obtain a PhD to honor the legacy of his father and to fulfill the dreams of his mother. I guess you can safely say that Quinti—much like his father—has become a noble man.

understanding how students access support and their willingness to do so paints a picture of how well they navigate the educational environment.

One of the core functions of the Escalera Program is to assist students with the development of an Individual Service Plan to approach their goals for postsecondary education and careers. This is achieved by assisting students with the preparation of personal statements, the college application process, applying for financial aid, mapping out educational requirements based on career interests, and making connections with postsecondary institutions. Additional academic support is provided through tutoring with the intended outcome of improving proficiency levels in core subject areas, providing remediation support, and preparing students for tests, such as the GED exam and college entrance exams.

Key Finding: [Escalera students accessed external supports more frequently than their non-Escalera counterparts.](#)

This study found that Latino students have high academic and career aspirations, but most lack support in helping them navigate the system to achieve their aspirations. Conversely, support from caring adults is critical in helping Latino students reach their academic and career goals. Thus, social support is often needed outside of the family system. A key finding from this study is that Latino students from their junior year in high school and beyond

seek more nonacademic supports, such as filling out college applications, applying for financial aid, writing personal statements, and navigating the postsecondary system than they seek out academic supports, such as tutoring and homework help.

Generally, Escalera students access external supports more frequently than their non-Escalera counterparts. Involvement in the program clearly helps to create the necessary social capital to assist with college preparation. Moreover, students who did not have similar external support in their high school years conveyed a sense of disappointment in this as they prepared for college. For non-Escalera students who did access external supports, assistance most often came from teachers, counselors, siblings, and campus-based college and career resource centers.

Students who have the ability to navigate the educational environment with clear goals tend to be less hindered by obstacles that arise during their academic pursuits. For example, students with an education plan know precisely the degree they will need to enter their career of choice and the coursework required to obtain that degree. This study set out to determine if, generally, students were able to articulate an educational plan that specifically related to their career goals.

Two basic questions were asked to help determine this:

- What type of work do you see yourself doing in ten years?
- What degree or academic requirements are necessary to prepare for that career?

Responses were divided into three categories:

- Do Not Understand
- Somewhat Understood
- Well Understood

As one may expect, year one group interviews with high school juniors found relatively little difference in the responses between Escalera students and their non-Escalera counterparts. The majority of responses fell in the “Somewhat Understood” and “Do Not Understand” categories.

An example of “Do Not Understand” is this comparison group student’s response. When asked what the educational requirements are to becoming a veterinarian, he responded:

“I’m not sure but I think it’s science, biology, and math, reading, mostly oral.”

This Escalera student expressed a career goal of nursing, and when asked what the academic requirements are she responded:

“To be a nurse of course you need your high school degree and I don’t know.”

Again, one may expect these types of responses from students who are just beginning career exploration

and discovering the level of education required to reach their career goals.

Some students in year one were able to express some knowledge of an educational plan. They fit the “Somewhat Understood” category.

This high school junior from the comparison group was interested in either architecture or medicine.

He anticipated the academic requirements:

“If I want to be an architect, [I need to study] design or drafting. If I want to be a doctor [I need] science or biology.”

This student understands that there are academic areas that are important to study or prepare for, yet does not mention any type of degree or certificate requirement.

The following Escalera student has aspirations of being a lawyer and had this to say about her educational future:

“I want to be a lawyer, and to go to law school you don’t have to major in anything specifically. You can major in basically anything you want.”

Again, this student knows that law school is in her future, but at this point she did not express an understanding that completing an undergraduate degree, preparing for the admission test, or the law school application process were steps for reaching her goal.



It must be noted that in year one, a couple of students were able to express more specific educational requirements for their career. For example, this student wanted to be an historian: *“For sure you need six years of college and maybe [to] excel in your field on your subject then you probably have to get a PhD in it.”*

At least this student knew that to be an historian, most likely in a university setting, a PhD is the appropriate degree to aspire to. Along the way, this student will have to complete steps and choose major areas of study. However, the knowledge that a PhD is required is more than most students possessed in their junior year of high school.

Key Finding: There were no significant differences in study habits between Escalera and non-Escalera students.

Study habits are an indicator used to assess college readiness of Latino students. What this study found was there were no significant differences in study habits between Escalera and non-Escalera students. High school juniors and seniors generally study between two and three hours a week. This

was consistent across study sites and age groups. College students generally study between eight and ten hours each week, which may be attributed to the rigors of college coursework. When college students—both Escalera and non-Escalera—were asked if their study habits in high school translated well to a college setting, the resounding response was, “No.”

Study habits are transferable skills that have an impact on college readiness. Teaching these habits and preparing students for rigorous college coursework are extremely important steps to ensuring that Latino students are college-ready. Moreover, ensuring that Latino students have access to rigorous college preparation coursework and quality instruction are also research-based factors that ensure that students are college-ready.

It is important to note that students oftentimes viewed study and homework as exclusive events. In other words, the researchers found that asking the question about study habits required a follow-up



question about homework to get an accurate read on actual study hours per week.

This study also found that the majority of Latino high school students study alone. Avoiding distractions was the primary reason students gave for not studying in small groups. On the other hand, college students balance their study a little more by participating in small study groups with more frequency than their high school counterparts. However, college students study alone most of the time. These findings are important because 21st century working environments are dynamic settings that often call for team-based, small-group participation to solve problems. If students do not have ample opportunities to work in teams, their first exposure to this type of expectation may be in the workplace. It's important for the Escalera Program to continue to incorporate team-based activities that promote teamwork, communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, all of which are leadership skills that easily transfer to the workplace. Raising these group activities as a critical element of career readiness could enhance students' preparedness for the workplace.

Key Finding: Students who have access to college and career exploration activities have a greater knowledge of career paths and associated academic requirements.

In year two focus groups, students were able to articulate a more detailed educational plan. Although there were still students from both

the treatment and comparison groups who gave responses that fit the “Do Not Understand” and “Somewhat Understood” categories, responses from Escalera students in year two exhibited a greater knowledge of academic requirements as they pertain to their career choices.

When asked about preparing to be an architect, this Escalera student replied:

“We went to a college visit at UMKC (University of Missouri–Kansas City), and the program coordinator for the architectural program said they had a joint program... take two years and then three years at Kansas State University for a five-year master’s program.”

To prepare for nursing, the following Escalera student shared her knowledge by saying:

“Just to be an RN it would be two years, but if you want to go farther you can go four years or six years. I learned that at UMKC nursing week in the summer. I went and they had all the different kinds of nurses you could be and how long it would take.”

These students not only demonstrated knowledge of how long it would take them to prepare for their careers, they also shared where they learned the information and the different levels of preparation, as acknowledged by the student interested in nursing.

The following responses are from a non-Escalera senior in year two; she demonstrates a comprehensive knowledge of academic requirements. This student has aspirations of being a doctor. When asked how

long she'll need to go to school, she responded:

“Eight to ten years for a doctor.”

She continued by sharing where she acquired this information:

“When we went to... [college visit] they give you the curriculum and they tell you the pathways for different careers and how long it takes for being a dentist, for being a doctor, for being a surgeon, for being a psychotherapist. They tell you and they specify how many years you have to study.”

When asked what degree she'll need she said:

“Well I'll be getting a bachelor's degree, and if possible after medical school maybe I'll go back and get a master's, then hopefully a PhD some day.”

This student demonstrates an understanding of what degrees she'll need, knowing that a bachelor's degree and medical school are part of her future. Furthermore, she has a realistic idea of the time commitment to achieve her goal—eight to ten years.

The next student is interested in working at the United Nations and has pretty good insight as to what she'll need to prepare herself:

“It would be like six years because I want to get a master's. You can't just go in there [UN] with a bachelor's. You have to have experience. I have to ensure that my college has study abroad [opportunities] or something so I can go abroad and obtain a lot of internships relating to the UN or something relating to that. I'll have to get a degree in international studies.”

This student also has realistic expectations of what is necessary to be competitive in her chosen career. She understands that education is important, yet also understands the value of experiences—such as internships abroad—that will enhance her chances of reaching her goal.

CAREER ASPIRATIONS

“Before I was in Escalera, I guess for the most part I saw myself as probably getting an education and getting a good job, but I never really thought about where I would be. I usually thought about having an office somewhere by Cook County, by the prison or something. Then I joined Escalera. They helped me with this internship and I saw this whole new world for me, somewhere that I hope I will be. I don't know... it's motivation. Through Escalera they helped me get a part-time job at a law firm as an intern and they sent me all around downtown. I was like—Wow!—I wish I could be here one day.”

—Escalera alum, Chicago

The Escalera Program creates opportunities for young Latinos to connect their career aspirations to applied work experience. In some cases, the Escalera experience actually helps to shape students' career aspirations. As evidenced in the quote above, applied work experience that connects

to a student’s interest can open up a whole new world of possibilities for young Latinos. In this section are the types of careers that young Latinos aspire to enter and some of the motivating factors behind their decision-making.

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of career aspirations by career categories and student groups.

Key Finding: Latino students have a variety of career aspirations.

As evidenced in Figure 2, Latino students most often cited five sectors—health care, private sector/small business, government, nonprofit/social work, and education—as their career aspirations. The “Other” category consisted of responses such as architecture, engineering, technology, creative arts,

journalism, and food service, among others. Detailed data analysis indicates that students who gravitate toward the private sector/small business sector are more inclined to be entrepreneurs than workers in established companies. In other words, when this particular category is unpacked, the majority of students expressed interest in running their own businesses as opposed to working for an established company. This is significant because there is a desire among some corporations to create a pipeline of Latino talent toward corporate leadership. Data suggest that the Escalera Program may be inspiring young Latino entrepreneurs interested in creating their own career path as opposed to following a path paved by others.

Also noteworthy is the high number of Escalera students and alumni interested in pursuing



careers in health care. Given our nation’s shortage of health care practitioners, these data are reassuring in that young Latinos may be responding to this need. Moreover, young Latinos can also help to fill a void of bilingual health care practitioners who serve in areas where there is the highest need.

Latino students are developing career aspirations based on a variety of influences, including inspirational figures, the media, self-interest, family figures, career preparation programs such as Escalera, a desire for social change, and mentors who develop in-depth relationships with youth. The following section delves into the role of relationships and how they influence the career aspirations of young Latino students.

PROXIMAL INSPIRATION TO CAREER ASPIRATIONS

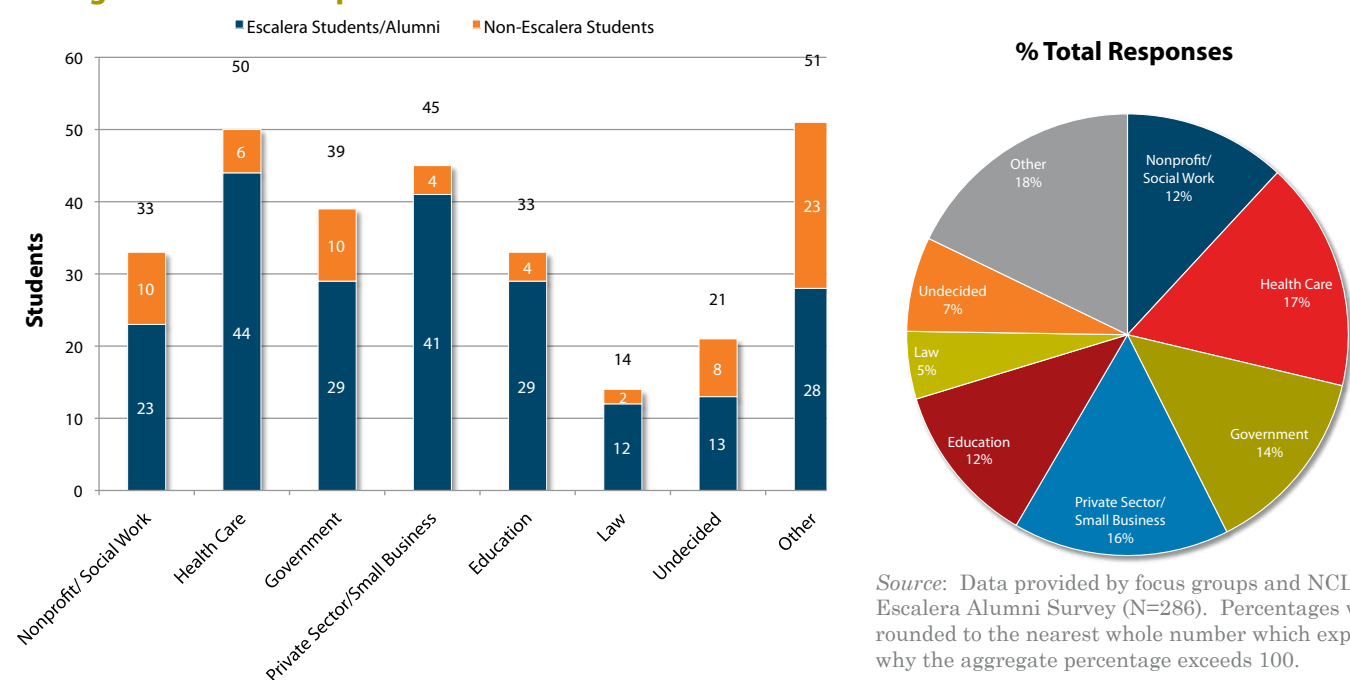
As mentioned above, Latino students draw inspiration and influence from a variety of sources. However, the data suggest that there is a much stronger relational component to decision-making than one might think. The researchers believe that it may have something to do with what they are

termining “proximal inspiration.” In other words, the closer in proximity a student is to someone—both physically and emotionally—the more likely he is to be influenced toward a specific career orientation. Several testimonials within the data suggest a strong link between inspirational figures in a young person’s life and future career aspirations.

The following example from an Escalera alum in Los Angeles helps to illustrate this point: *“My influence was my mom ‘cuz growing up she had a lot of health problems and every time she would get sick I would want to help her. But there [was] nothing I could do because I didn’t have any remedy or solution for whatever was making her ill. And then going to the hospital with her and noticing that the doctors know what to do, and they give her some type of prescription and that doesn’t do the job. It frustrates me. I want to become a doctor and then work towards finding an actual solution towards these illnesses and ways to prevent them and hopefully give back to my community, and try to influence more.”*



Figure 2: Career Aspirations of Escalera and Non-Escalera Students



Source: Data provided by focus groups and NCLR Escalera Alumni Survey (N=286). Percentages were rounded to the nearest whole number which explains why the aggregate percentage exceeds 100.

NCLR Escalera Program Impact

Clearly, in this example, personal experience and a strong emotional tie with the mother have influenced this student's decision to go into health care.

The following example from a student in Houston shows how an emotional connection with former teachers has inspired a decision to pursue a career in education:

"I guess because teachers have done so much for me and it has been a large part of my life, I want to make a change in other kids. So I want to wake up in the morning thinking that it's not just going to work but going to work to make a difference."

In other cases, students spoke passionately about how a mentor influenced their career decisions. In New York, a young man spoke about how a mentor in an after-school program changed his life. This positive social relationship influenced this young man to pursue a career in social services. Once again, the fact that the mentor—a youth development practitioner—had regular contact and an in-depth connection with the student influenced the student's future career path.

"I want to give back...to change the things that are going on."

—High school senior, Kansas City

Key Finding: A desire for social change influences career aspirations for Latinos.

Another variable found to clearly influence career choice was a desire for social change. In other words, students commonly choose their career because of a strong desire to give back. Very few Latino students in this study were motivated by money. In fact, 62% of Escalera alumni stated that helping others was the primary reason for their career choice.²¹ Growth in volunteerism and civic participation in the U.S. suggests that young people are making career choices that support broad social change.

There also seems to be a strong link between inspirational figures and civic responsibility. As seen in prior quotes, not only were young people influenced by inspirational figures, their intended actions suggest that they are interested in creating social change.

The Escalera Program is uniquely positioned to provide the "proximal inspiration" to students through staff support and by connecting students to mentors who develop strong relationships with them. Moreover, by acting as "surrogate social capital" for young Latino students and by assisting them as they explore career paths, the Escalera Program can continue to provide opportunities for young people to explore and prepare for a wide range of future leadership positions.

OVERVIEW

This section explores the level of impact that the NCLR Escalera Program is having on program participation, high school graduation rates, and college enrollment and retention rates. This section also provides analysis at the site level, which explains particular contributing factors behind some of the program's successes and challenges. Data in this section focus on the 2008 and 2009 cohorts who participated in this study and are derived from two primary sources: the program sites and the NCLR Escalera Program Alumni Survey.

KEY FINDINGS

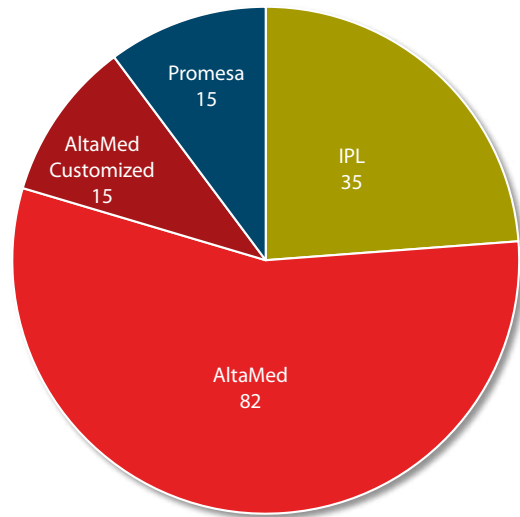
- In 2008, the Escalera Program served a total of 147 students at three pilot sites.
- In 2009, the Escalera Program increased in size and scope, serving 247 students at six sites.
- Of Escalera participants from the 2008 cohort, 86% graduated from high school or obtained a GED.
- Of eligible Escalera graduates from the 2009 cohort, 95% enrolled in college.
- Of Escalera graduates from the 2008 cohort, 99% persist in college past year one.



ESCALERA
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PARTICIPATION COMPARISON

Figure 3: 2008 Cohort Participation



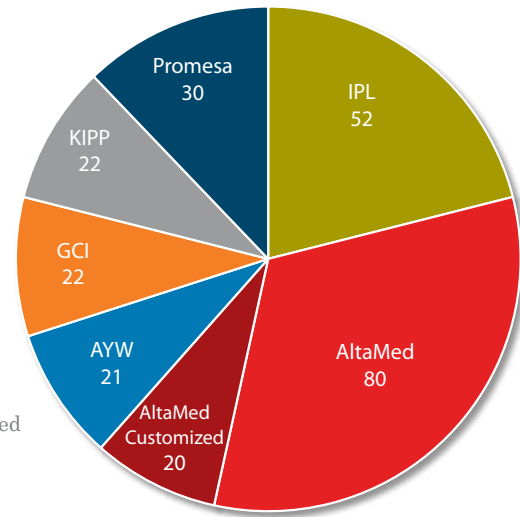
Source: Data provided by participating Escalera Affiliates.

Summary

The 2008 NCLR Escalera Program cohort consisted of three sites: AltaMed Health Services Corporation (AltaMed) in Los Angeles; Instituto del Progreso Latino (IPL) in Chicago; and Promesa Systems, Inc. (Promesa) in New York City. The 2008 cohort served a total of 147 participants at the three sites (see Figure 3).

Promesa served a smaller cohort size due to this being its first cohort. Conversely, both AltaMed and IPL were already considered “veteran sites” at this time, which explains the variance in the number of program participants across sites. AltaMed served an additional subgroup of 15 participants in a customized version of the Escalera Program.*

Figure 4: 2009 Cohort Participation



Summary

Figure 4 illustrates the growth of the NCLR Escalera Program in both size and scale for the 2009 cohort, serving a total of 247 participants. NCLR doubled the amount of sites from three to six, adding Affiliate partners Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) in Houston; Guadalupe Centers, Inc. (GCI) in Kansas City; and American YouthWorks (AYW) in Austin. These three new sites launched the program with smaller cohorts of at least 20 participants. IPL significantly increased the number of students served from the previous year, while Promesa also doubled in cohort size as expected. AltaMed also continued to serve a subgroup of 20 new participants in a customized Escalera Program.

* The traditional program model has been customized by AltaMed to meet the needs of youth with greater barriers for participation and who are at higher risk of not earning a high school credential.

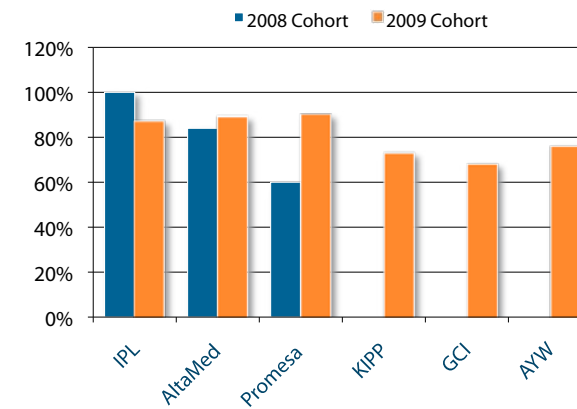
GRADUATION RATES

Figure 5: High School Graduation Rates by Site and Cohort*

2008 Cohort Graduation Rate: 86%

2009 Cohort Graduation Rate: 84%

Total Students Served in 2008 and 2009 Cohorts (N=359)[†]



Source: Data provided by participating Escalera Affiliates and calculations performed by NCLR.

* Graduation rates are calculated by considering the total number of students served in the traditional Escalera Program and the number of participants who both successfully graduated from the Escalera Program and high school or earned a GED. Graduation rates do not include the participants who may have graduated from high school or earned a GED but did not successfully complete the Escalera Program.

[†] Total number excludes students served in the customized program by AltaMed.

Summary

Escalera students take a profound first step toward greater economic mobility by graduating from high school. For the 2008 and 2009 cohorts, 86% and 84% of Escalera participants, respectively, graduated from high school or completed a GED, compared to 58% of Latinos nationally. Offering further analysis of these graduation rates, this study took a closer look at student recruitment.

AltaMed served an additional 15 participants in the 2008 cohort and 20 participants in the 2009 cohort by implementing a customized model. The customized model is a maximum of 12 months and addresses the needs of youth with greater barriers for success and are at a higher risk of not earning a high school credential. One hundred percent of the 2008 cohort earned their GED and successfully completed the Escalera Program. In the 2009 cohort, 60% of the participants earned their GED and successfully completed the program. The decline in the completion rate among both cohorts can partly be attributed to a change in case managers assigned to the students during this year. Yet, even with this decline, the 60% rate is close to the national graduation rate of their Hispanic peers.

Promesa experienced a significant increase in high school graduates from 60% in 2008 to 90% in 2009. The Escalera Program at this site was challenged by staff turnover during the startup phase and some early challenges with student recruitment. Therefore, the increase in graduation rates can be attributed to more stability in program management and a greater emphasis on student recruitment after the first year’s experience with implementation.

Calling special attention to AYW’s graduation rate, it is important to note that this site implemented





the traditional program model but recruited and served participants with multiple barriers to academic success. Many of the students in its program had previously dropped out of traditional high school, been incarcerated as teens, experienced homelessness and disconnection from their families, or became teen parents. From this lens, graduating 76% of its Escalera participants is a huge success and far exceeds the national graduation rate for Latinos.

The context behind the Escalera Program's graduation rate at KIPP is also noteworthy. Nationally, KIPP high schools are very successful at graduating students and preparing them for the challenges of postsecondary education. At first glance, graduating 73% of its Escalera participants may not seem all that impressive. However, Escalera Program participants are recruited from the bottom 50% of the student population among

the network of KIPP schools, which basically conveys that they recruit students with the highest academic and social needs. Furthermore, KIPP targets students with very little school connection, as evidenced by low participation rates in school and after-school activities. Thus, considering the recruitment base, a 73% graduation rate represents a success.

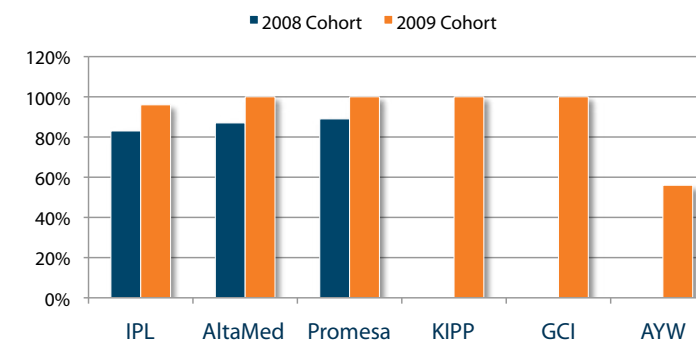
The graduation successes at both AYW and KIPP can also be attributed to intensive academic support through tutoring. Given the remediation needs of Escalera students at these sites, tutoring is emphasized a bit more than at other Escalera sites. Interestingly, students at AYW spoke more of the bond they created with their tutors than the actual academic benefit of the support, which reinforces the argument for social support.

COLLEGE ENROLLMENT RATES

Figure 6: Immediate College Enrollment Rates by Escalera Site and Cohort*

2008 Cohort College Enrollment: 86%

2009 Cohort College Enrollment: 95%



Source: Data provided by participating Escalera Affiliates and calculations performed by NCLR.

*For reporting purposes, immediate college enrollment is defined as students who enroll in college in their first eligible semester. For most, this would be the fall semester.

Summary

For the two-year reporting period, the NCLR Escalera Program enrolled a total of 278 eligible students into college.* For the 2009 cohort, 95% of eligible Escalera students enrolled in college compared to 86% for the 2008 cohort. The program far exceeds the national average of 58% for college enrollment rates of Latinos.

Further analysis reveals that four out of six Escalera sites enrolled 100% of their eligible students for the 2009 cohort into college. As evidenced in Figure 6, AYW's college enrollment rate of 56% is an outlier in comparison to the other six Escalera sites. This can be explained by its emphasis on serving students with the highest academic and social needs. Students served by AYW oftentimes are two to three academic years behind their peers, signifying that their remediation needs are much greater than the general Escalera student population. Furthermore, intensive case management is needed to reintegrate Escalera students into a classroom setting, given that a high percentage of the AYW participants have previously dropped out of school, been incarcerated, and/or experienced other academic and social setbacks.

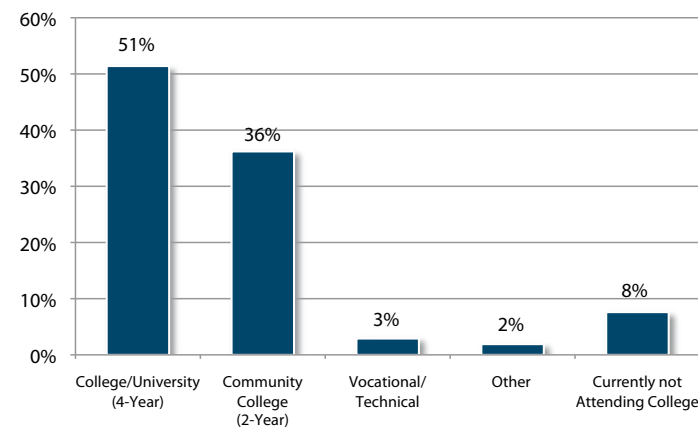
Of the Escalera alumni who do not immediately enroll in college, data collected by program sites reveal that some of them enroll at a later time.



*Eligible students are defined as students who have obtained a minimum of a high school diploma or GED.

COLLEGE ENROLLMENT BY INSTITUTION TYPE

Figure 7: NCLR Escalera Program Postsecondary Enrollment by Institution Type



Source: Data derived from the NCLR Escalera Program Alumni Survey (N=109).

Summary

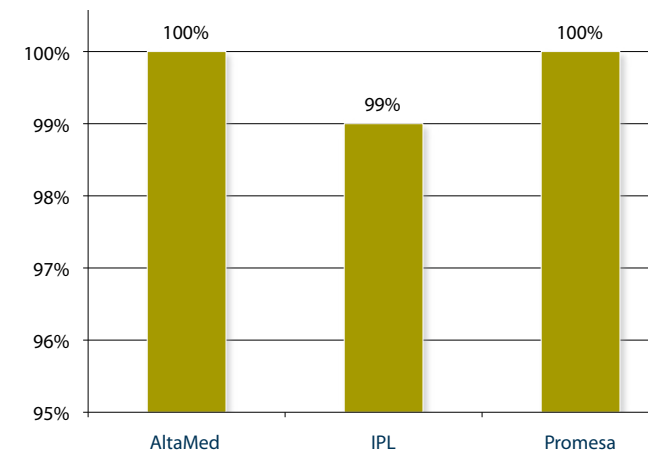
Statistics in Figure 7 represent roughly one-third of the entire Escalera alumni population. Fifty-one percent of the Escalera Program graduates are enrolled in a four-year college. Enrollment rates in community college demonstrate that 36% of the graduates have started their college education close to home. From focus groups conducted with alumni for this study, the two most common reasons given for their preference for local community colleges were the responsibilities of balancing both school and raising children, either their own or their younger siblings, and the feeling that it was a better way to “test the waters” for college. In other words, attending community college allowed them to get acclimated to college in a less threatening way because of the smaller student populations and more individualized attention from faculty.

The two responses in the “Other” category were defined as “beauty school,” which could be considered vocational/technical school.

COLLEGE PERSISTENCE RATES

Figure 8: 2008 Cohort College Persistence Rates by Site

2008 Cohort Aggregate College Persistence Rate: 99%



Source: Data provided by participating Escalera Affiliates and calculations performed by NCLR.

Summary

As evidenced in Figure 8, nearly all of the Escalera alumni in the 2008 cohort who originally enrolled in college continue to be enrolled past year one. As previously noted in Figure 1, workers with at least some college earn, on average, 20% more per year than those with only a high school diploma.* Thus, college experience is a reliable predictor of greater economic mobility for Escalera participants down the road.



* Authors' calculations of Educational Attainment data in Figure 1.

Conclusion

This study found that Latino students have high academic and career aspirations. They often need social support outside of the family system, since Latino parent involvement was found to be passive. The NCLR Escalera Program has helped to fill this void by providing supports to guide young Latinos through high school and into college. This study found that the Escalera Program graduates Latinos and enrolls them in postsecondary institutions at a much higher rate than the national average. This can be attributed, in large part, to intensive academic planning and preparation that helps to guide students through uncharted territory. This type of academic support has also set up an accountability structure for meeting higher academic and career goals that might not exist within Latino students' limited networks. It is important to note that academic planning alone will not ensure that students are college-ready. Rigorous coursework and access to quality instruction also play a significant role in ensuring that students are prepared for the expectations of college.

We know that Escalera students enroll in postsecondary education at a high rate. We also know that Escalera students persist in college past year one at a high rate. What is less known, however, is if the program is having an impact

on graduating Latinos from college and ensuring employment at higher or advanced levels. The expectation to this point has been to increase high school graduation and college enrollment rates for Latinos. Data within this report clearly demonstrate success in meeting these two objectives. However, significant economic mobility will only happen if enrollment in college leads to more Latino college graduates. The NCLR Escalera Program has only a limited number of eligible college graduates at this point given its relatively short existence. Accordingly, providing the necessary follow-up and support to Escalera alumni is critical to achieving higher college graduation rates.

Furthermore, this study found that Escalera students have more work experience and career knowledge than their non-Escalera counterparts. Work experience, specifically in professional occupations, helps young people increase their career literacy, which in turn leads to informed decision-making down the road. Once again, with limited social and professional networks, Latino students need increased exposure to careers outside of their circle of influence, which frequently is limited to the immediate family. Through internships, Escalera students are able to increase their social capital and expand their networks by

connecting to career professionals. Also, they are learning more about work environments and acquiring valuable transferable skills that will follow them into the workforce.

Finally, proximal influences, personal experiences, and a desire for social change are key variables that drive Latino career aspirations. These variables should be taken into account when developing and pursuing certain workforce objectives. To

achieve greater parity for Latinos in professional occupations, one must understand what drives the population's decision-making. Thus, if building a pipeline of Latino leaders is an objective, more needs to be done to connect young Latinos with inspirational figures in the corporate sector with greater frequency and depth. Also, companies may want to highlight their social responsibility efforts to align with Latinos' desire to create social change.



Recommendations

Ensure that Latino students have access to rigorous college preparation coursework and quality instruction.

Social support is critical in providing the roadmap for Latino students to graduate from high school and enroll in college. However, to ensure that they are college-ready, continued work has to be done to ensure that students are taking rigorous coursework and have access to quality instruction in their schools. This may require that the Escalera Program recruit students earlier in their high school careers and advise them earlier to ensure that they are taking courses that will adequately prepare them for college coursework. This can also be accomplished through partnership with the feeder schools from which the program recruits its students.

Provide more opportunities for students to develop leadership skills through team-based activities.

If Latino students do not have ample opportunities to work in groups in their schools, programs like Escalera may have to step up to fill this void. Teamwork and collaboration are hallmarks of the 21st century workplace. Conversely, early exposure to team-based activities is critical to ensuring that Latinos are career-ready. Furthermore, leadership skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, and collaboration are all valuable skills that can be developed through team-based activities.

Assess program quality in an intentional way.

The program is now at the level of maturity where it is assessing quality in an intentional way.

Developing and implementing a quality assessment tool that assesses process outcomes across sites and provides site-level benchmarks for program delivery will help to improve consistency across sites. Quality assessment tools such as the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA), the Afterschool Program Assessment System (APAS), and the Quality Assurance System (QAS) are all research-based assessment tools that could be used in analyzing the quality of the NCLR Escalera Program.

Enhance the *Escalera Replication Guide* by connecting curriculum to intended student outcomes.

NCLR should consider adding a curriculum to its *Escalera Replication Guide* which connects lesson plans to intended student outcomes. This will enhance communication from the national level about what an “Escalera experience” should be and what tools an Escalera graduate will possess once exiting the program. It will also provide criteria and benchmarks for students to complete an Education Development Plan or Individual Service Plan. This curriculum could provide a model that will demonstrate the value of formally making work experience activities, such as internships and networking opportunities, part of formal academic preparation.

Provide ongoing support for Escalera alumni through college.

Program-level data collected by AltaMed and IPL demonstrate a decline in college retention for the cohorts preceding 2008. Students in the study

cited socioeconomic reasons, such as parenting responsibilities and increased financial burdens, for dropping out of college. An improved tracking system of alumni’s current status and increased staff capacity to continue much-needed case management are necessary across all sites for better understanding the barriers to college success and improving the college graduation rates for Escalera participants.

Additionally, increased social support through their college experience may be necessary to improve college persistence rates for Escalera alumni. Colleges and universities have a range of support services available to students. Federally funded programs such as Student Support Services provide one-on-one academic advisement, tutoring, and social support. Other programs such as the McNair Scholars Program provide internships and funding to promote research opportunities. Many students entering postsecondary education are unaware of these programs. Knowledge of such opportunities prior to entering college and a newfound ability to navigate the system could greatly enhance a student’s likelihood of success. Escalera staff should increase efforts to teach students how to seek out these support services at the college or university of their choice. This could also be part of the many campus visits that the Escalera Program provides.

Encourage consistent engagement from corporate partners.

Focus group data suggest that corporate involvement in Escalera programming is episodic.

Students spoke of seeing corporate partners “occasionally” at mock interviews, community events, and other Escalera events. Even so, according to Escalera students, this limited engagement still had an impact on making their career aspirations relevant. To maximize the experience, NCLR should encourage corporate partners to be more actively involved in implementing the Escalera curriculum. Perhaps the best way to approach this is to pair up students interested in corporate careers with a mentor who can guide them through the process. This will assist the Escalera student in building social capital in the corporate world

Track Escalera alumni as they enter the workforce.

To truly understand Latino economic mobility, it is necessary to document the matriculation patterns of Escalera alumni as they enter the workforce. As the program matures, learning from Escalera alumni about the careers they are choosing, the entry-level wages they are garnering, and connecting their career aspirations with career choice will be helpful in guiding future program decisions. It will also help to better assess if the NCLR Escalera Program is contributing to greater economic mobility for Latinos.



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