

Principles for the Federal Role in Higher Education

The Higher Education Act (HEA), at its core, is a civil rights act. Reauthorization of the law, in part or as a whole, must maintain that foundational purpose. The HEA has long helped maintain that more Americans, especially those in communities of color, can access postsecondary education, contribute to our nation's prosperity, and find better economic opportunity.

Congress is poised to review and update the law. Reauthorization of HEA comes at a crucial time for Latinos: progress has been made to increase Hispanic high school graduation rates and college enrollment, but Latino students continue to lag behind their peers in both postsecondary enrollment and degree attainment. In 2014, 14% of Hispanics age 25 and older had a bachelor's degree or higher, the lowest of any racial or ethnic group, compared to 34% of Whites.¹ The rise of student debt and the rollback of federal protections for students from exploitation by predatory institutions will only serve to compound this disparity.²

The HEA, and its effect on Latino students, will also determine the strength of our future workforce and national economy. Hispanics are the youngest and one of the fastest-growing populations in the United States and will be crucial to maintaining a competitive workforce. They comprise a larger proportion of students enrolled in the American K-12 education system: one-in-four children are Latino.³ And by 2050, Latinos are projected to comprise 30% of the nation's workforce.⁴ The American economy will increasingly rely on the Latino community for well-educated workers. An equitable, high-quality higher education pipeline is essential for Latinos to be well-equipped to meet the needs of our 21st Century economy.

For 50 years, UnidosUS has worked to improve opportunities, particularly in education, for millions of Hispanics in the country. With a focus on Latino, DREAMer, and low-income students, reauthorization of the HEA should adhere to the following principles:

- 1. *Preserve and expand access to higher education by helping students become college-ready.*** More Latinos than ever are enrolling in and attending postsecondary institutions, but more can be done to ensure that Latino students have the foundation that will allow them to succeed in postsecondary pursuits, especially at more selective,

four-year institutions. It is essential that the federal government continue to invest in programs that help underserved and low-income students prepare for and enroll in college, like TRIO*, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), High School Equivalency Program (HEP) and College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP), so they enter postsecondary programs prepared to succeed. Latino students—most of whom are first-generation college-goers—and their families need transparent and complete information, delivered in a culturally competent and personalized way, to make the most informed decisions about college. Access to this information before enrolling in a program equips students, and their families, with the information necessary to successfully complete their program of study.

- 2. *Make college affordable for low-income students.*** As a variety of factors contribute to the increasing cost of higher education, a growing racial and ethnic wealth gap disadvantages Latino students and their families as they finance college and manage the debt burden. The rising costs of higher education have been a barrier to enrollment and completion for low-income students. Therefore, the federal government should support efforts to improve affordability, including through increasing and improving the Pell Grant and streamlining the FAFSA. Because many students are already struggling under the burden of student debt, the federal government should work to improve and preserve repayment plans that help students stay current on their loans, especially in an economy where wages remain stagnant. Improved affordability and decreased loan burdens would make it easier for students and graduates to start businesses, save for retirement, purchase a home, and help grow the American economy.

- 3. *Address barriers to college completion.*** While Latinos are closing the gap in high school graduation and college enrollment, they are still less likely than other students to complete their programs. Barriers to completion, including financial, academic and familial obligations, often leave students with debt and no degree, creating a potentially disastrous financial situation. The federal government should invest in efforts to improve completion rates through academic and nonacademic supports and create pathways from two-year to four-year programs. Reforms should include remediation redesign that allow students to enter college ready to enroll and succeed in credit-

* The Federal Trio Programs include eight programs targeted towards helping low-income and first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities progress from middle schools to postbaccalaureate programs. The programs include Educational Opportunity Centers, Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Scholarships, Student Support Services, Talent Search, Training Program for Federal TRIO Program staff, Upward Bound, Upward Bound Math-Science, and Veterans Upward Bound.

bearing courses, rather than being forced to take courses that unnecessarily increase the time and cost to complete their programs. Completion is crucial for students to benefit from the wage premium that comes from higher education.

- 4. *Protect students from financial exploitation.*** While most institutions of higher education want to serve students well, some prey on first-generation students and students of color through deceptive recruiting practices and false marketing claims. Studies have shown these programs do not provide a wage premium for graduates, leaving them saddled with significant debt and no means with which to repay.⁵ The federal government should enforce strong regulations against for-profit schools to ensure students are not on a path to a low-quality degree and potentially ruinous debt. Federal protections need to require student loan servicers to be transparent with and responsive to students and enable borrowers to access repayment solutions that are affordable.

¹ Lauren Musu-Gillette, et al., *Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2017*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2017), Figure 25.2, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017051.pdf> (accessed December 2017).

² Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights and UnidosUS, “Re: Concerns about Impact of Student Loan Servicing and Debt Collection Changes and Undermined Regulations on Black and Latino Borrowers,” September 19, 2017, <http://civilrightsdocs.info/pdf/policy/letters/2017/StudentLoanServicing091917.pdf> (accessed March 2018).

³ Kids Count Data Center, “Child population by race,” <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/103-child-population-by-race#detailed/1/any/false/870,573,869,36,868/68,69,67,12,70,66,71,72/423,424> (accessed January 2018).

⁴ Anthony Carnevale and Nicole Smith, “America’s Future Workforce,” in *All-In Nation: An America that Works for All*, ed. Vanessa Cardenas and Sarah Treuhaft (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress and PolicyLink, 2013), <https://allinnation.org/ms-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/10/Chapter3.pdf> (accessed August 2017).

⁵ Stephanie Riegg Cellini and Nick Turner, “Gainfully Employed? Assessing the Employment and Earnings of For-Profit College Students Using Administrative Data,” *National Bureau of Economic Research* (May 2016), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2786445## (accessed March 2018).