



Policy Brief: Equity Data in Higher Education

Luis León Medina, Yale University

Andrew Mendoza, University of California, Berkeley

Who We Are

Andrew Mendoza (he/him/his) is a junior at the University of California, Berkeley. Originally from Los Angeles, California, Andrew's interest in pursuing a Political Science and Legal Studies degree is emboldened by his experiences as a first-generation, low-income community-college transfer student. Andrew elevates the voices of the underrepresented populations he comes from and serves. He is currently president of La Unidad Latina, Lambda Upsilon Lambda Fraternity, Inc. at UC Berkeley, and he leads UC Berkeley's Navigating Cal (NavCal) Program, teaching social and cultural capital to his beloved communities. Andrew seeks to pursue a joint JD/MPP degree and has cultivated this interest from his experiences as a Public Policy and Leadership Conference Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and as a legal intern for the Phillips Black Project.

Luis León Medina (he/him/his) is a junior at Yale University studying sociology and data science. Originally from El Salvador, Luis currently resides in Houston, Texas. On campus, he is heavily involved in the Latinx community, serving as a student consultant for the cultural center, co-president of the Latinx pre-professional student group, and president of Ballet Folklorico. Professionally, Luis has worked in philanthropy, non-profit, and tech, always with the goal of amplifying the voices of underrepresented communities. Luis has a deep passion for data-driven policy and is an UnidosUS *Avanzando Líderes* Fellow.

Background

Undergraduate enrollment rates for Hispanic students have increased from 1.4 million students in 2000 to 3.4 million in 2018.¹ As of 2012, Latinos are the fastest-growing population enrolled in higher education.² However, Latinx students face significant barriers to college success. At four-year institutions, the Latinx graduation rate hovers around 54%, compared to 64% for White students.³ By 2045, America-at-large will exist as a minority-majority entity with Latinos at the helm.⁴ Therefore, we must take the foundational, proactive steps to ensure that student success is more equal across ethnic and racial lines. Many Latino students are first-generation college students from households that often contain low-income and mixed-status families.⁵ For those students, education is the

golden ticket toward socioeconomic mobility. However, there is no federal mechanism to acquire the “equity” data needed to equalize student outcomes given the disparity in success. The Department of Education’s federal mechanism to acquire demographic data is the Free Application for Federal Student Aid form (FAFSA), but it only captures surface-level details. This means that many marginalized identities and their unique struggles fall between the gaps of data metrics. Better acquisition and understanding of data are instrumental to determine the needs of current students and help them succeed in higher education. This work will impact future generations.

The Ask

Providing further avenues to understanding where existing gaps hinder Latinx student success is necessary for bridging those gaps uniformly and at a federal level. A holistic understanding of student experiences is important to equalize the educational outcomes for Latinx students. Currently, we stand at the precipice of possibility. In taking action, we have the opportunity to provide a foundational jumping-off point toward student equity. Without action, though, we teeter dangerously close to the precipice of perpetuating systemic wounds that time has yet to heal. Therefore:

The Department of Education should:

- Create a uniform federal standard to acquire “equity data” that will be directly used to gauge student outcomes. Some factors may include college enrollment data, retention rates, need of support services in the institution, the number of institutionalized ethnic/racial support centers and clubs on campus, and average earnings following degree attainment. The data should, at least, be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, income, and household/student status.

Congress should:

- Require the Department of Education to improve performance standards and accountability by having a uniform criterion with which to measure equity data and increase public oversight, by establishing clear publicly available ways to utilize this data moving forward.
- Disseminate and disaggregate newly acquired data from higher education through cross-sectional metrics, including but not limited to Pell-grant eligibility, sex, and immigration status.
- Require Title IV institutions to provide equity data on the following: enrollment change from the previous semester by type (first-time, full-time, transfer, and part-time), completion rates, withdrawal rates, job placement rates, alumni earnings, and underrepresented minority (URM) status, including and not limited to student-parents, formerly incarcerated, and disabled.

The Need

Currently, we are not able to cross-tabulate data to understand the needs of the marginalized populations who are inevitably inhabiting the spaces of higher education. As such, the status quo will be seen as a relic of antiquity, ill-equipped to handle the changes of a modern world. It is time for the ongoing socioeconomic and racial disparities in higher education to be rectified. By changing the way we acquire, curate, and subsequently use higher education data, we can begin to bridge the equity gap that bars marginalized student populations from full participation on campus and prepare them for the coming

future. Furthermore, by being transparent and equity-focused in using holistic data, we can hope to close the gaps in Latino graduation and success rates.

Impact

We must act now. The next generation of college students needs us! The hope is that this accessibility and cross-tabulated data will not only help us achieve the next Latinx frontier, but will also help us with serving Black, Indigenous, Asian, first-generation White, and rural students, as well as many other populations. This data will only make us better. This data will enable students, researchers, policy analysts, think tanks, and local and federal politicians to understand the gaps, the successes, and the failures in higher education both at the local and federal level. It will help us all!

The vision is for a Census-style Application Programming Interface (API) of higher education data that anyone can easily query and search. The Massachusetts Department of Higher Education has the Performance Measurement Reporting System, where community colleges and state universities report data on access and affordability, student success and completion, workforce alignment and outcomes, and fiscal stewardship. Their mission is “to modernize data and analytics systems, improve analytic capabilities, and place data at the center of all policy discussions in public higher education.”⁶ Through this tool, anyone can understand the landscape of Massachusetts’ higher education environment. We don’t have to imagine the potential; we already have working examples. It is time to act now and see this data nationally.

Endnotes

- 1 National Center for Education Statistics, “The Condition of Education: Undergraduate Enrollment,” U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC, 2020, accessed February 11, 2021, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cha.asp.
- 2 Rachel Dinkes, “Bar Chart Race: Changing Demographics in Postsecondary Enrollment,” National Center for Education Statistics Blog, June 30, 2020, <https://nces.ed.gov/blogs/nces/2020/06/30/default>.
- 3 National Center for Education Statistics, “Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups: Indicator 23: Postsecondary Graduation Rates,” U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC, 2019, accessed February 11, 2021, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_red.asp.
- 4 William H. Frey, “The US Will Become ‘Minority White’ in 2045, Census Projects: Youthful Minorities Are the Engine of Future Growth,” Brookings Institution, March 14, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/03/14/the-us-will-become-minority-white-in-2045-census-projects/>.
- 5 Nicole Alia Salis Reyes and Amaury Nora, “Lost Among the Data: A Review of Latino First Generation College Students,” Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2012, accessed February 11, 2021, https://www.hacu.net/images/hacu/OPAI/H3ERC/2012_papers/Reyes%20nora%20-%20rev%20of%201st%20gen%20latino%20college%20students%20-%202012.pdf.
- 6 Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, “Performance Measurement Reporting System,” Department of Higher Education Data Center, May 2019, <https://www.mass.edu/datacenter/PMRS/home.asp>.