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Unmet Needs, Unfinished Degrees: Basic Needs Insecurity Among Latinos in Higher Education

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It's either food or school, so my priority is food.

Student, general group, four-year public university in California

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Services don't necessarily advertise as much. You kind of have to dig, or go and ask somebody, or actually tell someone that you're struggling — and maybe that person knows where to send you.

Student, caregiving group, four-year private university in Texas

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Today, 3.9 million Latino students are enrolled in postsecondary education, comprising 1 in 5 college students nationwide. Rooted in *familismo*, a cultural orientation emphasizing collective responsibility and family obligation, many Latino students view completing a college degree as a shared investment and a pathway to economic mobility for themselves and their families.

Despite this ambition and growing enrollment, degree completion rates for Latinos trail their white peers by 18.5 percentage points — a gap that cannot be explained by academic preparation or motivation alone. In a 2024 survey of 3,000 Latino college students, UnidosUS found that two-thirds of respondents reported considering leaving school, and one-third had paused their studies at least once.

Since that survey, the strain on student supports within colleges and universities and across the broader social safety net has only deepened. Recent policy changes by the Trump administration have reduced access to food assistance, health coverage and institutional funding, thereby widening the gap between what Latino students need to persist and what public systems provide. Meanwhile, college has never been more expensive. Tuition, housing, food and healthcare costs have risen faster than wages and financial aid, and many Latino students and families cannot keep up.

To better understand how these pressures operate in students' daily lives and to identify targeted solutions, UnidosUS conducted focus groups in March 2026 with 18 Latino college students across seven states.

Across the focus groups, five findings emerged:

- 1. Basic need deficits are interconnected and compounding.** Latino students experience food insecurity, housing instability, transportation barriers and financial strain simultaneously. These challenges reinforce one another, creating a cycle in which each unmet need leaves students with fewer resources to meet the next.
- 2. Family responsibilities are a hidden cost affecting Latino student persistence.** Cultural values of *familismo* and collective responsibility can motivate Latino students to pursue and persist in higher education, as family can serve as an important source of emotional support. At the same time, family expectations can place competing demands on students' time and financial resources. Caregiving responsibilities and financial contributions to household expenses are not fully captured by financial aid systems.
- 3. Mental health and emotional stress emerge as both a driver and a consequence of basic needs insecurity.** As financial, academic and family pressures converge, mental health is often deprioritized, directly undermining students' ability to remain enrolled by further demoralizing them. Culturally affirming care remains difficult to access on campus.
- 4. Recent federal policy changes have resulted in material harms.** Immigration enforcement, threats to public benefits, and the rollback of culturally responsive campus support have resulted in tangible disruptions to students' financial stability, academic engagement and access to resources. For Latino students, policy decisions directly shape their ability to stay enrolled in school.
- 5. Services available to support students are often insufficient, fragmented and lack effective outreach.** While students' needs are interconnected, campus support remains insufficient and poorly coordinated. Students discover resources only after they need them most. Students rely on peer networks and organizations, community-based organizations and cultural centers to fill gaps.

UnidosUS explores these findings in depth in a new report coming soon. Watch our social media channels for the release of, "Unmet Needs, Unfinished Degrees: Basic Needs Insecurity Among Latinos in Higher Education."

Learn more about UnidosUS postsecondary research and policy work at unidosus.org/higher-ed.



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